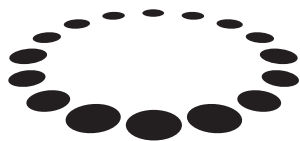


DEBATES  
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**How Can We Build Student  
Engagement and an Educational  
Community?**

Valerie Hannon



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## Introduction

I am from the Innovation Unit, based in London. We are a not-for-profit social enterprise which was born out of the conviction that our public services are not fit for purpose. We were initially entirely focused on education, but we have become increasingly involved in most public services, including health, local government, juvenile justice, mental health services – a very wide range of public services and we believe that social innovation is critical to all of them. They are too expensive, they are not meeting users' needs and they are not fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we face it.

I'm so pleased that Fundació Jaume Bofill has elected to think about this issue of student disengagement, together with the issue of community, because I do believe it is a symptom of the underlying unsuitability and failure of education systems around the world.

This is not a phenomenon which is special to Catalonia or to Spain or to Europe or even to the rich northern hemisphere. We have the good fortune in the Innovation Unit to be working globally. And I have been working in places as disparate, as Finland, which has been at the top of PISA for so very long, as well as Kwazulu Natal, the biggest province in South Africa. Both of these jurisdictions are concerned (from differing perspectives) about the level of student disengagement that they are facing.

Across the world you will see many jurisdictions concerned about disengagement amongst students. But this can mean that students disappear – they are out of the door either as soon as they can legally or even before it's legal. Others are disengaged because they are 'gone in their heads'. They are achieving reasonable results, perhaps, sometimes even doing quite well, but whether they are really engaged as learners is another question. And perhaps many of you will, in your own sons and daughters or young people you know well, come across young people

who seem to be achieving but actually who aren't really in their heart and in their soul turning into passionate learners; they're doing just what they need to do to get by.

Research worldwide tells us that this is important because it's associated with a wide number of life outcomes. Students who are not engaged with their learning are likely to learn at a slower pace and, of course, achieve worse. That's research from 2004. John Hattie, whose meta-study of effective teaching methods is well known, points out that motivation and engagement in schools have a higher effect on student achievement than numerous other in-school factors. In other words, it's a kind of golden key.

Research also shows that engagement in learning at school decreases with age. The longer students are in school, the more disengaged they get. And we know that disengagement is a far bigger problem for the most disadvantaged children. Numerous studies from across the world have shown that. So if you're poor, if you're from a one-parent family, if you're from an ethnic minority your levels of engagement with schooling are very likely to be much lower.

However, I want to pose the question of what we really mean by engagement. I want to distinguish between engagement in *learning* and engagement in *schooling*: we don't think that they are the same thing.

Research into engagement in schooling has generally used 5 criteria or 5 characteristics. Does the student attend? Do they seem to be attentive? In other words, are their eyes open and are their eyes looking vaguely in your direction? Do they conform or are they coming to school in strange, ripped clothes and showing that they're placing themselves apart from the school community. Are they achieving good exam results? Is their behaviour good or bad?

Now, that is the set of criteria which researchers have used to determine levels of engagement in school. But would you say that those are levels or criteria for engagement in learning? We don't think so. We think that if you are serious about engagement in learning you mean different things. Are they energetic and enthusiastic? Is there passion there? Are they learning all the time everywhere? Are they taking responsibility for their own learning, rather than just doing what somebody else tells them,

looking things up, trying to find new spaces to learn, taking their own responsibility and achieving a wider set of learning outcomes?

If a student can talk to you about their learning with passion and interest, you know you've got an engaged learner, don't you? But those are not the things that researchers classically try to measure and we think we need to shift the focus away from engagement in schooling, which has fundamentally been about compliance, towards engagement in *learning*.

How do we measure that? Too many surveys focus on conformity and compliance with schooling. Together with the University of Bristol therefore, and with the help of the OECD survey specialists, we have created a learner engagement survey for a programme called *Learning Frontiers*, working across Australia. This survey takes a very different view. If we are concerned with real motivation and real engagement, there are five things we ought to be concerned about.

- Is learning a part of a student's identity?
- Is it pervasive, does it extend beyond the school?
- Is learning social?
- Is it deep?
- Does it result in memorable and meaningful experiences and is it relevant?

So, a survey has been constructed using those five constructs, to try to get at really serious areas of engagement and we piloted this with four jurisdictions. These are all members of the Global Education Leaders Programme (<http://gelponline.org>). I won't say much about this other than to say 14 jurisdictions worldwide, in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China, Brazil, South Korea, have all participated in a programme to share thinking about radical innovation in education.

The four jurisdictions which piloted the engagement survey were: Finland, Kentucky, South Korea and Australia and our colleagues in those jurisdictions had samples of very varying sizes, but I want to give you one sample only, which is the Finnish sample.

