



CULTURAL SNAPSHOT  
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## Social Tapestries Policy Paper Education & Learning

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### **Executive Summary**

This paper will outline briefly the approach used by Proboscis' Social Tapestries<sup>1</sup> programme in a primary and secondary school setting. In each of these examples, Proboscis relies heavily on arts based education methods and works closely with local teachers and administration to develop programmes and curriculum that address local issues and concerns. Ultimately the staff and students are the primary actors responsible for the mapping and sharing of their local knowledge

This paper then goes on to examine how the process addresses several important outcomes as outlined by the recent Department for Education and Skills White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*<sup>2</sup>. Most importantly, the paper examines how the process:

- Encourages a personalized/individualized approach for students
- Promotes participatory local knowledge sharing and a renewed sense of local understanding, identification and belonging
- Supports associated learning

Lastly, an examination of the implications of this process for students and educators follows.

### **Introduction**

Choice, personalization, community integration and a seamless school to work transition are principal pillars underlining the recently released Department for Education and Skills (DfES) White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*. This paper champions choice for individual students and families, enhancing the authority of local schools while simultaneously attempting to ensure a sense of equality and fairness for all students irrespective of difference across the system. It also represents an attempt to strike a difficult balance not only between local communities and central government, but also between those with greater access to the levers of power and various forms of capital and those who lack such access or are excluded through various means. There are clear tensions between many of the principles expressed in this most recent White Paper, but what is more problematic is the failure to acknowledge some of the more subjective realities of students and communities, which deterministically interweave them to their unique cultural, social and geographical identities.

The question of how to translate these objective aims into subjective realities represents a central concern for those working in education and learning. Curriculum, when it is standardized, presents a challenge to both educators and learners. Educators struggle to find ways to make the curriculum more meaningful and relevant to their students: standardized tests often exacerbate this struggle. Similarly for learners, who often come to school with a complexity of issues and concerns that fall outside of curriculum content guidelines, the last thing on their minds is often the information presented to them.

However, as this essay articulates, the process of translating the objective to the subjective, particularly as piloted in two specific examples outlined from Proboscis' Social Tapestries research programme, demonstrates the potential multifold benefits of this particular arts-based and participatory model, not only for learners and teachers, but for the broader community.

Social Tapestries, a research programme developed and run out of the creative studio Proboscis, aims to explore the potential benefits of local knowledge mapping and sharing, what they term the “public authoring of social knowledge”. As it pertains to education and learning, Social Tapestries developed two unique partnerships, one at the Jenny Hammond Primary School in Waltham Forest north east London and the other at Kingswood High School in Bransholme, near Hull. Both examples rely primarily on the individual experiences of students, and on highly developed partnerships with the teachers and schools. By outlining the general processes developed by Proboscis as well as some of the direct lessons and implications learnt from each pilot project, the unique benefits of this approach, the public authoring of social knowledge, will be revealed. Each example helps translate the objective into the subjective and offers deeper interpretations of associative learning, personalization and localism – all critical elements of the Blair government’s education policy.

### **The Processes Developed: Two Case Studies**

#### **Jenny Hammond Primary School**

In June and December 2005, sound artist and educator Loren Chasse from San Francisco, whilst working in collaboration with Proboscis, undertook a sound and mapping workshop with Year 5 of the Jenny Hammond School. The workshop investigated how sound could be used to map the students’ local environment as part of the Social Tapestries research project. During this series of workshops, students explored how they listen, the significance of different types of sounds they hear, favourite sounds and how to map and link the sounds geographically. The workshop took place over 4 sessions, 3 taking place in June 2005 and the final mapping workshop in December 2005.

This project, through its design, aimed to:

- Enhance listening
- Address the ways in which students were mapping knowledge
- Focus on student’s perspectives – allow marginalized students a voice
- Integrate the social environment into the curriculum
- Personalise a project for the student while managing curriculum expectations
- Enable students to kick-start change and improve situation locally

The project received positive feedback not only from the staff but more importantly from the students. It is important to note that there are positive implications for the broader community here as well. Empowering individual students to take more of an active role in their local communities has positive implications for social inclusion and cohesion – it increases a sense of community not only for individual students, but also amidst members of the community at large. Encouraging participatory learning of this kind at a young age through artistic means can have many positive effects.

