

Building the future

'Learning zones' trialling new approaches to teaching, outdoor classrooms bringing students closer to the natural world and the possibilities for knowledge sharing afforded by Web 2.0... these were just some of the innovations highlighted by school leaders contemplating the opportunities offered by Building Schools for the Future (BSF) in a recent talk2learn debate.

Many contributors argued that BSF should be seized on as a chance to rethink education – not just to create state-of-the-art classrooms, fixtures and fittings. Before embarking on designing new buildings, school leaders should analyse what they want education to achieve in future, education consultant Stan Terry warned.

"There is plenty of evidence in the business world that change projects often fail because not enough thought has gone in before the project is started," he said.

Sara Pelling, a school business manager in a Burnley secondary, felt schools need a better understanding not only of what children want to learn but also how they want to learn it.

"Young people today learn so quickly in spaces outside of school but we are not always giving them the support or skills to transfer this learning to other areas."

Steve Gater, a secondary headteacher in Newcastle, was one of many contributors to highlight the vital role ICT has to play in providing new approaches to learning. Higher education is also looking to capitalise on young people's use of new technologies and schools should do the same, he suggested.

"I had a conversation with a pro vice-chancellor of a local university in which he propounded the virtues of Web 2.0 for better learning. He described the tools that young people are already using themselves for informal learning and, as we know, are often denied within school formal learning programmes because of a widespread lack of knowledge, understanding and skills among the school workforce."

At Assistant Head Steven Maxson's secondary school in Scunthorpe, they



are using BSF as a platform to create a 'learning zone' research project.

"In this large, fully-equipped space, we will trial a variety of approaches to learning – single year, single subject; mixed year, single subject; mixed year, cross-curricular; single year, cross-curricular – and hope to come to some conclusions."

And showing that innovative thinking doesn't have to be confined to a school building, Administrator Diane Ball's small rural primary in Lancashire has put up an outdoor classroom which is also used for lunchtime activities and by the community.

"The children are thriving on being outdoors and learning from 'doing'," she said. "Our next project is a small pond area which will bring the community, parents and children together to create a wildlife area. The children love the 'hands on' approach and the interaction with other adults."

Finally, Cathy Laird, an assistant head in a Suffolk secondary, urged caution. Rather than recreating an ideal that never really existed or going 'space age', forward-thinking schools should concentrate on interpersonal and communication skills and the ability to research, receive and reflect on information, she argued.

"I want schools to educate youngsters to have the abilities and self-esteem to learn throughout their lives." I don't think we should be responding to a hypothetical virtual world, the demands of industry or the current skills shortages which will all have changed again in five, 10, 15 years' time."

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