They took this very seriously. They surveyed 15,000 students in the age range 13 to 15. And here we are talking, let's remember, about what



is supposed to be one of the best schooling systems in the world and what they found was that young people appreciate learning, but they were frequently deeply bored at school.

So, for example, one of the items on the questionnaire is, ‘how often do you pretend to pay attention whereas in fact you are thinking about something else entirely?’ and a huge number said, ‘very often’. They’re just not there. They’re doing what they need to do. So even in this top system young people found school very boring. The pedagogies didn’t suit them, but yet they were eager to learn.

And there were significant minorities even where you could tell a good news story: for example, 70% seemed engaged, 30% were displaying signs of lack of engagement across most of the underlying constructs. However that is a very big minority and this is in a reasonably successful system. The other outcomes were worse. We think it’s a very interesting beginning and these jurisdictions are committed to improving the survey and using it *not* to rate themselves against other countries, but *to have good conversations with principals of schools, with teachers in schools and with learners themselves about what’s going on.*

The question that thinking about engagement in *learning* really raises is: what is an education worth having today, wherever you are? Because if a young person believes an education is worth having they will engage with it. I said at the beginning that in some of the surprising places around the world we are finding disengagement. South Africa, Kwazulu Natal, where the youth unemployment is just horrific, 80-90%. You would think that in that context young people would see education as their route to a good life and would seize every opportunity they could to get some kind of education. In fact the reverse is true. Young people are dropping out very early in the system at 15, just to be unemployed and to hangout on township street corners. Why? Because they don’t think that what is being offered in school is an education worth having, even in those desperate circumstances.

And in wealthier countries we know that the same is true. Young people know that there’s supposed to be a connection between education, schooling and the rest of their lives, but they don’t buy it. They don’t see that that is necessarily the case. So the question is being asked wherever

you are and it's particularly being asked in countries, which of course, have been so deeply hit by the global financial crisis, here in Europe particularly, but all across the world, even in North America, which did not get such a bad economic shock.

What will matter in the future is your capacity to learn, and to learn fast, your confidence in your learning, your resilience in your learning, and your adaption to new circumstances. This poses a new challenge for schools. Not least in a world where we've had an explosion of information technology which has changed the context and young people know these days that with the avenues and routes to knowledge and the skills increasingly open and online, they look to schools for different things. I'm not saying that schools are going to become irrelevant, but they no longer have the monopoly on access to learning.

Does this mean school does not have a role? I don't think so at all. I may not sound like it, but I am a passionate believer in schools, because I think they have many other functions to play, but they must change. In my view they must change radically. And if you don't believe it, take a look at what was my book of the year for 2013, Al Gore's book *The Future*, a really extraordinary look across what is going to happen to our world in the next two decades and his conclusion is a simple one. Amongst scientists, amongst predictors and social commentators there is a clear consensus – the future now emerging will be extremely different from anything we have ever known in the past. It is a difference not of degree, but of kind.

If you accept that, this is the most extraordinary challenge to human-kind and therefore **an education worth having** needs to be one which equips young people to deal with the seriousness of these challenges. And we're not even close.

Young people themselves, it seems to me, really are much more value-driven and concerned about some of the critical issues facing our planet than we are. After all, they are going to inherit it and it strikes me that some of the issues that really engage and make young people passionate, schools hardly reflect upon at all. The major threats to our planet and how we are going to deal with those. Now this is not a problem in waiting. This is a problem which communities, and I'm coming back to

that business about learning communities, are dealing with now. And when young people engage with that in a real and authentic sense, then we find that they make connections with their learning in fascinating new and powerful ways.

## How should education leaders respond?

How should education leaders respond to all of this? Well, it really will depend upon your beliefs about change and about human motivation. Let me explain what I mean.

I was in the United States for a while recently and two things took my attention. The first was a copy of a well-known journal called *Education Week* which was an issue on motivation and was looking at some attempts by schools to crack this very difficult problem of unengaged students. They were running a cash rewards system so that students who did well in their grades were able to claim cash rewards at the end of their semesters: that's one way to go.

Another approach was finding ways for teachers to make their lessons more *entertaining* – in the belief that to be engaged you need to be entertained.

Let's look at some of the research again. If you want a pretty good round up of the research on motivation, look at Daniel Pink whose 2009 book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about what Motivates Us*, takes a very broad view of psychological research, social science research and also research done by economists and he says there are three big things which motivate us as human beings. It's not cash and it's not being entertained. It's about autonomy: that is your sense of choice and control over what you do. The second is mastery, a growing sense that you have mastered a set of skills or a subject and the excitement that you get through your growing sense of mastery. And the third is purpose: that you can connect this learning with purpose either to problems you are facing in your own life, in your own community or as you see them affecting the society that you are going to live in.

