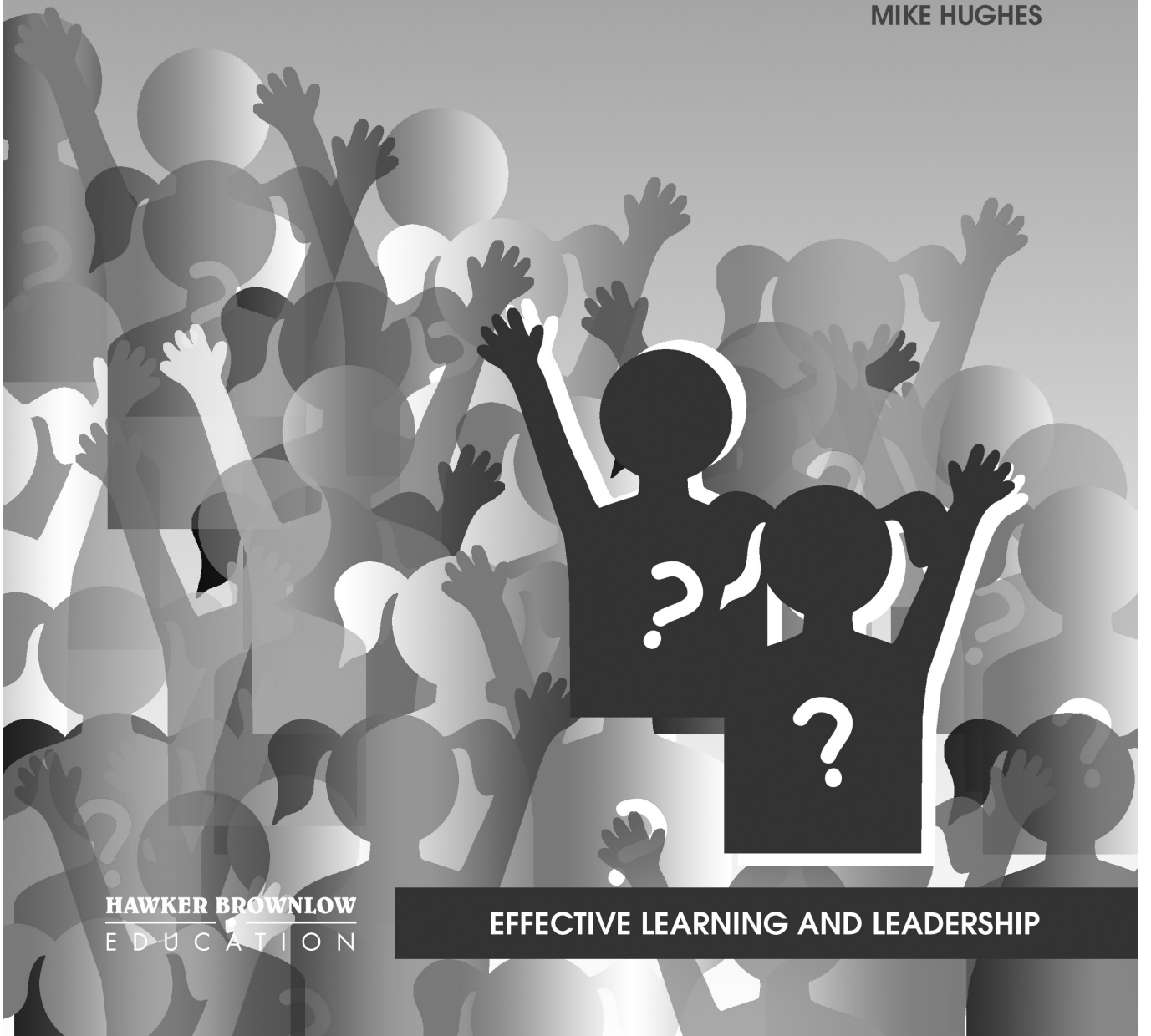


LESSONS ARE FOR LEARNING

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Foreword

A teacher's task is much more ambitious than it used to be and demands a focus on the subtleties of teaching and learning and on the emerging knowledge of school improvement.

Teaching can be a very lonely activity. The time-honoured practice of a single teacher working alone in the classroom is still the norm; yet to operate alone is, in the end, to become isolated and impoverished. This book addresses two issues – the need to focus on practical and useful ideas connected with teaching and learning and the wish thereby to provide some sort of an antidote to the loneliness of the long distance teacher who is daily berated by an anxious society.

Teachers flourish best when, in teams or departments (or more rarely whole schools), their talk is predominantly about teaching and learning and where, unconnected with appraisal, they are privileged to observe each other teach; to plan and review their work together; and to practise the habit of learning from each other new teaching techniques. But how does this state of affairs arise? Is it to do with the way staffrooms are physically organized so that the walls bear testimony to interesting articles and in the corner there is a dedicated computer tuned to 'conferences' about, school improvement, the teaching of English, and so on, and whether, in consequence, the teacher leaning over the shoulder of the enthusiastic IT colleagues sees the promise of interesting practice elsewhere? Has the primary school cracked it when it organizes successive staff meetings in different classrooms and invites the 'host' teacher to start the meeting with a 15-minute exposition of their classroom organization and management? Or is it the same staff sharing, on a rota basis, a slot on successive staff meeting agendas when each in turn reviews a new book they have used with their class? And what of the whole school which now uses 'active' and 'passive' concerts of carefully chosen music as part of their accelerated learning techniques?

