



Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership

Learning Conversation

In January 2005 the DfES funded The Learning Conversation Research Project which was set up by The National Strategy Team under the personalised learning initiative. This was part of their drive to help schools to enable pupils to understand their learning better, become more powerful learners and, as a result, higher achievers. Bedfordshire was one of the five LEAs chosen to be part of the project; this was due to their outstanding work with pupil involvement in school improvement. In each LEA two schools were identified, one from the primary sector and the other from the secondary. In Bedfordshire, these schools were Henlow Middle school and Samuel Whitbread Community College.

The LEA were asked to support both schools and nominated two consultants to create the framework for Learning Conversations and support the schools as well as providing training to develop facilitators' skills. These consultants were also responsible for appraising its sustainability; monitoring and evaluating the project; and lead and support its application throughout the county. The project leaders in the schools selected pupils who they felt would most benefit from this project and teachers and other staff were identified as mentors for opening the dialogue with these pupils. Both schools in Bedfordshire conducted Learning Conversations on a regular basis in an informal forum setting outside the classroom during lesson time. The pupils were encouraged to talk about their learning so that their capacity to learn could be improved, self confidence increased, learning techniques developed and performance raised.

So that any evaluation could take place the schools agreed to key milestones,

- Working cross-phase on developing the language of learning with pupils
- Identifying personnel and pupils
- Organising the timetable to make space for learning conversations
- Informing parents
- Holding whole school briefings
- Receiving training and networking ideas
- Conducting an initial discussion with selected pupils
- Trailing approaches to the learning conversation
- Holding at least three learning conversations with selected pupils in the Spring term.

The national team proposed the following as aims/ goals for the pupils,

- Clarify their understanding of learning and of themselves as learners and so take greater control over their learning
- Make informed choices about the curriculum and learning
- Express preferences and opinions about learning
- Negotiate targets for learning
- Transfer and apply their learning better across subjects and contexts and so improve their rate of progress

- Increase their levels of motivation and engagement in learning.

The aims for the facilitators were based on utilising their skills to enable pupils to learn more effectively. Therefore by reviewing their facilitations of the conversations they aimed to,

- Know pupils better as learners in order to assist them in making better progress and achieving higher standards
- Support pupils in making informed choices about the curriculum and learning
- Support pupils in transferring their learning to different subjects, contexts and settings.

The role of the facilitator was seen as promoting a genuine dialogue with pupils where everyone has a voice, all views are considered and all contributions are valued and built upon to construct the group's knowledge and understanding of learning. A significant part of this process was seen as enabling pupils to develop a new language of learning through which they could discuss and analyse approaches to learning, take charge of how they learn and confidently increase their repertoire of learning strategies. It was anticipated that the facilitator role would not be easy to exercise because of needing to change traditional perceptions of teachers as knowledge holders and pupils as learners.

A team approach was imperative and was a key feature of the Bedfordshire project. Project Leaders and LEA consultants made a presentation to the Learning Community 3 executive group in which all schools in the community are included. The initial training for facilitators was provided by the LEA consultants which led to schools formulating their own approaches, desired aspirations, internal support systems and consultation procedures.

A Learning Conversation often starts with a review of how the students felt they had learnt in the previous weeks lesson. Any successes would be celebrated meaning an association could be made with getting praise and attention for working hard. The next stage was to introduce a new learning theme which they could then discuss in relation to their current lessons and what constraints it could have. The third stage was implementing this theme with realistic goals which the students could reflect on in subsequent sessions. The bridging between Learning Conversations and the classroom and also between school and home was paramount and ensured learning strategies were successfully transferred to other situations. As one participating pupil said,

"If I'm on the last tee of a golf course I can concentrate, focus and block out distractions, so if I 'act as if' I'm on the 1st tee when I'm in a lesson I can do the same."

Samuel Whitbread chose to work with year ten boys in groups of five. The pupils involved were selected as they were not reaching their potential and so may not achieve their predicted grade when taking their GCSE's. Each group had an adult mentor and then one or two 6th form mentors. The 6th form mentors were viewed as essential in their project, as one pupil commented,

“they speak the same language”

Samuel Whitbread wanted to make sure the project was not a 'bolt-on' but an extension which had a structure and program in place before the conversations started. The main outcome was that they pupils had a desire to achieve, that their future aspirations depended on them doing well. One student commented, “it makes you want to, sort of, go for it” which became a key phrase in the National Project Report. In particular the National Project Director saw that there was a “high degree of commitment and support from the Head teacher and teacher at all levels” which would have been key to its success. The school is now developing the Learning Conversations into a whole school initiative, incorporating it into their pastoral system so that it involves all students, teachers and senior leaders.

Henlow Middle School's approach was to select boys that were at periods of transition, in Year 6 and Year 8. Half the group was made up of boys who were reaching there full potential and the other half were see to be underachieving. The National Director commented,

“there was a good rationale for the selection of students”.

In addition to this approach Henlow worked with a life coach and neuro-linguistic expert, who worked alongside the staff in facilitating the learning conversations. The hope was to build and achieve an open atmosphere where the pupils felt confident to share their views. Initial Learning Conversations focussed on learning styles, memory skills and how to block out distractions. A powerful outcome was that the pupils now expressed their feelings on learning. A previously demotivated pupil said that he enjoyed Monday so much “because we have learning conversations”.

A model was constructed to show how Learning Conversations could operate effectively in an ideal world and this formed the basis of the project evaluation. The comparison of this model with the data gathered was used to define the evaluation. There may be many stakeholders who would benefit from the project but it was agreed that the main 'customer' was the pupil. Therefore the evaluation was designed as a 'pupil-centred' model and the Five E's (Checkland and Scholes, 1990) were used.

The following point summarise the key components of the evaluation, both in terms of benefits for the pupils and for members of staff and the school.

- Pupils were aware of the support provided and therefore confidence increased

- Pupils ask more often for help from teachers
- Parents realised that homework was getting more effort
- A shared vocabulary was developed collaboratively
- "The involvement of 6th formers in the LC is essential. They have a bridging role as they speak the language"
- Empowered pupils to talk about there learning
- "Changing my behaviour will change the way people behave towards me"
- "Students are showing signs of maturity and trust"
- Pupils reported successful using techniques to aid them in lesson; the learning styles being applied to a variety of situations.
- Pupils have become more focused, teachers recognising that students were trying harder and some not so antagonistic, keener to please.
- "If I am on the last tee of a golf course I can concentrate, focus and block out distractions. So if I 'act as if' I'm on the 1st tee when I'm in a lesson I can do the same"
- The armoury of practical strategies they have required has led to them taking responsibility for there learning
- "all of the students discussed strategies of avoidance, 'tricks of the classroom' etc. Obviously this is very interesting for teachers! More importantly however is the way this shows greater transparency between teacher/mentor and pupil"
- Behaviour in the classroom change
- Through the shared vocabulary.

James Whitehead
 Student Voice Consultant
 Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership (BSIP)

For the Bedfordshire Learning Conversation pilot report or any additional information please contact the BSIP office:

Learning Conversations
 BSIP
 County Hall
 Bedford
 MK42 9AP

Michelle.argent@bedscc.gov.uk

01234 276738

APPENDIX: MODEL OF A LEARNING CONVERSATION

