Book Reviews

Making Learning Happen: A Guide for Post-Compulsory Education
Phil Race
Review by David Mathew

The first thing to notice about this book, of course, is the sly provocatively title. It is not 'Make Learning Happen' (i.e. Do It Now!), it is 'Making’ – which suggests the furtherance of a continuing (perhaps even continuous) process of practical, 'hands-on' development. It is a title that mixes a certain sense of pragmatic reality-checking with a spirit of can-do hopefulness for the present and the future: much like the contents of the book itself. While the author offers a generous array of suggestions throughout, the clear message herein is that there are no quick fixes, that pedagogic alchemy is a myth: what we need are strategies, what will work are contextualizations, conditions and robust meta-systems of planning.

‘People have been trying to make learning happen throughout the recorded development of the human species,’ Race writes, early on; and he is keen to avoid the traps set by ‘some academics climbing ever higher up their ivory towers, and some practice-based writers ignoring the wisdom which emanates from those towers’... Well, that’s us told, is it not? It is clear from the beginning that Race has an agenda all of his own, and it is up to us to put up or shut up. By ‘focusing on learners themselves’ we will attain a state of pedagogic grace; by adhering to admonishments such as ‘it is all still just information until they have done things with it to turn it into the start of their own knowledge’ we are led to believe that we will be closer to cracking an academic code of sorts.

But perhaps, for all the occasional bluntness of language, the author is correct. Certainly it is both enlightening and depressing that Race senses the need to advocate a collective re-evaluation of our current practices of assessment and feedback. The reaction might be one of jolted denial – I do that already! – but the fact that Race includes gobbets of damning verdict such as ‘assessment and feedback are weak links in our attempts to make learning happen’ is testament to a belief that despite our decades of intervention, surveys, our reworkings of practice, our quorums and our think-tanks, we are considerably further behind in our development of an enriched and enriching learner experience than where we should be. Surely this is as robust an indictment as any. For all of Race’s attitudinal can-do spirit, this book is a deeply sobering document; a reminder, if one were needed, of some of the lengths that we still have to travel.

Upon which roads might we find illumination? The book is crammed with academic pseudo-aphorisms – ‘In short, we can’t measure what students understand. We can only measure the...
evidence that students produce to demonstrate their understanding’ – and the key messages, referring to the learner doing something, to providing feedback within 24 hours, to repetition of task, to the need to forget, revisit, forget, revisit… and then finally learn, are clear.

Elsewhere, the author informs us that ‘at present we often seem to undervalue the potential of learning through mistakes’ and that ‘adjusting the timing of feedback can make a lot of difference to its value to learners’. But what underpins successful learning? In Race’s opinion, there are the interlinked elements of wanting to learn, needing to learn, learning by doing, learning through feedback, and making sense of things. All of which sounds like sage advice; but how are these goals achieved? Via wanting/need, doing, making sense, feedback, coaching/explaining/teaching, assessing – all of these stages being steps on the way to the crock of educational gold known as understanding.

Frankly, some of the arguments seem simplistic, and some seem to mollycoddle learners, but the spry nature of the writing is infectious. However, for all the catchy spring of the prose, Race does not always triumph over cliché, and some of his jokes are stillborn: so after a while the reader learns to take in the substance and disregard much of the style. Why not? We might not agree with everything propounded in this volume (I disagree with the idea of needing to ‘shame’ students into providing an answer when in a large group), but why should we? There is a very useful three-page checklist to adapt for your learners: not just what they should do, but why they should do it (‘Don’t think that studying is something you have to do alone’; ‘Self-assess all the time’ etc). There are excellent passages on assessment as learning, on making sense in large groups, but I do wish that some of Race’s thinking had been more robust. For example, we are told that ‘I’ve seen somewhere a figure for how long the average lecturer waits after posing a question before proceeding to answer it – 1.8 seconds!’ It is not that I doubt the author, but it might have been useful to have read some further exposition on such negative commentary, or at least a reference to further reading, so that those who are interested might know where to go from here.

Although the book seems stymied in places by old-fashioned notions of what a lecture is, or should be (‘Lectures are no longer just to give students information – if that’s all we want to do, we may as well give each of them a data stick full of information’ – but they should not have conformed to this model for some years now; perhaps they really still do!), and although there are some well-aimed barbs at the laziness that arises from the giving-out of handouts (prompting the reader’s question: how has a situation been allowed to arrive that corroborates these views?), Making Learning Happen is a useful compendium of some new ideas and some old ideas presented in a fresh format. The word ‘Guide’ in the subtitle is certainly apt. This book is part-refresher, part-generator-of-ideas. Although Race seems reluctant to propound solutions...
(the implication being that there aren’t many), he has designed a brisk read for busy practitioners, highlighting the virtues of seven specific applications.

Throughout the book, as mentioned above, the dichotomous gulf between saying and doing is evident, and the fact that this is a second edition implies that the author has several points that are worth repeating. In other words, we have still not got it right. I repeat: We have still not got it right. With his tally-ho dismissal of much academic writing, and his cheeky implication that his way is not only the best way, it’s the only way, there is certainly no shortage of opinionated hubris about this book. And yet, curiously, even touchingly, there is a seam of self-doubt that also runs through the chapters, as if (by inference) Race is posing the questions: Can it really be this easy? Can it really be this hard? While he practises what he preaches (a rock-bottom simplicity of language, short punchy sub-chapters, a crystallisation of theories and previous research), the author slams, again and again, up against the brick wall that separates thinking from execution.

Most chapters end with a useful summary of what has been said (presumably partly for the really busy practitioner who does not have the time to read) and while the book may not constitute ‘deep learning’ in the author’s own formulation, it is analogous with the anecdote he tells about a learner’s need to forget information several times before true understanding might grow. In this light, certainly, Making Learning Happen is a book to dip into or to read straight through; more importantly, it is probably a book to learn from more deeply upon each reader’s subsequent visits.

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The SAGE Handbook of Workplace Learning
Malloch M., Cairns L., Evans K. and O’Connor B. N. Eds
Sage Publications. 2011
Review by Mark Atlay

This SAGE Handbook aims to provide a ‘state-of-the-art overview of the field of Workplace Learning internationally’. It is a collection of articles from well-known authors on the subject including David Boud, Paul Hager, Michael Eraut and Lorna Unwin. The book is organised in three sections: theory, research and practice, and issues and futures. The articles are wide-ranging and cover Workplace Learning at all levels and in a variety of different contexts.

No precise definition of Workplace Learning is provided but the initial chapter unpacks what is meant by work, place and learning. The focus of the articles is on the learning of employees and on vocational and professional education, training and development. This a complex area embracing competencies, professional values, implicit and tacit knowledge, the development of judgement through experience, and notions of individual and collective actions and development. In chapter 3, Knud Illeris explores this complexity in some detail emphasising the content dimension.