

# Rewriting the rules

We are increasingly adapting the way we live our home and work life, so why should our education system be any different? It shouldn't, if we want to give young people the opportunity to learn to the best of their ability

**Why should the** school day start at 8.45am and finish at 3.30pm? Why should there be three terms in a year? Why should learning only happen in the classroom? Why do students have to follow a rigid timetable? What would happen if these conventions were overturned: how would a new approach to learning help to create a positive and effective school experience for each individual pupil?

These are some of the questions that forward-looking schools are already addressing, supported by the Innovation Unit, which was set up by the government in 2002 to respond to and support innovative ideas put forward by teachers and heads. The Unit, originally part of the education department (then the DfES), recently became a not-for-profit company, though it retains governmental links.

The second phase of the Unit's work looks beyond "best practice" to "Next Practice", as it seeks to shape the future of education. One of the key areas the Innovation Unit is currently working on is Next Practice in Resourcing Personalisation, in partnership with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. The core idea is to shape education around the needs of children and young people, and provide education that meets the needs of all learners. There are currently 17 field trials going on in 24 schools of all kinds to explore how this might be achieved.

The Next Practice in Resourcing Personalisation models are based around four broad themes: innovative use of technology, innovative use of time, involving students in creating their own learning schedule and the school environment itself.

Information technology is already in use in many schools; the interactive whiteboard is well-known and schools are also starting to exploit the potential of laptops, email, video-conferencing, wireless networks and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). These allow students to access resources effectively. They also allow students to "work from home", already a familiar concept in the workplace. IT also works for teachers, for example by simplifying personal assessments and data management.

Making IT a major priority goes beyond

## 'Why should learning only happen in the classroom?'

simple facilitation, however, says Mike Gibbons, the Innovation Unit's chief executive. "It is more radical than that; it legitimises the technological skills that young people already possess. Young people have a huge range of technical know-how; youngsters are already living in the digital age outside school."

Changing the way schools manage time is another key area. Challenging the concepts of the fixed school timetable, day and term allows for far greater flexibility. "We are not saying every school must use every hour there is," emphasises Gibbons. "But the rest of the world is asynchronous now: the world is moving on, and where school, parents and staff are willing, we can look at a more flexible use of time."

Schools are experimenting with lessons of differing length, extended school days and timetables that stretch over six to ten days; the concept of the three-term year with the long summer break is also being called into question. Such practices allow pupils to learn at their own pace. Projects that need more time can be catered for, as can peer mentoring and work that takes place out of school. And introducing an element of choice engages students and lets them take control of their own learning.

This notion of choice is a further vital concept. New models seek to put student needs at the core of education and support pupils in directing and shaping their own learning. Developing the skills needed to achieve this will allow students to become "co-designers" of their own education.

"It has long been acknowledged that teaching is not a simple, one-way process," says Gibbons. "Regarding pupils as empty vessels has never been the hallmark of a good teacher. Co-designing means involving youngsters deeply in their own learning and they have the sophisticated skills to manage this." Such an approach will also smooth the transition to higher and further education, where there is far more emphasis on self-directed learning.

As learning becomes increasingly varied, the concepts of "school" and "classroom" are



beginning to become outmoded. Pupils are already beginning to be included in discussion on school design. "The days of a school being a big building with boxes for 30 people have to change," says Gibbons. "We know of schools where pupils receive one-to-one sessions to support or push them, and others where lecture-type masterclasses are held for 50, 60 or 70 pupils. Learning spaces need to be flexible." Other projects, he notes, use the structure and rebuilding of the school itself as a teaching and learning resource to investigate topics such as sustainability and energy saving.

The Innovation Unit's remit targets everyone who has a stake in learning; it is also currently working on system leadership, with the National College for School Leadership. Also in the pipeline, in partnership with the Training and Development Agency for Schools, is a project on using the whole workforce to enhance learning, plus a project on parental engagement in teaching and learning. "We need very strong alliances between these groups, to achieve a system that educates every individual child," says Gibbons.

He draws attention to the difference between incremental and radical innovation; the former improves what already exists, the latter is about more fundamental change, and both are valuable. "We want to make sure

incremental ideas don't get stuck on location, so everybody isn't endlessly remaking the same wheel," he explains. "And if your agenda is to transform the education system, you need the radical change and the fundamental challenges that will lead to the next big idea."

