

THINK GLOBAL THINKPIECE SERIES 013



Motivating the core: a values-led approach to owning a common future

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Overview (why read this?)

This paper shares a selection of the context, insights and implications emerging from a pilot project 'Leading Through Values' (LTV). The project took place across nine primary schools in the Midlands and focused specifically on nine active classes and their 210 learners. Pupils ranged from Year 2 to Year 6 and the active phase of the project was September 2012 - April 2013.

The focus of this paper is on exploring how the project motivated teachers to engage in critical values learning and to adapt their teaching and learning. Paramount to this was a carefully constructed learning journey, incorporating several inter-related theories, but all of the time being led by a consideration of values and their practical integration in the classroom. The paper begins with the context, setting out how the project emerged and touching on one or two of the theories and ideas driving it. It then shares some of the key insights to emerge from the active phase in schools, before reflecting on the implications of the project for those engaged, or with an interest, in global learning. The paper finishes with identifying how readers can contribute to, and learn further from, the ongoing work this project has spawned and its likely next steps.

Talking the same language (how the project came to be)

At the heart of the project was an interest in values and learning shared by five national organisations (Lifeworlds Learning, Think Global, Oxfam, British Red Cross and Practical Action). This interest was sufficiently strong to initiate a joint exploration of how values and learning intersect in formal education and what the implications of this relationship might be for global learning.

Central to this process, was the need for the organisations involved to discover and converse in the same language, for even a shared space such as 'global learning' is characterized by a myriad of perspectives and interpretations once one peels back the lid. Leaving that exciting, and I would argue necessary dissensus, to one side, I want to here explain some of the key terms used within the LTV project. These should assist the reader in the remainder of this thinkpiece.

Common Cause: The organisations behind LTV initially came together around a piece of work on values and frames that is most widely known through the lens of the Common Cause Handbook (Holmes et al, 2011). Common Cause provides an accessible explanation of how values work within society to influence behaviours and attitudes. Its authors make the case for better understanding these mechanisms in order to counter the pervasive power of forces perceived to be working (whether consciously or not) against a more just and sustainable future.

Bigger Than Self (BTS) issues: Associated with Common Cause is the notion of Bigger Than Self issues, a concept that proved especially useful to the LTV project which defined BTS issues as:

'... issues that may feel simply too big to deal with. For us these include those relating to global poverty, sustainability and humanitarianism. We will call these Bigger Than Self (BTS) issues, but the terms Global, Complex, Controversial and Universal are also used. To a large extent the term does not matter, but the skills, dispositions and ability to consider these issues, to form an opinion, and to take relevant action does. Values are at the heart of this.'

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Values: The 'universal human values' explored in Common Cause can be categorized by type or characteristic. There is considerable detail in this and room for disagreement also, but at the broadest level the distinction is made between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Values. Extrinsic Values are generally those associated with self and could be summarized by status and success. Intrinsic Values are by contrast those associated with others and the wider world and are closely linked to notions of well-being, justice and sustainability that are the focus of many in global learning.

These terms are further explored in associated project papers (see Bowden, 2013a and 2013b), but the above explanations should provide sufficient context for readers of the present thinkpiece.

Guided by obliquity... (what we set out to do...)

The LTV project was established to explore whether the ideas within Common Cause could be applied in formal education to engage the intrinsic values of learners (here we include teachers) through Bigger Than Self (BTS) issues. The object was not to 'teach' or 'convey' specific intrinsic values that might be akin to the agendas and objectives of the partners, but rather to devise a process through which a broad values dialogue could take place. The test was to see whether providing such a space, would lead to a strengthening of intrinsic values and in doing so lead to an increase in awareness of, and engagement with learning through BTS approaches like global learning.

A critic might immediately question the merit and purpose of such a circuitous and chance-laden journey - why not simply devise a programme of activity and support that overtly introduces and promotes the desired values? The response to such a legitimate query is both easy and persuasive. It lies firstly in a growing body of evidence that the transmission of values simply does not work. Such approaches have at best a temporary pull on the values by which we live our lives, and at worst cause outright rejection because values shifts require change and change rarely works when imposed (Bowden and Wilson 2013).

A second and related response is to be found in the theory of obliquity made popular by John Kay (2011), which in a nutshell posits that goals are best achieved indirectly;

if you want to achieve X, then focus on doing Y. Allowing for the obvious complexity behind this notion, obliquity has proven especially useful in guiding our work on values, which if dealt with head-on can unveil sensitivities and even confrontation. One needs only to think of the values clashes played out almost daily by our elected politicians to appreciate this. The school environment can be equally volatile and never more so than under the present changes that are widely accepted as unparalleled in living memory.

... and working from security (...and how we went about it).

Aware of sensitivity around working with values and of the current operational environment for schools, LTV practitioners were at pains to work from a position of security, at least as a starting point. This security was twofold – firstly in the idea that the work of the partner organisations was rooted in the intrinsic values we were hoping to engage, and second in the belief that the **process** supporting a values-led approach was more important than the **content**. We therefore took faith in beginning where teachers and their learners were.

