Are You Satisfied?

In the last couple of months I have been forced to speculate on the dangerous nature of satisfaction. In daily life it is tempting to assume that satisfaction is a good thing. But – as the two sections of this editorial illustrate – dissatisfaction can be a far more powerful creative force.

Are you satisfied with your classroom?

There is a fascinating and complex relationship between the design of our classrooms and the way we behave as teachers. In the 1970s – the heady days of educational transformation – a great deal of research was undertaken (particularly in the USA) concerning the size, shape and layout of classrooms, and the relationships of these matters to numbers of students and approaches to grouping students. But by the 1990s this whole strand of research effectively dried up as educational policy veered sharply back towards traditional and 'back to basics' approaches that valued whole-class teaching and rows of desks. How refreshing therefore to find a genuinely new strand of this research (Horne 1999) and to hear that it has something to tell us not only about classrooms and teaching, but also about design.

Any number of variables can be used to characterise a classroom and the behaviour of its inhabitants, but one tiny fragment of Horne's research that I shall focus on here, concerns just two variables: the degree of satisfaction that teachers have with their classrooms, and the degree of control they feel they have over their arrangement. And the interesting thing is that the relationship between the two is (on the face of it) counter-intuitive. It is not the relationship one might expect. For the teachers that feel most 'dissatisfied' with their classrooms are the ones that feel they have most control over changing them. On the other hand, those teachers that feel 'satisfied' with their classrooms tend also to feel that they have little or no control over changing them.

So what are we to make of this? Horne is driven to speculate that a sense of dissatisfaction with one's classroom may be the first step towards taking control over it. If it doesn't bother me – or hinder me – why would I go to the trouble of changing it. Or if I am so disempowered that the very idea of changing the classroom seems completely beyond the realms of possibility, then there is little point in feeling frustrated by it. In this (sad) case, the classroom remains just as it is, and there is nothing to be done about it.

I am reminded of the aphorism that describes the process of learning. It concerns the perceived stages through which one progresses in the acquisition of a new skill: unconscious incompetence >> conscious incompetence >> conscious competence >> unconscious competence. At the outset one may be quite unaware of the fact that one is incompetent, and this incompetence needs to become conscious before we can do anything about it. Thereafter we deliberately develop the skill and exercise it consciously, until the point is reached at which it becomes so habitual that we forget about it and exercise it unconsciously. This idea has some bearing on Horne's research, for it suggests that many teachers (the satisfied and/or disempowered ones) are in a state of unconscious incompetence. They are simply unaware that their classroom could be otherwise – and that things could be better.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the research shows that design and technology teachers are in the category of teachers that register high levels of dissatisfaction – and high levels of control. They are more likely to be at least conscious of their surroundings, and dissatisfied with them. And this dissatisfaction is empowering to the extent that they feel they can get on and reorganise things to make them better.

It seems therefore, that it is not quite accurate to describe necessity as the mother of invention. We should perhaps say that dissatisfaction is. However necessary it might be for teachers to grapple with redesigning their teaching spaces, it will not happen until they are ALSO sufficiently dissatisfied with the current condition to overcome the inertia of the status quo. And even if they are dissatisfied and motivated to make changes, a different problem then arises. Do they have the skills (and the environmental understanding) to get to grips with what might be done to improve things?

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Awareness of this question prompted me to look at the TTA 'standards', particularly for the award of QTS (for new teachers) and for subject leaders. Astonishingly, there is almost no mention made of the role and the significance of the classroom environment in supporting effective learning. These TTA documents appear not even to recognise that the issue exists, let alone that it has a direct bearing on the learning effectiveness of the classroom.

And so to the second issue. You will recall that in the last edition of the journal we included a brief questioinnaire that we hoped would allow us to evaluate readers' reactions to the new format of the Journal. And – at the bottom of it all – the question we were asking was…

Are you satisfied with the Journal?

I have never been a great enthusiast of questionnaire surveys, but it seemed the simplest way to retrieve some response. In the event we received 27 returns from a circulation of approx. 4000 copies, which reflects a response rate of 0.6%. There are, of course, many ways of interpreting such a response rate, and the editorial board does not think that this would be an entirely reliable basis on which to embark on any major changes. Having said that however, we are not deaf to the comments of those who took the time and trouble to respond and the following analysis might interest readers generally.

The returns reflect the following breakdown of readership:

- secondary teachers   14
- higher education   7
- primary teachers   3
- LEA support staff   2
- consultants   1

And we received the full spectrum of critical acclaim and denigration:

"I would like to cancel my membership of DATA … the Journal has not lived up to its promise."

"Congratulations on a very enjoyable, valuable, publication. Thanks."

Digging beneath the overall comment, we can discern one or two trends: Almost all the responses comment that the major purpose of the journal is "to keep me informed about what is going on in design and technology", and the journal seems to be well thought of in this regard. "It helps you to step outside your own department and see good practice elsewhere", "for authentic, subject centred news and comment", "it gives me information on where to find information", "to keep up to date with changes", "to refresh my thinking".

And few responses identify much in the way of competition, though we have occasional mentions of the national press, the International Journal, the Big Paper, and the Internet.

We have received some great suggestions for more material, dealing for example with design and technology for gifted children; design and technology in industry; 'green' technology' and 'cutting-edge' technology. I hope it goes without saying that any pieces submitted on any of these (or indeed any other) topics would be warmly welcomed by the editorial board.

Some of the responses appeal for more classroom material – at the level of suggestions for new projects, or guides to department budgeting, and there is some appeal for a more illustrated, less dense, format. All these comments were considered carefully at the last meeting of the editorial board.

In responding to these points, we are very aware of the multiple functions that the Journal has to perform, and the sections we have created (research/curriculum/reviews) are in response to these. We hope that readers will see the journal as a 'first stop' in their reading of DATA material, but there is far more produced by DATA than just the Journal – and much of it is to support classroom activity (Guidance Materials, Designing magazine, Datanews, Helpsheets etc.).

Our primary target is the one that most respondents identified. To keep readers informed of developments in design and technology and to maintain the level of

debate about the roles, values and practices of design and technology in schools and colleges. And we should remember that this function does not only include teachers and lecturers in the field, but also embraces policy personnel (e.g.) in DfEE, QCA, TTA, who read the Journal to keep themselves up to date with the live issues and debates in our field. As a professional Journal we would be foolish if we ignored the needs of this readership who are important in shaping the professional context within which we operate.

We are most grateful to those who took the trouble to respond to the questionnaire. And it is tempting to assume that all those who did not respond are (more-or-less) satisfied with it. But I recognise that this sounds like complacency, and illustrates how dangerous satisfaction can be. I think the pledge of the editorial board should be to remain dissatisfied.

Reference

Horne S (1999) 'Establishing Trend Relationships in Teachers' Use of the Classroom Environment' IDATER 1999, Loughborough University of Technology

EDITORIAL