These big ideas could be far-reaching indeed; the Innovation Unit's new status as a not-for-profit company not only gives it a more independent voice, but also means it can nurture innovation in sectors beyond education, such as the voluntary sector.

This is not, however, about imposing strategies from on high, emphasises Gibbons. "We are working with the best practitioners and professionals to design new models, using a disciplined approach that questions and examines. Any scaling up will come from their enthusiasm, their example, and peer-to-peer proselytising. Collaboration and co-operation are central to the process." The ultimate aim, he says, is to have the very best professionals working not just for their own school, or even their own LEA — but for the education system as a whole.

To keep up with the Innovation Unit's Next Practice, sign up on the website.

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## WORK IN PRACTICE

Last summer was a busy time for the teachers at the Bridge Academy in Fulham. They were fitting up the homes of over 50 pupils with internet-enabled Mac Mini computers. A successful pilot scheme with Year Nine children was being rolled out to the whole school, a referral unit that caters for up to 175 learners aged 11-16. As Andre Bailey, assistant head for e-learning, notes, all have somehow been unable to fit in with mainstream schooling. "The pupils and their parents too have all been involved in a cycle of failure; all their contact with education has been negative. Bridge Academy Online breaks that cycle, creates learning spaces in homes, and re-engages pupils with learning."

For one day a week, the pupils work at home, using their computers to access a personalised programme that is tailored specifically for them by their teachers. The Studywiz site, with its "e-lockers" and straightforward, accessible, appealing design, which covers all subjects from English and Maths to PE and PHSE, has proved highly popular with pupils. Staff too are enthusiastic, says Bailey. "The key thing was allowing time. We started staff training in January and everyone had dedicated time to develop their skills and resources." Funding for the project was sufficient to cover an extra member of technical staff to support the project.

Criticisms of home learning and flexible timetables for school pupils have suggested they are a "truants' charter"; the experience at the Bridge Academy belies that. "There is a requirement of 25 hours a week for learners in school," says Andre Bailey. "Our pupils do more than that, in fact they go well beyond the target using Bridge Academy Online." There have been other positive effects. Not only has attendance at the Bridge Academy risen to 80 per cent, parental involvement has rocketed. Few attend parents' evenings, but all parents bar one, who sent apologies, turned up to the launch of the project; the entire family, including parents and siblings, can use the computers in their homes.

School has other roles to play outside simply teaching and learning, says Andre Bailey. "Pupils still come in four days a week. But this is about learning self-discipline, motivation and willingness to change. It's not about replacing teachers, but about changing the teaching role to lead to independent learning."

Thomas Hardy School in Dorchester, Dorset, has been involved with the Innovation Unit for the past five years, since it achieved Leading Edge status. One of the school's current projects involves motivating the minority of pupils who find it difficult to engage with learning. Richard Wheal, assistant head teacher and co-ordinator of school improvement, believes this is about confidence. "Lack of confidence is behind lack of motivation, and motivation is more important than intellect when it comes to achievement," he says.

The technique the school is using is motivational interviewing, a process that encourages taking responsibility for behaviour. Motivational interviewing was originally developed for use with substance abusers, explains Richard; "people whose lack of confidence in themselves and the world turned to self-harm". It has been used in the NHS for this purpose but its use in schools is new; it develops self-motivation without assuming a desire for change, the principle which underpins most counselling techniques. Motivational interviewing is non-confrontational; if there is no confrontation, there is no reason to resist the process. It is also non-judgmental. However, it encourages the pupil to address the gap between their aspirations and their behaviour, and take responsibility for their own learning. "Everyone wants to do well, nobody wants to do badly, and making the pupils aware of their own ambivalence means they can think about resolving it by minimising some behaviours and maximising others," explains Richard Wheal.

Again, there have been measurable results. Each pupil has regular reviews, which look at the gaps between predicted and potential grades. These gaps have started to close, and, says Richard Wheal, half the students on the scheme are no longer viewed as challenging. "It has been particularly successful for those who were taking out their lack of confidence on their peers, by bullying," he notes. "There is no telling off involved, which changes the whole atmosphere of the school, though that is less measurable."

He believes that there is infinite room in schools for innovative thinking. "The government has said that attainment must keep rising forever and it's our job to find ways of making that happen. If you don't innovate, you go backwards."