

# LEADING LEARNING

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# LEADING LEARNING

## an introduction

This book of posters for leading learning and transforming teaching derives from the many hundreds of workshops on learning and teaching which I have delivered in recent years.

The texts come from different sources. Some are observations about learning, based on my own work and put into sayings; some are from researchers in different academic disciplines; and some come from research on social and economic trends. It is intended that the posters can be used in educational establishments to bolster staff development and to test and challenge thinking about the scope and purpose of learning.

These posters are in copyright and their use is confined to within the purchasing establishment. However, I would hope that educationalists can be creative in the use of the poster material, a key purpose of which is to lead learners into learning. Take the thoughts described within these pages and use them to bemuse, challenge, inform and extend your colleagues.

Every effort has been made to identify the source of the poster material. Where there is no source stated then the material is my own.

The term kaizen may be familiar to you if you have been involved in management training or if you have read any organisational development literature. Kaizen is the Japanese concept of organisational change which authorises and values small, almost imperceptible, ongoing and never-ending improvements. Little things accrue great value in kaizen. Small keys open big doors.

In schools and colleges and in classrooms generally, 'don't denizen their kaizen' is a good maxim. I was astonished recently to hear from a headteacher who was lamenting a consequence of a reducing budget – that staff tea and coffee, previously free and unlimited over breaks, was now to be stopped. As I listened to this tale unfold I thought of the consequence of removing something which is seemingly trivial to an accountant or a tax payer but which may have a different set of meanings for a member of staff. The headteacher was guilty of 'denizen their kaizen' and the impact on morale, willingness to give that extra yard, sense of common purpose, and daily opportunities for social cohesion, was diminished in a small but perceptible way which would not be recovered by a simple reversal of the decision. Small things add up. The posters provided in this book, although slight in appearance, can be heavy in consequence and are part of your kaizen repertoire. Their use can signify greater changes.

Kaizen, small incremental and never-ending improvements, are of no use if you and your organisation are 'in confuzen'. An organisation 'in confuzen' has not agreed and set its priorities; it has not got a direction and a sense of purpose and is not focused on what matters. An organisation such as a school or college 'in confuzen' is wasting its time with kaizen.

How does an organisation decide what is important and begin to accommodate all the trivia with all the other big challenges that come along? What, if anything, should get lost along the way? Is staffroom tea and coffee more important than a bullying policy or new windows for the science block or the child who's experimenting with drugs? How is it possible to do it all? Is it advisable to even try?

Charles Handy, a management guru much favoured in the UK, uses lots of analogies for management and prioritisation. He would wish any organisation to be clear about core purpose and not to lose sight of delivering that core purpose. He would want your school to focus on the core stuff. He uses this analogy to help explain his prioritisation philosophy.

How do you get rocks, stones, pebbles, sand and water into a small glass jar? Pile it all in at once and it overflows. Sand and water will fill it almost to the brim anyway. Grinding the lot down by brute force and sheer will power may be one method, but it leaves a mess and some damage along the way. The answer? Sort out the big stuff first.

Put your rocks in early. Lodge them in place, then build the other materials around what is solid, unquestionable and commonly agreed-on as more important than anything else. This is the equivalent of focusing unerringly on the learner and the quality of the learning experience at all times in your school or college. All educational establishments claim to do this. Few really do. For most it's the manic dance of putting in one set of rocks then swapping them around, filling up with pebbles then taking some out again. A visitor, an 'expert', an official or an inspector arrives with new rocks, stones, pebbles, sand and water and before you know it the jar is being emptied again. A rock edict arrives in a brown envelope: the definition of a rock is changed! Academic research shows that what we thought were rocks are not in fact authentic rocks. Statisticians show that rocks are not what they used to be. Higher-order rocks are what is required. Rock measurements are discredited. You just can't get the sand nowadays! In the midst of all of this, what certainties prevail?

The certainties which prevail hang around our core purpose of 'leading learners to learn'. That's where kaizen comes in. That's where the posters come in. All the posters in this book are concerned with the issues of learning and with how to lead learners to learn. When you have secured clarity about core purpose; when that core purpose is expressed at the levels of vision, mission, goals, targets and tasks; when everyone knows what is expected of them, to what level, with what resource and against what measures, then you put in the stones, the pebbles, the sand and the water. The kaizen or small things are the stones, the pebbles, the sand and the water. You can only get them in and to best effect when the big stuff is secure.

Two tenets of effective staff development for schools are that coaching on the job is the most effective mechanism for sustained teaching improvement and that programmes, not events, are better for securing such improvements. Again, this may depend on the rocks being in place. If you do not have a view of what is good teaching and what is effective learning, and have colleagues who consistently exhibit the former and reflect on the latter, then it is hard to coach for it. If you do not have clarity of vision about how you wish to secure good teaching and, effective learning, then it is impossible to plan a sustaining support programme for it. You need the rocks and, what's more, they need to be your own rocks! Inspectorate, local authority officers, prospective parents and the occasional politician may, from time-to-time, come and look at your rocks; they may even offer you their own, but yours are best. Avoid accepting someone else's definitions of good teaching and effective learning. Invariably such definitions are circumscribed by precedent and by the circumstances which generated them. Definitions of teaching which arise from observed experience of what has gone before can take you to a very dull place: a place where mediocrity can be rewarded. Similarly, in a world where children communicate as readily by word of mouse as by word of mouth, fresh thinking about the timing, the scope, the site and the methodology of learning is overdue.

Time spent on learning about learning is part of your professional responsibility. The posters in this book can enhance this process; they can assist in your coaching and mentoring programs and they can be part of your attempts to capture and sustain freshness in approaches to teaching and thinking about learning.

The posters can be used as part of the induction program for new and supply staff and as part of your support for teachers in training. The simple expedient of a focus for the week or fortnight, derived from one of the poster sources and shared at staff briefing and later debriefing, can have as much effect as a conference. The relevant poster(s) can then be reduced and put in the staff briefing sheet or enlarged and put on a staff notice board to prompt further discussion. For example, primacy and recency – positive beginnings and endings to lessons – could be a two-week focus.

The staff handbook can contain excerpts from the poster collection. Poster packs can be made available for departmental meetings. Some posters are appropriate for themed assemblies, for display in classrooms or around the school or college generally. The messages can be used as screen savers on the computer network, as a theme of the week on the school or college website or as part of the closed-circuit televised message system. Some poster material may be suited to parents' evenings or for presentations to governing bodies. Some can be used, albeit judiciously, for staff development within the school or college.

Each poster offers the possibility of a small, almost imperceptible, ongoing and never-ending improvement – and as such is your kaizen.

**Alistair Smith January 2001**

