

Stephen Heppell – involving kids in learning design

STARTS 00.07:

There are three things that are happening here that are really important. This is not a focus group, this is not 'we've designed the school; let's get the kids in and say what colour do you think we ought to paint the toilets?' This is properly asking them to do the research and be a part of it. You get three things when they do research. First of all, you get to trust them. These four here are doing sound and how we manage sound; this lot are looking at lux levels; they've got lux meters on their phone. They're looking at super classes. You're Skyping into Norway and saying, what's it like to be taught the way they get taught in Norway. You're looking at shoeless learning.

So you've got your kids all doing different things. You're not asking them their opinion - you're asking them to be reflective practitioners. You're saying, go off and do the research. I'm doing this with four-year-olds. This was just on Twitter yesterday; this was me chatting to a bunch of kids in a school that I'm involved in. So people will beam in and talk to your children about what the look of it all looks like. And then why not get them to prototype it a little bit?

Here's a group of children in Catalonia who had no money but thought they'd build a pastiche. They thought they'd actually build their own version of a classroom. They said, look, 'we sort of know what we want, so we're gonna build it with no money.' They'd liked the mood lighting: they'd read the Harvard research about the impact of colour on what they do and so they *built* a mock classroom to see what it would be like to be taught in it. Everything in here is built by children. They've got a cardboard monitor on the wall. They like those three-sided spaces and so they've built somewhere here. You can see: there's their research into the chairs, into colours - they've done proper research. You're not asking their opinions, asking their research. Look, they've built these rather seductive little three-sided spaces - there's only chicken wire.

What *amazed* me when I went to visit them - because this is one of my projects - was that they were teaching the damn thing. They were actually being taught in their mock classroom. People often say, if we build a new school how will we learn to teach in it? Get the kids to model the classrooms with you and then work with the children on how you might model it - it really really works. That way, you really do learn to trust them.

Stand back: just really let them go. You need learning professionals. What the teachers do, what the parents do, are ask those little catalytic questions to get them thinking - but don't fill in the answers. You won't do it *for* them, you will do it *with* them, it's really the key.

Here's a school that my daughter teaches in - and I'll tell you why I've picked this example in a second - where the children won a competition. Why hasn't Christchurch got a competition going right now for children to design their better learning spaces ahead of the school? You can start right now; the kids have got from here through to the end of term to do all that. Make it competitive; give them a tight budget. Everybody says it's the tightness of the budget that makes the decisions good. If you just say, hey, we've got a billion Euros, do whatever we like - a billion dollars - make the budget tight.

This lot like the writable surfaces; they like the fact that you can write on walls and desks. You can write on desks, because it'll carry on camera, so the information isn't lost anymore - we'll have a look at that in two seconds.

They like comfortable seating. I've never seen a child in history *ever* sit on a chair like that to read a book - ever. Have you been on holiday and kids are going down to the beach carrying their chairs with them because they've got a novel they want to finish? When you're at home, do they say, 'Mum, can I borrow a chair from the kitchen? I need to take it up to me bedroom, I wanna finish a book'.? It just doesn't happen. In schools we torture the little blighters with these hideous things - and then wonder why we've got a reading crisis. The minute you ask them, they will tell you that the chairs are crap and the toilets are mingy. But the listening, here, is really really important.

They said, let's have the furniture that we read on. They took pictures of each other reading and then modelled that in the classroom. There was the mood lighting. Look they're in a blinking container too. They said, 'look at us - we're fat, we're thin, we're tall, we're short. Why wouldn't our furniture reflect the fact that we're different, not all the same?' Why wouldn't the chairs be a different colour so the teacher can say, right, everyone on a green chair, up here, or if you wanna work on your own today, sit at a red table - everybody will know. Having different colours in the room gives you pedagogic options. Making it all the same looks beautiful, but it's crap. Work with the kids on the excitement of all that.

Look it's just a lovely seductive place. They like Skyping to other schools so much that they just do more. Those are the kids who designed the space and they just absolutely adore it.

Then of course what happens next is that they start Skyping to other schools. So here we've got teenage kids flirting about the design of their learning environment. So it doesn't get... Well, it *does* get better than that, because those kids broke into their school last Easter. Those London kids *broke* into their school. Why? Because they *didn't* want to go home. They broke into the school because they didn't want to have a holiday - they were enjoying learning so much in their classroom.

[musical interlude 5.19 to END]

Recording ENDS: 5:25