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# ALEX QUIGLEY

# SHINE A LIGHT

**HOW DO WE IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OUR SCHOOLS? THROUGH THREATS AND PRESSURE? OR BY SHARING WHAT WE'RE ALREADY GETTING RIGHT? ALEX QUIGLEY'S HUNTING FOR ANSWERS...**

**H**ow do schools get better? It is a simple question that has been troubling politicians and policy makers for decades. The problem is that they persist in toiling around in the dark looking for answers. Invariably, their responses centre upon the following trio of 'solutions': another curriculum overhaul, tougher accountability measures and, of course, the dreaded ghoul of OFSTED – thrashing schools into improving. Only these top down measures never transform what matters: teaching in the classroom. We remain in the dark.

What is the answer to deep and sustainable improvements in schools? It is as simple and as complex as talking about teaching and learning. Politicians and policy makers, and many school leaders, often struggle because they go searching far and wide for the latest panacea, such as the latest ICT tool on the market. Then, soon after, despite their protestations against the fact, they wonder why these changes they implement aren't transformational or long lasting. Our answers are always much closer to home.

As Chip and Dan Heath said in their great book about change, *Switch*, we need to "find the bright spots" already present in our schools. We need to shine a light on the best practice we already possess, rather than going searching for consultants with the 'answer', or by swallowing the latest whisper about what OFSTED wants. Have you ever responded favourably to being told 'your neighbour is better than you, let's change your whole approach and imitate them?' I thought not.

These bright spots need not be extraordinary successes, nor ratified by OFSTED as the 'outstanding' solution. Teachers cannot humanly rattle out five outstanding lessons every day of the week, regardless of what pressures we are put under. The best outcomes for our students will be very good teaching, consistently applied, by teachers who are supported and share their best practice daily. Simply better teaching and learning, not 'outstanding' razzmatazz. You can scale better methods across school sustainably without foisting upon teachers the latest fad or fashion.

Time is a precious commodity. If we don't find the time and space for teachers to talk about teaching and learning then it will never happen to the degree we need. It is too easy to be swept along by the tide of paperwork, planning and marking that besets our attempts to really practise and get better.

So how can schools find the time and space to talk about teaching and learning productively – and shine a light on those 'bright spots'?



ALEX IS AN AHT AND SUBJECT LEADER OF ENGLISH AT HUNTINGTON SCHOOL, YORK. HE WRITES REGULAR BLOGS AT HUNTINGENGLISH.COM. HE IS DUE TO RELEASE 'TEACH NOW! ENGLISH: BECOMING A GREAT ENGLISH TEACHER' IN 2014.

### Improve training days

We should shift the balance from hiring in experts to having our CPD training led by staff. The best training I have ever been part of comprised a series of contributions led by teachers, from a range of departments, sharing their ideas about 'DIRT' strategies ('Dedicated Improvement and Reflection Time'). Teachers were then given time to reflect on such strategies, with planning time to embed the strategies.

### Make a marketplace

Adults are invariably stubborn creatures. Instead of having the latest 'outstanding' strategy imposed upon us, we need to be nudged towards improving our practice. Choice can help immensely. By having a 'marketplace' of different teaching and learning aspects to choose from, teachers can find the 'bright spots' that best apply to their specific needs.

### The coaching model

The 'continuous' in CPD too often belies the truth. What school leaders need to do is initiate time and resources into a continuous coaching program. In our school we balance subject based training with cross curricular coaching. It is dedicated space and time to talk and share bright spots (with supporting resources to make it happen).

### Newsletters and blogs

Many schools initiate the sharing of their 'bright spots' by having their own hub for ideas and resources. It can provoke that crucial talk with practical resources to help. These documents can provide the impetus for talk and they can be a real engine room for bottom up improvements. Do you share useful resources regularly with your colleagues across the school? If not, start.

### More useful technology

Another way to spread the light on classroom practice is to use video equipment to record teaching and learning. With not too much effort, each school could create their own useful bank of teaching and learning strategies. A teacher should be able to ask: 'what does great teaching look like in our school?' rather than seeking some silver bullet from elsewhere.

### Lesson study

Find the time for teachers to observe one another. When do really good, consistent teachers get the opportunity to see other good teachers and hone their craft? There is no better way of spreading improvement.