

No: P52
Title: Learning to Listen: Using ICT to capture pupils' perceptions and help the teacher to respond
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Background

Coming into the teaching profession from industry, I was used to widespread reliance on ICT as a means of communication. What I didn't realise, however, was that Durham Learning Gateway would prove to be as useful in the classroom as the email is in the office. I thought of Durham Learning Gateway originally as a way to set work for the children to do independently, and of a way to cut down on my marking – I was to be pleasantly surprised. Not only is Durham Learning Gateway an interactive teaching and communication tool for Teachers, but it allows the children a safe and non-threatening way to voice their opinions. However, Durham Learning Gateway can't correct spellings, or stop the children being unkind to each other, so it will never replace a teacher or classroom/learning assistant. (I have corrected spelling on these quotes to make the reading a little easier!)

First steps

At first it was hard enough being a NQT and working my way round the classroom. Working in an ICT Test Bed school was a huge challenge. Not only did I have to get to grips with my teaching styles and the children's learning styles, but there was this vast array of equipment I was meant to be using along the way. I'm sure everyone has gone through a similar experience, but at the time you think you are the only one. I tried many ways to get to know the children in my class a little better, talking to them in after-school clubs, reasoning with them about behaviour, that sort of thing. I even created a suggestion box in the good old fashioned Blue Peter way, with a box and coloured paper.

During the Autumn Term I was introduced to Durham Learning Gateway for the first time. Originally I used it for spellings and set the system up to automatically mark and return the work. This type of project worked well, but I still needed to get inside the heads of one or two of the children that I was struggling to connect with. Then I happened across the idea of an electronic, guided, suggestion box scheme using the Durham Learning Gateway. I posted a couple of questions, for example "What kind of After School Club would you come to? What do you like about class three? What could we do to make class three better?", and then waited for the responses to roll in. At first I got the typical "I don't like the work" type responses, but what surprised me was that the other children policed the system, asking the questions I was thinking.

For example, one child wrote each letter in every word several tttttiiiiimmmmmeeeeesssss. Another child logged on and asked straight away "What is all that about?" which pleased me, as I did think the whole process was about to degenerate! In the discussions regarding the after school club, one child wanted to do Basketball – which we have never done in PE. Another child asked "why basketball?"

While some children did just enter their comments in isolation to other postings, I was encouraged to see that some of them were reading the context of others comments and questioning or adding to them.

Observations and Lessons Learnt

The main thing I have learnt during this process is that the children are a lot more aware of their surroundings than I gave them credit for. Of course there is a wide range of emotional development in the class, but in general they are pretty switched on to the feelings of their classmates and to the consequences of others' actions. One child sent me a note "Mr Moulton, I try to behave as good as I can." Another, in response to the question concerning making the class better, wrote "We can make people feel better if they make you better" to which another responded "If people help you, you should help them." Some of the children seem to be more open using the Durham Learning Gateway than when engaging them in conversation, where the peer pressure of their classmates can colour their responses.

I asked open questions, such as "What are your thoughts about Class Three?" Now being new to the school, I expected to get the odd comment about the Teacher. I did! I also got some very constructive comments along the lines of "I like class three when kids are being good". It was really interesting to note how much children valued harmony in the classroom. This and other comments also tell me that the conversations we have around citizenship are making their mark. This led on to the Durham Learning Gateway being used like a safe chat room, with the children able to say what good things they like about the class and the lessons, as well as what they don't like. For example, they do like the new way I have set out the classroom, but think the homework I set is too hard. I thought they would hate the new desk arrangement and didn't realise the reason that everyone didn't hand in homework was because it was difficult.

ICT and the listening teacher...

Using the Durham Learning Gateway in this way has taught me a great deal, in a short space of time, about the children I am teaching and their perceptions of the world around them. For example, there is one girl in my class who always seems a bit down. By tracking her comments on the Durham Learning Gateway (In reply to the after school club question - "Nothing", and responding to one of her classmates quite sensible question as "Stupid! I hate You!") I have realised that there is a bit more to this than a couple of bad days and I will be keeping an eye on her in class to try to keep her involved and upbeat. Of course, whilst it can't be claimed that setting up this electronic suggestion box gives the teacher access to all learners' minds, it can improve the teacher's awareness of learners' unspoken needs, and even occasional insights into the needs of an unhappy pupil will make it worthwhile.

I have also realised that my own wariness of teaching Art has meant that I don't get the children involved in drawing as much as perhaps I should. They seem to miss the creative side of things, so this will be used to inform my planning this week.

The Future – Listening and Acting

I want to use comments from the Durham Learning Gateway to inform planning and take on the feedback from the children. For example, I recently block booked some time to do an extended D&T lesson on moving monsters, after realising that the children really enjoy the artistic and practical side of these lessons – a single lesson just wasn't enough to get them engaged in the process.

I also intend to use it on a regular basis to assess changes and developments within the dynamics of the class. The children all seem to enjoy school more when everyone is behaving, there is a purposeful atmosphere, and they can all

learn together. We recently have had a couple of new starters in the class and I'm about to repeat this exercise as a quick and effective way of identifying how they are fitting into the dynamics and what they like and don't like.

I want to use their own comments on posters and cards. I will involve this in a PHSCE lesson around our expectations of others. Again, I'm considering getting the children to make the posters themselves. My feeling is that if they have set their own expectations there is a greater likelihood of the children reaching them.

I feel that this has been a really useful exercise for me as a NQT, but also feel that other teachers could benefit. Any teacher new to a school, or a class, wants to know about the pupils in the class and their backgrounds and social skills. Sometimes it can take a while to get to know individuals but this process really helped me to do that a lot quicker.

I will be discussing my results with those class teachers preparing for SATs to see if it could be a good way of understanding children's fears and addressing anxieties in a less public way. – Oh, and one child wants me to be his Dad, but I don't think I'll be following up on that one.