

<http://www.futurelab.org.uk/projects/teachers-as-innovators/stories-of-practice/students-as-peer-teachers>

Dan Buckley, Cambridge Education

Lord of the Flies is an intense account of a group of children left to govern themselves and survive on a desert island. At Eggbuckland School in Devon, instead of handmade spears, a class of children in Year 8 were given laptops and told to teach themselves for two years. This sounds like a recipe for chaos, but the experiment showed that when left to their own devices, students became creative and innovative peer teachers.

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Dan Buckley, now principle consultant and head of personalisation at Cambridge Education, and then deputy head at Eggbuckland, explains why he chose to give these students a free reign over their education: “We wanted to empower children to be in control of their own learning, and the logical tool to use for that at the moment is the laptop. When you first give children control over their own learning, it’s scary because you realise that they can’t do all those things you thought they could do. Everything has been broken up by teachers so much that it only looks like they understand. They’re actually following menus, not really thinking it through.”

He says that the science teachers were horrified to discover in the early months of the project that the laptop group didn’t actually understand that a science experiment was something to do with the lesson as an example of the theory; they thought that if a teacher was kind, they’d put an activity in the middle to break it up, Buckley says.

“So at first, it looked like their academic performance was dropping,” continues Buckley. “But actually, their true academic performance was showing through. We didn’t correct the students if they taught something or answered wrongly; if they delivered a lesson and a teacher said, ‘Well actually, now here’s the real lesson’, the child isn’t really being a teacher as we’re not trusting them with that job. If you’re in a real life job and you mess up, you take the blunt for that. Failure is something that it’s an important skill to deal with.”

Over time, the teaching methods used by the class evolved from aping what they had experienced when being taught by an adult, to taking what really worked and gripped their classmates. As a result of this groundbreaking, potentially high-risk concept, the students evolved their academic and personal skills far beyond those of their peers.

Learning came thick and fast over the two years of the project. The children came across the need for multiple sources naturally. “They came to the conclusion themselves that they had to look at three or four sites on the internet before they delivered their lesson, as if they only found one dodgy one and someone else in the class had already found a better site, they would be shown up in front of their friends,” comments Buckley. “The quality of lessons the students produced was amazing, because they knew they were for real and that there were people in the classroom that really, desperately wanted to do well.”

Each student had been paired academically to a ‘buddy’ in the main school that mirrored academic attainment and potential, so Buckley had a control group to compare with the progress of the laptop group. At the end of Year 9, SAT tests showed what Buckley had predicted, and informed parents of, at the beginning of the experiment, that the academic

performance of the group was below that of their peers at this point. But he says this was not a true reflection of the laptop group's proper academic status.

His theory was born out at GCSE level, when the group was split up and integrated back into the mainstream school. Not only did the laptop students go into one set higher than their buddies, but they all achieved at least one entire grade higher than their buddies in all their GCSE all subjects.

At Egguckland, Buckley was tasked with creating an e-school. He had to come up with a 20-year vision for the school that would empower children to manage whole areas of the curriculum and school themselves. As well as his radical laptop group, he updated school reports with the addition of an evaluation of the national key skills areas that he broke into 20 strands. Students were given a mark from zero up to nine in areas such as empathy, presenting to an audience and ICT handling data.

Buckley then put students in charge of ICT rooms, run through the student council to which he awarded more power. "I was frustrated with the way student councils had no power; they had no meaning. So I gave the council a budget to manage, and decided to give the children jobs so they could gain a seat on the council if they held down that job. They helped in the careers library and did things like that, but it had limited success. I changed it to giving them the ICT rooms to manage, which they could open at lunchtimes. They had to elect a leader for each room, and there were different grades of leader. It all linked back to the council, with some of the highest grades taking council seats."

From all of these projects, Buckley selected the best elements and rolled them into one innovative bundle, named Personalisation By Pieces (PBP). This has taken the form of one piece of software per user that goes onto a handheld device such as a PDA or mobile phone. It shows key skills areas that students need to work towards, and for each skills area, a 'ladder' of attainment that has to be climbed one level at a time, listing what needs to be done to get over that level. The software also includes a way of submitting evidence that a certain level has been achieved.

Evidence is submitted to another student who is higher up the attainment scale on that particular skill ladder than the student submitting information. The higher student may refuse to pass a lower student on something like presenting to an audience if they believe the evidence does not demonstrate the required skill level. For instance, presenting using PowerPoint may not be enough to pass level three, as the student could have just stood to the side and let the slides do the talking. The student that failed that time would then have to go out and gather new evidence to show they were ready to move up a level.

"The intent here is for kids to understand the target, then submit evidence they've achieved it," says Buckley. "Everyone who successfully submits a piece of work can then assess lower levels in that specific skill ladder."

A trial of PBP is now rolling out to 10 schools around the UK. The launch date has moved from January 2008 to 1 April due to demand. Buckley comments: "Three months ago I would have said PBP was best suited for junior and secondary, but now I realise there is professional development everywhere, learning without boundaries, and that's where PBP can go. Because there's no content in PBP, it can be applied anywhere. We've had requests from all types of learning establishments and even from car parking attendants!"