

'If we don't innovate. we won't raise standards'

John Dunford Expert view

Interview by Diana Hinds

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Education would die without innovation. It is a vitally important part of the job and it is part of what makes teaching attractive to the brightest and best graduates of each generation. Schools need to give their teachers the opportunity sometimes to go "off piste". I think it's right that schools should have a very clear ethos and expectations about what goes on in the classroom, but within that it's important to give teachers the space to innovate.

There is less time than there used to be for teachers to experiment and explore. That's partly about the central precepts of the syllabus and increasingly prescriptive teaching methods, particularly in primary school. It's partly about the sheer volume of what schools are now expected to do.

Teachers, however, often have more freedom than they think. We have got into a very defensive culture based on fear of Ofsted. But Ofsted has always recognised good teaching as good teaching, and good exam results as good exam results. Innovation is an important part of good teaching and it does in the end bring better exam results if more imaginative approaches are used.

Good teachers are inevitably good innovators. Even good, traditional teachers will innovate, because they know enough about their subject to identify different ways of approaching the same thing. Some people, of course, are more imaginative than others. I don't think I was a particularly creative classroom teacher, but I had what seemed to me occasional flashes of creativity. And I've had a few good ideas over the last 30 or 40 years.

It's important that headteachers, too, try hard not to be ground down by the weight of government initiatives and still find space to innovate. I think all good heads have some good ideas during their headships. For many, innovation may be the transfer into their own school of something exciting that they have seen or heard about elsewhere. But that is still innovation.

For me, the most significant aspect of the Innovation Unit is that it is run by practitioners. I was always in favour of the unit being formed, but initially I was very much against it being set up inside the DfES - because I thought the

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centralising tendencies of the department would grind the unit into submission. But I think they have managed to work well with the DfES and, in some small way, they have helped to shift the culture away from centralizing prescription towards a climate that places greater value on innovation. I think their primary role is as a catalyst.

Some schools may have had concerns that because the unit was in the DfES it was therefore part of the government machine. But all those who have worked with the unit know its main purpose is to encourage teachers to help shape the future. In changing its emphasis from funding individual projects, it is helping move the education system towards a more collaborative approach.

A great deal of interesting work is now going on in federations and networks, and it's important to take that forward to help change the climate from one of competition to one of collaboration. The unit's "Breakthrough" project - working with schools on boys' achievement - has been very good. People have really valued their participation in it. The other thing people say they appreciate are smaller school projects that have received a small amount of money from the unit to help bring them about. I hope these kinds of projects will not be lost with the unit's change in focus.

Can all this turn into innovation for innovation's sake? If people think that, it's obviously gone too far. The important point is that innovation improves the quality of education. There could, too, be occasions when things go disastrously wrong - but maybe you have to take a risk. School leadership has become quite risk-averse, partly through pressure from the government and from Ofsted. But by taking a risk you are ensuring that the system is not completely closed to innovation.

If we don't innovate, we won't take the education system forward nor raise standards. The unit is helping to maintain an open climate and remove people's fears about innovating. The fact it's in the DfES puts a seal of approval on this crucial process - which I think many people feared had gone out the window.

John Dunford is general secretary of the Secondary Heads Association