From this standpoint the project was able to engage participants openly and quickly as it did not impose or expect any specialist knowledge or insight as its starting point. Rather it was able to build confidence and motivation amongst both teachers and learners by asking deceptively simple questions and by working with what they were already doing and/or planning to do in their learning. It would be deceptive to say that this did not also cause some confusion in the initial stages, but this was primarily because teachers had become so accustomed to heavily proscribed programmes and interventions.

Towards a pedagogy of hope? (finding an inner energy)

The ideas of Paulo Freire are often cited in theories of global learning, but just as often flounder in practice when they clash with the neo-liberal models governing the system. Freire never meant for his works to be a methodology, but rather as a stimulus for adaptation and development. A key tenet of his work that seems enormously under-valued, is its inherent energy. So many educators become animated and passionate about a more just and sustainable world when they engage with his ideas. In the spirit of Freire, we set out to see whether values-led learning could provide a similar and perhaps more sustainable energy.

The energy we sought to create had three key sources. The first was in providing teachers with an opportunity to explore their own values and consider how values are formed, influenced and change. The second was in asking them to think about their learners and the aspirations they held for their future. This became the focus of a disorientating dilemma (Mezirow, 2000), helping teachers to contrast the values-led aspirations they held for their learners with the teaching and learning in their classrooms. In most instances this identified significant potential for change.

The third energy source lay in the simple act of starting 'where teachers (and their learners) were at', as opposed to bringing additional content into already busy classrooms. By placing our confidence in the idea that all learning could be connected to values and to Bigger Than Self (BTS) issues, we were able to help teachers work within their existing planning. The effort was not expended on learning new content, but on applying new learning approaches to current content. This approach echoed theoretical understanding of work around values and allowed us to cast ourselves as facilitators exposing and motivating existing dispositions, rather than as experts educating the uninformed.

The energy released through these sources was seen to clearly motivate teachers and learners alike to engage more actively in BTS issues and to do so through a growing values understanding and dialogue. Of particular note, was the ownership that was assumed by all of those involved; an ownership that is akin to what we know about how values work. This vital issue of ownership also helps explain the failure of many initiatives based on values delivery where ownership is more normally vested in the delivery partner than the recipient. Ownership was most evident in the volume of work taking place in the pilot classrooms, with teachers engaging in much more values-based learning than had originally been planned and talking of "*not wanting it to stop*".

Finding a flow (confidence and comfort)

The ownership that teachers exhibited for values approaches quickly translated into comfort and confidence in dealing with a range of Bigger Than Self issues, both locally and globally. Teachers of 10-15 years' experience talked of trying things that they would "*not have dreamed of exploring*" before, and of being amazed at the ability of their learners "*to debate and come up with really sensible ideas*". Beyond the formal learning of the classroom this newfound confidence was referenced by teachers who spoke of "*seeing values and BTS issues everywhere*" and by learners who began regularly bringing issues (from the community, media, family discussions etc) into the classroom for further exploration.

The values processes and emerging language were considered the 'keys' to unlocking a flow around this work. Flow is that state of being whereby an essentially cognitive process (such as thinking about complex BTS issues) becomes increasingly second nature, such that it not only requires less (conscious) effort, but is even enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi in Kahneman, 2011). This state of flow was clearly seen in one or two of the pilot schools, where teachers, observers and learners themselves spoke of increased enjoyment, engagement and motivation for learning. There are several cases in which normally disruptive or perhaps struggling (in SEN terms) learners were noted for a marked positive turnaround in their learning.

Also of note, was a connection between increased confidence and the desire to act. In two of the schools I am aware of, learners (in both cases year 3) became sufficiently motivated to challenge the structures and values statements of the classroom and wider school. In one instance learners renegotiated the school rules to be the values

by which they would learn and live together, and in another the learners worked with staff and governors to revisit and refresh the school mission around pupil-led values. This motivation to act was not limited to learners. One teacher remarked quite openly about how the project and the engagement in values had afforded her a new confidence to work with senior leadership to tackle a key need for shelter in the playground. The same teacher also restructured the way in which they ran parents' evenings, working from the values of the parent/carer rather than the largely extrinsic (performance-related) values that often dominate a schools approach to parents' evenings. In other schools, teachers spoke of adding a values lens to their planning grids, and of looking out to BTS issues for ways to enrich and extend planned learning such that it becomes more meaningful and 'real'.

Reaching in, in order to reach out (learning to let go)

So, what are the implications of this pilot project for those engaged in global learning as teachers, leaders or providers? The reality is that to overly state a series of implications would be both premature and misguided. Premature in the sense that this was a short-term, limited scale pilot project following a very specific pathway that is not instantly replicable. Misguided because the very nature of the project was to explore the application of values approaches and BTS issues across a wide variety of settings and the bespoke nature of this engagement raises (quite rightly) considerable caution against any quick fix 'roll-out'.