Now if these are key – autonomy, mastery and purpose – there are

some very clear implications for how we organise schools and how we organise learning. And I think most teachers know this in their hearts, but the difficulty is translating that into pedagogical practice. However, there are now many jurisdictions around the world really moving fast in this direction and I'd like to describe some of that activity.

## 1. The Harris student commission on learning, London

The Harris Federation is a set of schools in a very poor area of South London. High numbers of black students who are living in poverty and achieve, or were achieving very low levels. What the school did to address this was to create a *student commission on learning*. This was about the learners themselves, starting to become a powerful force for innovation. Across 10 schools they set up a commission of around 70 students, they supported them with resources for research and staff members who would help them with their undertaking. The student commission was asking a single question: What will make learning powerful in our schools? And the students set about researching worldwide examples of really powerful learning. They set up Skype interviews, they invited people to come into their schools, they emailed researchers across the world, they gathered a huge amount of evidence and what was impressive was it was global. These students put together the evidence that they were getting about what was really powerful learning that could go on in schools and came up with a series of recommendations. By the way, I should say that the Principal of the school, a chain of them, whatever the student commission on learning comes up with, we will implement. In other words, he made it meaningful so the students knew that it mattered. (If you Google the Harris Federation, The Student Commission on Learning, you will find a huge amount on this example and I think you will find it inspiring). These students have pointed the way for change, and the pedagogies they want are those which motivate, and engage them. The schools have changed enormously as learning environments.

## 2. New York city ize

Schools in New York City are a huge system where examples of improvement have been terrific, but, in the view of many people, much too slow. Mayor Bloomberg, when he was in office, set up the Innovation Zone, which was a group of 300 setting out not to improve schools, but to transform them. They are committed to radical innovation in their contexts, particularly around this issue of engagement.

The iZone is dedicated to personalizing learning. They are rethinking structures, creating new models and promoting innovation across the system. They are changing their spaces, their classroom design, their curriculum, assessment, staff and student roles, programmes and schedules. In the past students had to fit in with old patterns. Those things are fixed: if they didn't suit students, too bad.

What the iZone is trying to do is *start* with the students and re-shape those things, the spaces, the classroom design, the roles, the curriculum, the assessment and the schedules to fit with students. And what we are seeing in this iZone is an absolute explosion of new models for schooling, which is fundamentally directed at creating powerful, engaged learners.

### 3. Learning Frontiers, Australia

The third example I will mention is *Learning Frontiers*, a new programme operating across Australia, sponsored by the Australian Institute for Teaching and Learning (AITSL) and supported by Innovation Unit. It comprises schools who care about engagement. Their whole purpose is to create professional practices to increase student engagement and learning and they want this to be a global enterprise, they want to connect with educators elsewhere. So when you Google it, you'll find a website that you can follow and connect with and I hope perhaps make real connections.

So, what's *Learning Frontiers* doing? Their aim is to increase the proportion of Australian students who are deeply engaged in learning through the development of teaching and learning practices that promote it. In other words, to close that gap between what we know about motivation, what excites passion and what it really looks like and what we actually do in school. And they're going to measure it by the goal that Australia has set for itself nationally, which is: *Successful learners; confident, active citizens*. Pretty good goal really. Not many nations have summed up what they are trying to do with their education system and certainly the UK has not. We often just take it for granted what the education system is for, what an education worth having is. But maybe we should actually be explicit, the way the Australians have. So what we're going to do is find the practices that create those outcomes, and they're going to do it by designing, developing and testing learning teaching and assessment practices that foster engagement in an education worth having.

They're not doing this in a vacuum. They are going to use all the research we have about learning and what makes it powerful as a starting

point. Innovators don't just dive in and think up something from their imagination without having as a springboard, as a starting point, the best knowledge base that we can get. The innovating schools in Learning Frontiers have looked to around four sources of research about what kinds of designs for schools are really powerful.

The first book is this one which is published by the OECD, called *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*. That book brought together the state of knowledge on learning sciences. So that was source number one.

Source number two for design principles was taken from the Global Education Leaders Programme book, called *Redesigning Education: Shaping Learning Systems around the Globe* and in that a series of principles for how our education practice should evolve to engage students is set out.

The third source was a book which we wrote two years ago called *Learning a Living*. This is about radical innovation in education for work. We looked at a range of innovators across the world who were creating quite different models for learning which were successful in getting young people into work, whether it was in poor villages in Bangladesh which is what you're looking at here or in further education in Finland or in technical colleges in Brazil. There were some really important lessons to be drawn from the work of these educators, so we have used those as well.

