

Talking about learning – are we really?¹

Have you noticed what can happen in conversations which aim to be about learning? They often slip into a different focus. So when we're trying to give some space to consider learning, various "space invaders" take the room. It's important we spot this, because we may need to keep them aside in order to discuss learning. There are three main culprits:

1. Teaching

In recent years, phrases such as "teaching and learning policies" or "teaching and learning strategies" have been used more and more. But close examination suggests that they might better read "teaching and teaching", since the real attention given to learning is minimal. And the phrase is also often said as "teaching'n'learning" rather like "fish'n'chips" — the "and" is almost missed, whereas it represents both the challenge and achievement of the profession. The links between teaching and learning are complex and multiple. High-level learning doesn't come from us teaching our socks off.

See what happens to your thinking when you tackle this question: "which do you think happens more often – teaching without learning or learning without teaching?"

2. Performance

"Performance" is not learning, though it may develop from learning. Politicians and policy-makers have reduced the goal of schools to measurable outcomes of a limited sort: performance tables, performance pay, performance management. From the confines of their parallel universe, they create and disperse lists by which all shall be judged. In order to achieve compliance a sprinkling of fear is added, and under such pressures there has been a grave risk that teachers fall into passing it on. The Prime Minister modelled this, saying "We're putting the teaching profession under a lot of pressure, and we're doing it for a simple reason: there are a lot of people putting us under pressure" (2 Feb 2002). Under conditions of pressure and compliance some people talk about consistency as though it were a goal. Yet education cannot be about consistency: consistency means that you know tomorrow what you know today – and it could be consistently bad.

The distinction between learning and performance is crucial and will be addressed later. Briefly, the evidence is that a focus on performance can depress performance: learners end up with negative ideas about their competence, they seek help less, use fewer strategies, and become organised by the very judgements which do them down. And the evidence is that a focus on learning can enhance performance.

3. Work

Listen in any classroom: "get on with your work", "Home work", "schemes of work", "have you finished your work?". It's the dominant discourse of classroom life. But it can lead to a situation of meaningless work, as when people talk about being "on task" without assessing the learning quality or engagement. The space invader of "work" can be addressed quite effectively – especially with collaboration. A teacher in Greenwich agreed with her class that every time she and they seemed about to use the word "work", they would try the word "learning" instead. The effects were electric and led to much more engagement. Try it out.



Do you recognise these "space invaders"?
How do they manage to take away the space? What helps them?



Think about occasions when you have tamed the negative effects of the space invaders. What did you do? What did others do?

¹ From Watkins C (2003) *Learning: a sense-maker's guide*, London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers