

Futurelab event transcript

Futurelab Research Update

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Teachers as Innovators

Dan Sutch, Futurelab

Dan:

I'd like to talk very very briefly about a project or a programme of work we recently started with teachers. And then after about 10 minutes of talking about what we're trying to do there, what the new innovation involves, then going back to the speakers from this morning and have some questions, some more questions that you think of and a bit more conversation between everyone, because that's what we're here for today to learn from each other.

Before I start there's an invitation. There's an e-mail address there – innovations@futurelab.org.uk. E-mail that and I can tell you more about the project afterwards or if you want to get involved.

Teachers as Innovators has a tack on there which is 'investigating the capacity of teachers to innovate'. That's under the first clause. The second clause is 'in their use of digital technologies'... because we appreciate how digital technologies can enable teachers and learners to become involved in new types of social interactions - so what enables teachers to innovate in classrooms, to innovate in their use of digital technologies.

There are three key words in the sentence, first 'teachers' because at the moment we're just talking about teachers as in those who are professionally qualified teachers working in the classroom, rather than other people who are involved in teaching. Second key word, the capacity... and not just thinking about the mental capacity... we're thinking about all sorts of capacities like the opportunities for teachers to innovate, to try new things, looking at the motivation to innovate, the encouragements etc.

We're also of course trying to highlight the barriers to teachers developing new practices, teachers innovating in their classrooms. So innovating is the third key word, being creative in the use of digital technologies. So we're not just thinking about teachers as individuals, we're also thinking about them within their school settings, within their local settings, within the national frameworks etc.

So the first thing is 'capacity' is a very very big rich word, we're looking at what's the capacity, the opportunities that teachers have to innovate. And the second word, when we talk about innovation we're talking about developing radical new practices. Now I'll come back to the word radical because it can be quite scary... but it's using it on purpose.

We're talking about being creative in the use of digital technologies that really takes advantage of the affordances of technologies. Developing new approaches to teaching, to learning, to the use of resources, to the use of classrooms and out of classrooms etc... linking to other people in the community. And the last one really that I think sums it up – responding to the new possibilities and the new problems that have been highlighted for quite a long time. This last sentence came from the OECD five years ago now, it's about the real challenges and opportunities we have in changing educational practice now. And that's where we are still I think with these incredible opportunities and these incredible possible problems. OK so that's what we mean by teachers as innovators.

Why are we interested in teachers being innovators? We know that teachers innovate anyway. We know teachers are very good at relating to and creatively taking national strategies etc, but it's what's termed as sustained innovation. How teachers are very

creative or innovative within the current system. What we're looking at is the radical innovation that begins to challenge and develop the system as a whole, and that's where it becomes disruptive or radical. So we're looking at how teachers can move from just being very creative within the classroom to making things more personal and appropriate to the people they're working with, to begin to challenge the bigger boundaries of the education system.

We're looking at how teachers can adapt to these changing circumstances that have been mentioned in all of the presentations, especially John's at the end there about new education environments, with BSF about new educational requirements, and how teachers can react to and still work in effective ways within these new places.

By developing these new skills we're looking at re-professionalisation of current teachers, what the new role is. Much of the literature talks about the de-skilling of teachers over the last 10 to 30 years. What's the new role of the teacher? What are the new skills and competencies and capabilities that teachers need? About empowering teachers as professionals, what's that new role, and how can teachers innovate and react to the new changing needs.

Another reason why we're looking at teachers and innovation here, it's not just innovation we want... trying exciting things for innovation's sake, it's actually about changing and developing, improving the education system. So in innovation you talk about insights, invention and application. In teaching terms you talk about reflective practitioners, designing learning experiences and it's where those two kind of sentences meet, there's something more about insight about knowing what's going on outside of the classrooms, what's going on inside other people's classrooms. What's going on in research labs that teachers have that turn them into innovators rather than reflective practitioners.

When we talk about designing learning activities we talk about the way in which we use maybe a QCA scheme of work that can be adapted to our classroom. Thinking more than that, it's not just taking some resources and designing for the classroom learning experience, but invention, bringing new things in that the teacher feels more appropriate.

And then the action/application, it's pretty similar, it's about putting those things into practice. So teachers as innovators, teachers doing something new, bringing something new into a classroom context or a learning scenario that changes the social practice to improve learning.

Many many other reasons why we're looking at teachers as having a really important role in education as being innovators. So we have down here another quote from the literature review that Tony and Avril wrote: "Change in education may now be thought of as a constant condition rather than event", so having this constantly evolving, constantly changing educational environment. Teachers must be able to be skilled, tooled - whatever term you want to use - to act within these situations.

There's another side as well that goes with the knowledge economy agenda and that's the future innovators. There's a really exciting programme starting at NESTA called 'Future Innovators'... I suggest you have a look at it, it's wonderful. But if learners to fit in with the knowledge economy are going to be these future innovators, we now have teachers who model behaviours... and maybe that's another reason for innovating - showing the skills, capacities, competencies of innovation, so that learners can develop those practices as well. So lots and lots of reasons and there are loads more about why teachers have an important role as innovators within the education environment.

So what are we trying to do to find this out? Well we're going back to that idea of capacity of teachers to innovate, we're going through this kind of process of firstly just talking, to understand their perceptions of what's enabling and what's constraining teachers as innovators. That's the first thing. So we're talking to all those groups and more...

Government, non-Governmental agencies, to teachers, the head teachers etc. Through to academics and industry... people who I guess are considered key stakeholders in education. We're not talking with parents at this first stage.

Now aside from collecting those barriers and those enablers of innovation we're also trying to develop a map of innovation and that's looking at where exciting innovative practice is taking place. And part of that is to show to other teachers, show to other people who are involved in this area that there are exciting things going on, how new technology is being used, what sort of practice is developing. But it's also so that we can begin to understand what the similarities are and the differences are between different projects taking place.

Now so far we have a lot of really exciting things going on that still fit within that sustained innovation rules, really exciting things that fit or 'wouldn't fit' within the national curriculum, or tweak it slightly within the timetable of schools etc.

So what other examples are there of really innovative and exciting teaching practice, learning practice?

And the idea of those two things then is that we understand what enables and what constrains innovative practice. And then the invitation at the bottom there, you can get hold of me through the e-mail address innovations@futurelab.org.uk. It's to become involved somehow in sharing your perspective, your thoughts on some of these questions. There's an online questionnaire that takes 20 minutes to fill out, it'd be really valuable to helping us to get your perspective.

OK, so that's what we're doing, this part of the programme up until March and April. From there actually we're going to have a Call for Ideas in February like we have now, which is about tools for teachers. And that's slightly removed from here because it's not just about teachers as in professional educationalists within the classroom, it's tools for teaching. OK. I'm going to get back to some of the questions that were raised earlier before we get on with these, but I want to learn from you guys rather than just listening to me croak on about some of the really key issues that I'm trying to battle with but have been raised so well this morning. What are the barriers to developing new educational practices? Specially educational practices.

And then there's a second question as well - what's stopping these practices emerge to take on personalisation or to develop a better understanding or more personal relationship with new sorts of knowledge we were talking about this morning. What are the barriers to us getting there, so it's thinking about how we can then overcome them and what sort of strategy we need to start thinking about. It's part of the project's aims to develop understanding of what's stopping us developing new practices and teachers becoming innovators.