And then, examples from great great schools. There are some schools around the world who are just doing this work with extraordinary success. Take High Tech High, which is in San Diego California. If you don't know it, Google it. They are the most extraordinary learning community who are running webinars, MOOCs, creating a global community of educators who are absorbed with the issue of student engagement. And High Tech High have 4 principles that they say are at the heart of their success. This school in San Diego, and there is a huge demand for places because it is so successful. 100% of their students go on to college, irrespective of their socio-economic status. But HTH takes a completely unselected student body – grade scores do not ensure entry. You can only get in through a lottery system.



They have a number of design principles. They say the first thing is the primacy of the quality of student work. Everything comes back to the quality of student work. They set incredibly high expectations and if you get the chance ever to visit the school or just have a look at their website, you are astounded by the quality of the work that students can do. It comes back to that issue about mastery. Most of the time we don't ask students enough, we are unchallenging and unambitious for them and when in an educational context people are really challenging, the students take off.

Second: integration of heart, head and hand. Practical things, cognitive intellectual things and things that strike at your values and your emotions. They integrate the lot. Integration of students' and disciplines. They don't track students or put them in different classes according to ability or achievement. They are all completely mixed up and comprehensive and they teach in an interdisciplinary way. The general pedagogy is through project based learning. Not all the time, but a very high percentage and a great deal of it is cross-disciplinary. If you look at some of the videos on their website you will see examples of maths teachers working with physical education teachers. You'll see arts teachers working with scientists and biologists and creating absorbing, absorbing programmes of work.

Third: they see teachers as designers, teachers as designers. The job of the teacher is to design a learning environment. Not how the chairs are set out, but a learning programme which is powerful. And if you think about teachers as designers you completely alter how you see our work.

## 'Learning Frontiers', Design Principle

So the Australians in *Learning Frontiers* took these as their starting point. The research from OECD, the Global Education Leaders Programme, Learning and Living and examples of great schools, like High Tech High.

The schools have decided there are four, which will really engage students and their work now is creating the practices around how to do that.

**The first is that learning is co-created**, meaning that it recognises both adults and students as a powerful resource for the design of learning. It's

not just down to teachers, it's students as well. *They* need to be involved in how learning programmes are designed.

**The second is connected.** There is connection through the fantastic world of information technology, but also work which is connected to and uses real world contexts, contemporary issues, whether it's the threats for Aboriginal life in Australia, the degradation of the environment there, the lack of water affecting the country, racism within the country, simple issue of reasonable good work for all Australians. So, those contemporary issues are fundamentally at the heart of their learning design. Activity in school needs to be connected to the rich resources available in the community and the wider world. In other words, they will use experts whether they're at an open university or at a research institute to come into schools and work with teachers and to use their environment for the students as well.

**The third principle is that it's personal.** This comes back to the New York idea. It builds from the students' passions and capabilities and it is possible to create curricula which reflect students' passions and capabilities, to personalise their learning.

**And the final principle is that it will be integrated.** They will integrate as far as possible subjects, students and learning contexts. By 'learning contexts' that means whether they are learning in a classroom, in a museum, in a theatre, or at an internship in a company or a business, of which there will be many.

Those are their design principles adopted by the *Learning Frontiers* program and what AITSL, with our help, is now doing is to provide the opportunities and support for schools to develop their work and unite around these powerful design principles for engaged learning. They are running a whole series of prototypes and experiments about new professional practices for teachers in those areas of four principles.

I want to end this analysis with this thought from Yong Zhao who I know has been one of the guests of the seminar. I think Yong summed it up when he remarked, after the last PISA results came out, that the East Asian education systems may have a lot to offer if you want to have compliant and homogenous test takers. If you want that, then look to Shanghai, look to Hong Kong, copy those systems.

For those who are looking for a high quality education, Finland would be a better place now. It is a much more holistic, much more rounded, much higher quality education.

But for an education that truly cultivates the creative entrepreneurial, globally competent citizens needed in this next century, you will have to invent it. You will have to invent it. Not alone, but as a part of other communities in Australia, in New York, in South London. And now we can, because we are part of a global education community.

Global benchmarking can give you the best of the past, but *for the best of the future you have to do the invention yourself.*

## About the author

Valerie Hannon is a Board Director of the Innovation Unit, London, UK, which works internationally to promote innovation in the public services. She is a founding member of the Global Education Leaders Program within which she is the supporting consultant to Finland and a number of US States. She has worked on a number of programs on innovation in learning designs, and most recently launched *Learning Frontiers* in Australia. She is a regular contributor to events and in programs across the world, working in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Europe. In 2012 she published *Learning A Living: Radical Innovation in Education for Work* (Bloomsbury) and co-authored *Redesigning Education: shaping learning systems around the globe* (Booktrope 2013). She is a member of the Clinton Global Initiative and a consultant to the World Innovation Summit on education (WISE). [www.innovationunit.org](http://www.innovationunit.org)



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