It is of course well understood that even excellent teachers feel threatened when first they are observed. The constant observation of the teacher in training seems like that of the learner driver. Once you have passed your test and can drive unaccompanied, you do. You often make lots of mistakes and sometimes get into bad habits. Woe betide, however, the back seat driver who tells you so. In the same way the new teacher quickly loses the habit of observing others and being observed. So how do we get a confident, mutual observation debate going? One school I know found a simple and therefore brilliant solution. The Head of the History Department asked that a young colleague plan lessons for her – the Head of Department – to teach. This lesson she then taught and was observed by the young colleague. The subsequent discussion, in which the young teacher asked,

"Why did you divert the question and answer session I had planned?"

and was answered by,

"Because I could see that I needed to arrest the attention of the group by the window with some hands on role play, and so on."

lasted an hour and led to a once-a-term repeat discussion which, in the end, was adopted by the whole school. The whole school subsequently changed the pattern of its meetings to consolidate extended debate about teaching and learning. The two teachers claimed that because one planned and the other taught both were implicated but neither alone was responsible or felt 'got at'.

So there are practices which are both practical and more likely to make teaching a rewarding and successful activity. They can, as it were, increase the likelihood of a teacher surprising the students into understanding or doing something they did not think they could do rather than simply entertaining them or worse still occupying them. There are ways of helping teachers judge the best method of getting student expectation just ahead of self-esteem.

This book focuses on straightforward interventions which individual schools and teachers use to make life more rewarding for themselves and those they teach. Teachers deserve nothing less for they are the architects of tomorrow's society and society's ambition for what they achieve increases as each year passes.

Professor Tim Brighouse

Contents

Introduction		7
Section One	Focusing on learning	9
Section Two	Lessons are for learning	11
Section Three	Children learn effectively when ...	21
Section Four	'What is education if not enjoyment?'	23
Section Five	What questions did you ask today?	29
Section Six	'Thinking is so important'	39
Section Seven	'The needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many.'	49
Section Eight	What else are meetings for?	61
Section Nine	'Ah, but ...'	67

INTRODUCTION

This book has two key aims:

Firstly, it encourages teachers to reflect upon their own practice and to think carefully about what they are doing in the classroom. It is something that we, as teachers, do not do very often. We do not have time to. Yet it is without doubt the single most important aspect of the job and it is somewhat ironic, therefore, that we spend so little time discussing and analysing classroom practice.

While this is not in the least surprising, given the ever increasing time demands of the job, it is undoubtedly a hindrance to our professional development as classroom practitioners and it does no harm whatsoever to re-evaluate occasionally our day-to-day performance and consider why we teach in the way we do.

Secondly, it offers practical suggestions for classroom activities that attempt to bridge the gap between the recent development in our understanding of how children learn, with the realities of coping with year 8 on a wet Friday afternoon. Too often the gap between the theory of learning and the practicalities and constraints of the classroom proves to be insurmountable and is the reason why so many well-meaning books have relatively little impact on what goes on in the classroom.

The book draws upon a vast range of experiences and extensive lesson observations that cover the entire spectrum of secondary school subjects, enabling the suggestions for lesson activities to be firmly grounded in reality. Indeed all of the strategies outlined in this book are being successfully employed on a daily basis.

By the end of this book teachers will have:

- been encouraged to reflect upon their own classroom practice
- been challenged to think about why they teach in the way they do
- developed a clear picture of what constitutes effective classroom practice
- discovered a range of practical strategies to make their teaching more effective

The book aims to stimulate thought and generate discussion among teachers with the intention that the outcome will be to help them become more effective at their prime function: helping young people to learn.

Section One

Focusing on learning

A story is told of a teacher called Tom. Apparently, Tom is always keen to tell any course presenter that while he has taught for 28 years he hasn't changed a thing. Tom is proud to proclaim that what he does now in his classroom is precisely what he was doing 28 years ago. Warming to his theme, his proudest boast is that, while he hasn't changed in all this time, he has been at the forefront of educational thinking twice. Apocryphal though this story may be, any teacher who has been in education for some time will recognize a grain of truth in Tom's boast.

In 1967 Lady Plowden completed the report, right-wing commentators might say 'infamous report', of her investigation into children and their primary schools. Chapter 2 begins with a sentence that was to become the leitmotif of educational thinking in the 1960s and early 1970s in the UK: '*At the heart of the educational process lies the child.*' Whether this ever became orthodoxy is debatable. It was probably honoured more in rhetoric than reality. It was a view that came under fierce attack from the mid-1970s onwards however. In a speech at Ruskin College in 1976 James Callaghan, the then Labour prime minister, launched 'The Great Debate' on educational standards.

The debate, which continues to this day, has been characterized by the entrenchment and polarization of views. No teacher can escape a label. You are either a 'progressive trendy' or a 'traditionalist'. The debate allows no middle ground. It is couched in black and white assertions with the labels 'progressive' and 'trendy' becoming more readily associated with the perceived negative aspects of the various approaches. Here, 'traditional' stands for rigour, challenge, content and the maintenance of high standards. Traditional classrooms are caricatured by students sitting in straight rows and copying off the blackboard in silence.

At the other end of the spectrum, 'progressive' classrooms take account of individual learning styles and multiple intelligence, and have teachers who would agree that 'the greatest enemy of learning is coverage', or else they allow students to work when they feel like it, ignore spelling conventions and disrupt those who want to work, depending on your point of view.

What is interesting and what brings us back to Tom, however, is the subtle shift in the agenda which, though no one will admit it, takes us back to Lady Plowden. Currently, the terms on almost everyone's lips are:

- Personalized learning
- Every child matters

and one is left wondering how, in essence, these might differ from the view that 'at the heart of the educational process lies the child'.