#### **Kingswood High Secondary School**

Before outlining the programme developed here, it will be useful to describe briefly the existing community dynamic when Proboscis began to initiate its work. Located in the town of Hull, a fishing community whose industry collapsed in the late 1960s, this school had a very low completion rate with only 5% of its students graduating at sixteen (1999). Teenage pregnancies were common among the girls, and students faced a large amount of peer pressure to drop out of school at an early age and find employment.

In this example, Proboscis worked quite closely with the staff again to develop a curriculum model that aimed to:

- Break down barriers between curriculum subjects
- Let individual student experiences drive the creation of curriculum
- Respect community tradition
- Engage typically disaffected youth by letting them tell and share their own stories

Both of these case studies provide instructive lessons for the benefits associated in Proboscis' model of public authoring of social knowledge, particularly as it relates to education. By outlining these benefits and by corresponding them to examples of government education policy, it will become clear how such methods, particularly how the involvement of a third-party organization like Proboscis adds an element of creativity not readily apparent in many school environments.

### **Connections Created**

*Individualized/Personalized Approach* – implicit in both of these case studies is a commitment to encouraging individual students to tell their own stories. Education policy is increasingly turning its focus to the needs of individual learners. The needs of individual learners are not only being more readily experimented with in pedagogy but also through various means of assessment and through school organization and design. One of the central tenets of an individualized or personalized approach is the belief that no two students learn the same way and more importantly, each student acquires knowledge and information through very specific and individualized paths. Howard Gardner, a noted American educational theorist supports this belief stating,

*"that children are smart in different kinds of ways... more students can be reached more effectively, if their favored ways of knowing are taken into account in curriculum, instruction, and assessment."*<sup>3</sup>

This renewed commitment to personalization is readily apparent in the DfES' *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*. For example, the report clearly states a commitment to,

*"Create a step change in the personalised learning support available to every child – renewing the focus on English and maths, stretching gifted children and supporting those who may fall behind."*<sup>4</sup>

But what exactly does this mean for educators who have been striving for countless years to develop and implement strategies for teaching in mixed ability settings or to differentiate curriculum based on student need? One of the benefits of the approach outlined by Proboscis is that it bases curriculum expectations around genuine student experiences. Rather than establishing expectations and then attempting to develop artificial student experiences that meet these expectations, by allowing students to drive the process and by requiring their participation from the outset students feel a more genuine and real connection to that which they are learning.

A good example of this can be seen when Proboscis worked to develop a curriculum that allowed teachers to build upon students day-to-day experiences in their lesson plans. For instance, joyriding was a common occurrence in the Branshome area – many students were familiar not only with experience of joyriding but how it affected the neighbourhood. Much can be learnt from these experiences and, in many ways, students acquire knowledge of geography and even mathematics through these experiences.

Personal experiences like this one are critical to learning – and only when these experiences are incorporated into the lived experience of students at school will learning be more meaningful and long-term for students. Individual student voices telling their individual stories is knowledge that can't be replicated and yet is rarely privileged in most formal school environments. By allowing students direct experiences to drive the process, by relying on local history and knowledge and by allowing students to explore these topics in creative ways, Proboscis quite literally puts the experiences of students in a primary and unequivocally privileged position. In this way, students begin to take real ownership over their learning rather than purely expecting others in the school like teachers or classmates to take responsibility for it on their behalf.

*Localism* – a constant push and pull between local communities and central government characterizes current national education policy and its implementation. Catchphrases like “urban regeneration” or “neighbourhood renewal” represent the meat and potatoes of political rhetoric and also the guiding framework for most policy documents. This return to community is particularly evident in education policy. Yet questions remain about how to reflect individual community differences and needs, particularly in a climate of restraint and fiscal accountability. This tension between individual community needs and central education policy, as evidenced through the formulaic national curriculum, represents a challenge for policymakers and education practitioners alike.

