

Listening to the Learner

Gwrando ar Ddysgwyr

Ty Dysgu 14/12/2005

Rhondda Cynon Taf's bi-lingual School Councils Conference was held at Ty Dysgu, Nant Garw on Wednesday 14th December.

This was the first conference for secondary school council members in Rhondda Cynon Taf. Later this year we will be holding conferences for school councils in primary and special schools. This is part of our commitment to meeting the Welsh Assembly Government challenge to schools and LEAs to 'Listen to the Learner'. The conferences are organised by the School Improvement Group of headteachers, LEA officers and advisers. The event will be held annually and in future the school councils will determine the themes and the structures for the annual conferences.

12 schools (Aberdare Girls, Blaengwawr, Bryncelynnog, Ferndale, Hawthorn, Llanhari, Porth, St Johns, Rhydfelin, Rhydywaun, Tonypandy, Tonyrefail and Treorchy) sent teams of delegates to the conference. Delegates engaged in lively discussion about their own positive learning experiences and sought to identify effective influences on their learning, whether they be connected to the topic or subject, teaching strategies, learning styles or environment.



The conference keynote speakers were members of the Wales Schools Debating Team (Steffan Powell, Harry Thomas and Beth James) soon to be representing the nation at the World Schools Debating Finals in Montreal, Canada, and Katarina Kopajova, a special guest from the Slovakian Schools Debating team. Helen Jarman, ex-pupil of Ysgol Gyfun Llanhari and now a post-grad psychology student in Cardiff University, chaired the conference.

The theme of the conference was **Learning** and contributors spoke about what had accelerated their learning. Stories about the contribution of individual teachers whose enthusiasm and commitment inspired learning were set alongside the motivating effect of meeting ex-pupils as part of personal goal setting and career planning. Speakers praised the contribution of extra-curricular activities like school productions, travel, school musicals, debating and membership of a rock band. These helped inculcate time management skills, commitment, concentration, team working and personal maturity: all of which could accelerate learning directly and indirectly.

Observers included senior officers of Rhondda Cynon Taf, advisers, university staff, schools development officers from crime prevention, and teachers.

A selection of comments from delegates and observers are recorded below:

"It was interesting to listen to the speakers but I also liked giving my opinions."

"I learned a lot."

"I'm determined to travel like that girl from Slovakia. Her English was so good."

"The simultaneous translation was amazing."

"The young people have got so many good ideas. They know what they need from their education."

"An important start for the Listening to the Learner programme, and a successful start."

Recommendations

Delegates were asked to discuss the things that influenced their learning positively. Recommendations from group discussion are summarized as follows:

The Learning Environment

Students believed that the best learning takes place in a well-maintained, well-ventilated, warm, smart and fit-for-purpose environment. Displays are effective in raising learners' self esteem if they reflect student/pupil best practice and artistic

excellence. Variety of facility was also seen as important with quiet, roomy, study areas deemed an essential requirement. ICT facilities were described as important in order to make learning resources accessible and to raise the quality of the learning experience. Seating arrangements were seen as important as well because appropriate arrangements can ensure equal access to learning and equal status for learners: group arrangements are sometimes appropriate, sometimes not. Discipline needs to be backed up by a clear code of consequences for the unruly. Morning assemblies should be used to set the day up, not finish the day off before it has even started. Lunch times need to be re-thought with healthier food options as a starter. Out of classroom/school experiences should be better exploited to enrich learning with the learning environment being seen by some delegates to include the school grounds, museums and similar resources, Ogmore, Brecon Beacons, Llangranog, France and other venues for visits, educational experiences and the opportunity to talk to other people from different walks of life.

The Curriculum

The demands and status of work in Key Stages 3 and 4 need to be better balanced as the former often appears pointless and the latter manic. The syllabus was judged to be less important than the skills being developed. The syllabus was judged to be less relevant to the success or failure of the learning experience than the impact of teaching or learning styles. The importance of raising the quality of the ICT curriculum was highlighted. The focus appears to be on repetitive use of relatively low-level ICT skills and a more structured and ambitious programme ought to be possible. Delegates also wanted the opportunity to learn more practical life skills like financial management. Delegates wanted teachers to remember to sell the relevance of work being pursued in subjects like history and RE. These subjects are relevant but more learners would engage if the benefits were explicitly stressed. Real world issues ought to be identified as illustrations of points whenever possible. Delegates were keen to see conventional subjects re-drawn as broader areas of study, e.g. humanities replacing history, geography and RE. Prior knowledge needs to be audited before curriculum content is determined with each class. Many delegates reported unnecessary duplication with the obsession with 20th century warfare in all years with history an agreed example. PSE was described as a wasted opportunity delivered by teachers who often are uninterested.

The Learning Experience

Experiments in science lessons were described as positive learning experiences because of the opportunity to learn through discovery, to be hands-on and practical. Group work, teamwork, pair work, and individual work: all must be

given a chance as variety is valued and some are more appropriate for particular challenges. Learning through role-play and drama was also highlighted as effective. Delegates wanted to know the how and why and not just the what. Humour and fun are guaranteed to make learning memorable, as will enthusiasm, liveliness and occasional informality within a formal framework. Learning is more likely to be consolidated if a teacher explains how the experience will be relevant and links it to real life challenges. Access to modern ICT resources, sophisticated equipment, Higher Education and educational travel will all help to strengthen learning. Opportunities to fast track in your best subjects will motivate as will access to 1:1 coaching in weak areas and/or mentoring from more able students. Learning should be a dialogue and learners should be encouraged to take responsibility, even presenting (preparing a PowerPoint presentation is a real help to your own learning) to a class or group or individual. If you like, admire, respect and value your teachers, you will learn effectively.

Teaching styles and techniques.

Teachers need to have authority but should not be authoritarian. Enthusiasm and liveliness are engaging. The best teachers involve pupils; they pull not push. They encourage pupils to speak and show responsibility. They help the individual as well as the class. They map future learning and raise class expectation. They give practical feedback to learners and reward progress with recognition. They maintain a professional demeanor but allow their own personalities to colour their work. They master the new technologies available and utilize ICT support like PowerPoint and interactive whiteboards where relevant. They use a variety of teaching techniques and resources to make lessons memorable. They co-ordinate workload and content with other teachers to avoid duplication and deadline overload. They model positive attitudes and build relationships based on mutual respect. They encourage self-reliance and teach learning skills. They are involved in after school activities. They are patient and enjoy being questioned as well as questioning. They use unusual strategies like bringing in motivational guests like Cardiff Blues/Cardiff City players or employing relaxation sessions at the end of lessons. They genuinely encourage the participation of pupils in the wider life of the school. They sometimes use eccentricity to good effect. Student teachers and supply teachers have difficulty managing the above because most depend on effective relationships underpinning learning.

The conference was an undoubted success and the students from those schools that supported the event will have gained from the experience. The feedback will be reported to all schools and to the relevant strategic partnerships. This report will be used as evidence in the preparation of the next generation of Education Plans.

Steve Lamb, 23rd December 2005.