

Review of *Challenging Learning* by James Nottingham

Anyone who has seen James Nottingham at work, whether with adults or young people, will know that he is a naturally gifted teacher.

But what is more remarkable about him is the extent to which he has learnt – i.e. taught himself – to use his talent to best effect.

He would be the first to say that he has been on a learning ‘journey’. But the root meaning of that word - the travel of a day – is not quite appropriate.

His book, *Challenging Learning*, is the product of years of visiting schools of learning – schools not only in the sense of places, but also in the sense of pedagogies.

And the result is a *tour de force*.

Education is changing fast at the start of the 21st century, partly in response to changes in society and what it expects of schools/pedagogies, but partly as a result of changes in thinking about the processes of learning.

Those changes in thinking, themselves, have many roots and expressions, and it would require a huge effort of scholarship to trace them all.

What James achieves in this book – perhaps uniquely – is a well-referenced digest of some of the most influential and important developments in learning and teaching in our times.

But, even more importantly, he translates the theory into working models of his own, which he exemplifies not only by striking anecdotes but also by a substantial set of lesson plans (taking up nearly a third of the volume).

James grounds much of his own theory on the comprehensive review in 1999 of *Influences on student learning*, by John Hattie, Professor of Education at the University of Auckland, and on the experience of the RAIS (‘Raising Aspirations in Society’) project, of which he was the co-director, in Northumberland. But he also pays due credit to Chris Rowley, the inspiring teacher educator at Charlotte Mason College in Ambleside who introduced James to the practice of ‘Communities of Inquiry’.

Through this practice James became increasingly interested in the work of Professor Matthew Lipman, founder of Philosophy for Children and author of *Thinking in Education*.

Challenging learners to think for themselves, indeed, lies at the heart of James’s approach and advice. But he appreciates, as did Lipman, that the challenge needs to be appropriate in itself - i.e. potentially within their cognitive reach – as well as presented in an appropriate way.

Gauging the appropriate level of cognitive challenge for each individual is, of course, easier said than done, but James draws proper attention to the role of feedback, and more generally of dialogue, in this process. Teachers are encouraged to give and get feedback on learning that enables both themselves and the learners to ‘use more reasoning, inquiry and creativity in a bid to seek better answers to problems’.

As to the appropriate way of presenting challenge, the grand theory is based on the need for proper support to enable learners to climb into the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (as Lev

Vygotsky called it, but which James puts more simply in his 'Teaching Target Model' as the 'Learning Zone', distinguishing it importantly from the 'Practice Zone').

This support certainly involves 'scaffolding' - which James notes is a coinage of Jerome Bruner, not Lev Vygotsky as is often assumed - and he gives three different examples of this process in practice: 'Wobblers' (techniques to create 'cognitive conflict'), 'Scaffolders' (open-questioning techniques) and 'Concept Stretchers' (specific exercises as part of lesson plans to stretch learners' understanding).

But just as important is to create the confidence in learners that they can stretch their own minds. In this regard, James is well influenced by Professor Carol Dweck's theory of Fixed and Growth Mindsets, as well as by Vygotsky and by another significant figure in the learning revolution, Reuven Feuerstein, originator of Instrumental Enrichment.

All of these thinkers come from human development perspectives – treating learners, that is, as growing, sensitive and complex human beings rather than mechanical and linear information processors.

A demonstration of the way in which James so well couches those perspectives is his treatment of another famous theorist, Benjamin Bloom. Whilst accepting that Bloom's 'taxonomy' of thinking continues to exercise a strong, and mainly healthy, influence on educational practice, he notes that it was only one part of the original taxonomy of 'Educational Objectives', which also included affective and psychomotor objectives.

He also notes, approvingly, that Lipman's emphasis on developing reasonableness - and not just rationality - encourages the practice of Caring and Collaborative thinking, as well as Critical and Creative.

James presents his own model of 'good thinking' under the apposite acronym of EDUCERE, in which the first E stands for Engage and the D stands for Desire.

These unpack largely as healthy dispositions for learning that a teacher should herself model and encourage, not least paying attention and wanting to understand – dispositions that drive the cognitive processes of Understanding, Creating, Enquiring, Reasoning and Evaluating.

For the detailed unpacking of this acronym, readers of this review will have to read 'Challenging Learning' themselves. Provided that they duly exercise the dispositions themselves, from paying attention to careful judging, they will not be disappointed.

In short, James presents a rich and holistic framework for learning and teaching. His explanations of the interconnections between the various theories and models, are excellent. They are succinct but meaningful, well referenced but not overly academic.

The book is written in the first person, consistent with its recording of a personal journey, but also with the desire to show by examples - of which there are many (along with an array of brilliant quotations and significant facts relevant to each of the main chapter themes of the book: Feedback, Application, Challenge, Thinking and Self-esteem).

Challenging Learning is also very well shaped and edited by Steve Williams, to whom James rightly pays tribute. It makes for good reading, but should also become, for many people, an indispensable handbook for their own challenging journeys towards being better teachers.