According to the recent White Paper, this return to localism would be accomplished by, “Giving parents the opportunity to set up new schools with the support of the local authority”, and also by, “Enabling every school to link directly to a Trust bringing the benefit of the ethos, support and drive that external partners like parents and community groups, charitable bodies linked to education and business and faith groups can contribute.” What is evident in both of these statements is that the White Paper’s commitment to localism hinges on external mechanisms to connect schools to community – it doesn’t necessarily provide a variety of communities or those with dissimilar strengths with a means of linking up community assets with schools. Similarly, what about communities where there is a perceived absence of community strengths or cohesive community interests, in what ways are such communities to respond or react and how can the notion of localism in the ways defined by the White Paper work in effective ways for these such groups? The success of the Blair government increasingly hinges on the notion of neighborhood renewal, but more importantly on the government’s capacity to provide real substance to support the rhetoric. If Blair’s government wants to transition beyond the pure political spin of “neighbourhood renewal” then it must outline in greater details the ways and means or more specifically the tools available for practitioners, such as teachers and Heads, to implement towards ensuring genuine progress:. Corresponding buzzwords like “knowledge sharing”, “local partnerships”, “informal cooperation”, and “open communities of innovation” must be more than just that – they must also describe a degree of real and measurable change.

The approach taken by Proboscis is beneficial because it responds to each individual communities’ set of particular, and inherently unique, criteria. As was the case in Hull – a great deal was learnt about the local specificity of teenage pregnancies by speaking to local people about their experience of the phenomena and what it represented to the community. Capturing the social context surrounding young mothers is important information that relevant to both formal learning in a school context, but also informally within other public service sectors in the community. Understanding the importance

of community and the geographic relevance of the young mothers' choices of home is information that can't be readily drawn from a textbook or a teacher.

One of the central tools Proboscis relied on when helping to develop its curriculum were maps that detailed local bits of knowledge. Regardless of what type of knowledge is being mapped, whether it be social knowledge, or the more conventional type of knowledge associated with more traditional geography, at their core, maps are devices that allow the user the flexibility to read the map or use the device in ways that are meaningful and responsive to his or her individual needs. Unlike census data or statistical reports that belie little real understanding of the numbers or the story behind them, maps on the contrary provide an artful display of more than just the numbers. They tell stories of a relational quality and of connection – types of information that cannot be garnered simply from other bland sources of information. If a skillful team of surveyors and cartographers present the knowledge in real ways, the uses for the device are endless.

*Associative Learning* – one of the last principles outlined in both the White Paper and other education policy documents is the Blair government's desire to spark and nourish associative learning. Simply put, associative learning is more meaningful because it not only connects with a student's real lived experience but it also breaks down traditional curriculum boundaries so that what a student is learning in Maths connects to what she or he is learning in English, or Geography. Proboscis's work in developing curriculum accomplishes this inherently but allowing students to design or author their learning process guided by their individual, lived experiences. Developing their own understandings of issues through mapping or sound exercises like the one described above play to a learner's very natural desire to form links and bridges between knowledge. This model encourages these bridges from forming naturally rather than placing artificial borders or boundaries on this process.

### **Implications**

The processes outlined above aim to encourage associative learning, an individualized approach and a renewed sense of localism by embedding creativity into the learning process. This is perhaps the most intangible, yet important outcome. Children lack sufficient opportunities to play and to express themselves through artistic and creative channels. Increasingly, the arts are being underprivileged as worthy routes to knowing or understanding. Yet the benefits of allowing students to learn through the arts cannot be ignored or avoided. And by encouraging students to take a participatory role in learning through creative and artistic channels, it empowers them as learners to begin to address their local environments in ways that are real and meaningful to them. They begin to see themselves as meaningful members of their community and this has important consequences for themselves, their parents and the community at large.

**Notes**

1. Social Tapestries: <http://socialtapestries.net>
2. DfES, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper/>. October 25, 2005.
3. Howard Gardner, "A Multiplicity of Inteligences" Scientific American Presents: *Exploring Human Intelligences*, Winter 1998.
4. DfES, *Schools White Paper: Summary of Main Points*, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hottopics/summary06.shtml>.

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**Social Tapestries**

A research programme exploring the potential benefits and costs of local knowledge mapping and sharing (public authoring). Since 2004 Proboscis has developed a series of experimental uses of public authoring with local communities to demonstrate the social and cultural benefits of local knowledge sharing enabled by mobile and network technologies. These playful and challenging experiments build upon the Urban Tapestries framework and software platform developed by Proboscis and its partners. <http://socialtapestries.net>

**CULTURAL SNAPSHOTS**

A series of essays, polemics and manifestoes designed to provoke comment and debate on the contexts in which Proboscis works. Cultural Snapshots are commissioned and edited by Giles Lane.