Teaching Good Habits of Learning

23rd October 2013
Whitehawk Inn, Brighton

Lizzie Overton
@enliven_ed
www.enliven-ed.com

Introductions and outline of workshop.
I started teaching in 1987 which was the academic year in which the first national curriculum was issued to schools. By 2004 education had become a lot like Henry Ford’s assembly lines.
Skills and knowledge were being attached over weeks and terms. Assembly lines work well for the manufacture of cars but people are not cars and the results are not shiny.

‘Nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs.’
Henry Ford
As a headteacher I wanted what George Bernard Shaw wanted.

‘What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child.’
George Bernard Shaw
What happens when we dig down beneath the layers of ‘school artifice’?

I dug down through the artifice that’s been layered on schooling. Practice that happened only in schools had to argue its case to remain a part of what we did.
The writing of fiction is good example of real world learning vs school world learning.

Real Writers vs School writers

*Take time* to *gather inspiration or research* an idea before they start
- Are told what to write and have little time or opportunity to prepare

*Explore and develop ideas* over flexible and extended time frames
- Have to work within short fixed time-frames

*Have opportunities to develop their work through discussions* with other writers, editors or friends
- Have their work marked by the teacher and have limited opportunity to improve it themselves

*Choose* where to write and what tools to use
- Are required to sit in a set place at a table, to use pencils for ‘rough’ and pens for ‘best’

*Make ‘mistakes’ and constantly revise and refine ideas* in the drafting stages
- Are required to focus on ‘secretarial skills’ from the start (often with strict rules about underlining headings/how to write the date/using or not using a rubber)

*Publish their work* so that it can be read by a wide audience
- Keep their writing in exercise books or copy it out for a wall display
We worked as authentically as possible across the whole curriculum. As scientists, historians, geographers, we asked ‘real’ questions which we found by investigating at first hand (ref: Matthew Crawford ‘The Case for working with our hands’).
We worked as a team and had real and meaningful dialogue with each other (ref: Robin Alexander’s work on ‘Dialogic Teaching’).
We worked hard to create outcomes that could be shared with a wide audience.

We were disciplined, courageous, persevering.

We worked towards real outcomes so that we could play the ‘whole (junior) game’ (ref: David Perkins’ book ‘Making Learning Whole’).
Habits of mind, qualities, dispositions, character strengths (whatever we decide to call them) are often mentioned in school mission statements but are often not much more than lip service. Systems of planning, assessment and monitoring are key if we want strong habits of mind to be embedded into our teaching and learning.
We asked the kids ‘What do good learners do?’
Then we did some reading (ref Claxton, V A Alexander, Art Costa).
The Kipp Schools in America (Martin Seligman, Angela Duckworth and Chris Peterson) have made the building of ‘Character Strength’ central to their philosophy and practice (ref: Paul Tough ‘How Children Succeed’ which has a great chapter on the Kipp schools).
We need skills, knowledge and strong habits of mind if we want long term success. We are increasingly propping up the system with extrinsic rewards and punishment. When good habits of mind are embedded in learning the reward is intrinsic.
We can focus on 3 key elements that are key to teaching good habits of learning in any context:

How good a learner are you?
1. Look at yourself - how well do you model good habits of mind?
2. Allow curiosity and imagination to lead the way – is it possible to be less prescriptive/to allow more ‘silly’ questions to lead the way?
3. Find contexts for learning that matter now (ref David Perkins) – can we create more engaging contexts for learning?