Accepting of the above caveats, it is possible to raise a number of indicative points emerging from the project and to invite a wider dialogue around the potential implications of these. I will now deal with five of these briefly as they relate to the motivation of teachers.

Exploring ourselves: the process of exploring our own values and understanding more about how they are shaped and directed, appears to be key to the successful engagement and motivation of teachers and school leaders.

Finding your voice: the process of allowing a values language to emerge through dialogue and exploration is essential to fostering ownership and avoids the inhibitions associated with the introduction of specialist language and terminology. There is always room for translation once people are confident in their own voice.

Seeing the opportunity: approaching BTS issues not as specialist knowledge, but as an opportunity to ask questions, explore assumptions, acquire new insights, and challenge others has been key to liberating both teachers and learners to engage with confidence and to learn together through the gaps in understanding or knowledge.

Taking a risk: a process that is ready to "fail forwards", to learn from its errors, and to understand its achievements, helps to foster a culture of positive risk taking – risk that stretches the learning, ventures into unknown responses and embraces unfamiliar concepts. The role of leaders in supporting this risk is also a key factor. It requires faith in process and strong evidencing of outcomes.

Securing the space: a process that begins where teachers and schools are, rather than imposing what may be perceived as additional burdens, can free up involvement and create genuine cross-curricula space for both values and BTS approaches to learning. As one teacher remarked "*not so much a new way of teaching as a new pedagogy for what I already do*".

Not in a day's work (seeing the limits)

The above points combine to provide an encouraging mandate for change and action within schools that recognize the importance of global learning and are looking for ways to absorb it into their being. The project also provided some important points of caution, however. These points are worthy of brief mention by way of balance, and in particular to emphasise that the approaches used within the pilot are far from 'a day's work'. This work cannot be replicated through a simple one-off training day and neither is it suited to a simplified toolkit available for download and delivery. Accepting that, both could of course assist those wanting to embark on such a journey.

What the project revealed was an intensely human process, requiring time, openness, support, commitment, relationships, motivation and most of all time (yes more of it!). Within the pilot cohort, schools demonstrating the greatest shift had an active teacher embracing these needs. What enabled this shift when all schools received the same basis of engagement is the interesting question, and the answer it would appear comes back to the crux of this paper – the motivation of the core. And this motivation, I would suggest, is driven not by any promise of impact on learners, or any tangible gain for the school (though both were evident), but by teachers' own learning; by the potential of these approaches to stretch, challenge and re-energise them as teachers, but also as people passionate about learning. The engagement with values and BTS issues was core to this.

Where the active teacher in a school was less motivated by their own learning and engagement, and perceived the project as something to deliver 'for' their pupils, rather than to explore 'with' learners, there was notably less impact and shift. This is again to me an obvious statement, but suggests further challenges for this work given the viability of supporting all teachers to the level of depth possible within this project.

Conclusion

The findings of the pilot project suggest very strongly that a properly considered values approach can unleash new or renewed motivation for global learning through Bigger Than Self issues. Evidence from the study suggests greater teacher and learner engagement in BTS issues and the increased use of resources from organisations supporting such work. There is also evidence for improved attainment and behaviour which, though not in the least bit surprising to me, is useful in discussions with schools for whom these may be particular priorities. It may also be useful in discussions surrounding current curriculum change and the presence or otherwise in new curriculum documents of global learning and BTS issues.

What we are not able to draw conclusively from this pilot is the extent to which the approaches used could successfully steer whole-school development towards global learning. Anecdotal evidence from those schools where there was more active engagement from senior leadership (head and governors) alongside the active teacher, suggests significant potential. There is also evidence from follow-up meetings in four of the project schools. These were, in part at least, requested to support leadership in considering changes to their school development plan in reaction to the pilot. What is less clear at present is what a whole-school approach would look like, especially given what we know about the very personal aspects of this work and the inevitable values clashes that will exist within a school community (as in any community).

Negotiating a way through these necessary tensions in order to move effectively from an individual class to whole-school is a challenge that very much informs where we go next with this work. The 'we' is important, for the pilot has attracted interest from educators and organisations beyond the initial alliance that formed around a common cause. Together, this expanded community are actively planning a second phase of action-research in schools to address the questions arising from the pilot and to expand activity into the secondary phase (at least with Years 7 and 8).

In the interim the community have also committed to maintaining the traction gained during the pilot through the development of a website that will act as a depository and community space for those interested in this work. The full project report (of which this thinkpiece explores just one issue) is available there, as are other background papers and resources related to the project. The pilot delivery team have also devised a number of new professional learning opportunities designed to support schools, organisations and others who may see these approaches as contingent to their own work or direction of travel.

I would encourage interested readers to visit this website and to join the many inspiring and motivated educators who already form part of an exciting values community. If there are more specific questions relating to this work or you would simply like to see how you might contribute to, or learn from it, then please contact me in my role as coordinator of the Learning Through Values community.

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