



Professional Reading Group Study Guide

This study guide supports a professional reading group’s study and discussion of *The Hidden Lives of Learners* (NZCER Press, 2007), by Graham Nuthall.

Overview

Graham Nuthall was a distinguished education researcher and education professor who had a 40-year career spent mostly in his native Australia, at the University of Canterbury and University of Auckland. Distinguished but not necessarily highly influential. Nuthall was something of an iconoclast, who thought independently and followed with a commitment to scientific objectivity the trail of his research and the data it produced. One education blog has called him “the most important education researcher we never heard of.”

Like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill for eternity Nuthall seemed to take satisfaction in orienting his research around a proper understanding of the individual nature of the teaching/learning process even if it rendered his ultimate goal futile. He seemed like a man who would rather search out unknowable truths than spend his time gathering evidence to support myths and rituals. And he seemed to pay a professional price for this as many truth seekers often do. But this is reason enough to consider his work and the homage it pays to the supreme importance we play in our own learning.

But he was also a fairly lucid and compelling writer, and his commitment to uncovering the truth of the classroom learning experience led to him to certain conclusions that leaders in the education field would eventually catch up with and adopt themselves.



The Hidden Lives of Learners was Graham Nuthall's final work. He set out in this book to distill a career's worth of professional learning acquired through laborious and meticulous social science research and to communicate his principles and discoveries in a form readily accessible and of interest to all practitioners in the education field. In this he mostly succeeded, for the book reads mostly with a punchy crispness. There are two chapters two-thirds of the way into the work that are weighted down by discussions of his research methodology and education research practices more generally; these are of much less interest to the many who are not academic researchers. But most of the work, and especially its first several chapters, capture this iconoclast's discoveries and conclusions about how it is that students actually learn, and what relationship learning has with teaching and other significant factors.

The twenty key passages that follow capture those discoveries and conclusions. And the format of this study guide asks you to work in groups proceeding through the selections by first reading aloud the passage and then discussing whether and to what extent it agrees with your experience and professional knowledge. In the session's final third, each group can share out its most significant and revelatory discussions on two or three of the passages.

20 Key Passages

1. “The thing I continue to look at is how many times you have to revisit the same concept before the children actually grasp it and understand it. . . . It really cut me when I found out that there were things happening in the class between the children and I didn’t know it was happening . . . they were talking in a voice I couldn’t hear’ (Rathgen, 2006)” (12).
2. “The danger I fear is that teachers will be required to follow teaching recipes. Research will be used by educational authorities to tell teachers what they should be doing, regardless of the particular needs of their students or the circumstances in which they are teaching” (14).
3. “It will become clear, as we look at the research, that students learn a lot from their peers [Teachers] cannot be effective unless they take the peer relationships in their classrooms into account” (16).
4. “There is no question that there are significant differences in the educational attainment of students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and that this is a very serious concern But there is no evidence that these differences in attainment arise from differences in the way members of different ethnic or cultural groups actually learn. There is no evidence that, given the same experiences, Afro-American, Polynesian, Maori, Pacific Island, or Asian students do not learn in the same way” (17).
5. “The central business of teaching is about creating changes in the minds of students – in what students know and believe and how they think. The ability to create change means that, in some way, teachers need to be constantly reading the minds of students. Are their minds focused? What are they understanding, or not understanding? What do they really think?” (23).
6. “In an early study of teachers’ thinking, Philip Jackson (1968) found that experienced teachers develop a high level of sensitivity to students’ level of interest, their involvement, and their motivation” (24).
7. “For all the insights that direct observation might provide, we should not base our evaluations of teaching on some universal model or set of models of good teaching. *We simply cannot tell by looking.* Whatever is fashionable at the time determines what researchers look for and what they see” (25, 29).
8. “Every subject area has gone through periods where new methods of teaching were introduced and old methods disparaged. . . . In the realities of the classroom, methods do not exist. Every teacher adapts and modifies so-called methods. Research shows that teachers who believe they are using different methods may be doing essentially the same things, and teachers who believe they are using the same method may be doing quite different things. . . . A great deal of misunderstanding comes from assuming that activities given the same name are the same activities. Pharmaceutical drugs do not change their content when given to different people, but teaching methods do change when carried out by different teachers with different students” (32-33).
9. “The fact that we all have different food preferences does not mean the metabolic processes by which we digest and use food are different. . . . Similarly, students might have preferences for different kinds of

classroom activities or topics, but the underlying learning process by which their brains acquire new knowledge and skills is essentially the same for all children. . . . In other words, learning styles are about motivation and management. They are not about learning” (34-35).

10. “*First premise [of effective teaching]: students learn what they do. . . . We tend to separate the management of classroom behavior from the subject matter that we teach. But these are not separated in the students’ minds*” (36).
11. “*Second premise [of effective teaching]: social relationships determine learning. . . . Even in the teacher’s own territory, the classroom, the student’s primary audience is his or her peers. The peer culture can create the belief that doing what the teacher wants is demeaning. When there is a clash between the peer culture and the teacher’s management procedures, the peer culture wins every time. . . . Difficult and unusual as it may seem, long-term successful teaching involves working with the peer culture. . . . Some teachers have tried to deal with this problem by creating an alternative culture within their classrooms – a culture of mutual respect and cooperation, a culture in which everyone is expected to succeed in some significant aspect of classroom activities*” (37).
12. “When test results are reported, they should have attached to them an analysis of how motivated and committed the students were to doing well on the test” (42).
13. “We discovered that a student needed to encounter, *on at least three different occasions*, the complete set of the information she or he needed to understand a concept” (63).
14. “What our studies indicate is that new concepts are not created and transferred to long-term memory until enough information has accumulated in working memory to warrant the creation of a new concept It is as though existing knowledge and beliefs are protected against new experiences, unless the new experiences are similar and strong enough – have reached a critical mass – to warrant a major change or the introduction of a new concept or belief. Our data, to stress the point, suggest that three complete sets of relevant information, interpreted and integrated in working memory, are the minimum needed for the construction of a new belief or concept. In the normal course of events, this processing takes place unconsciously” (73).
15. “[Students] need to be taught the concept, or to encounter a full explanation of the concept, at least three times This does not mean simple repetition. Simply repeating explanations or activities is likely to be boring and turn student off engaging with the content in appropriate ways. What it does seem to mean is that students’ minds need time to process new information. They need opportunities to come to the material in different ways. It also means that the single brilliant explanation is not, in itself, enough” (81).
16. “As the evidence shows, the teacher is only one source of learning experiences. Peer interactions and social relationships are equally important and need to be carefully understood if student learning is to be explained and managed effectively” (83).
17. “The important factors that need to be taken into account are:

- The importance of differences in background knowledge and in the understandings and misunderstandings that students bring to any task
- The continuing power of peer relationship and status to determine what students do and how they evaluate their own and other students' involvement in classroom activities
- The need to constantly monitor what students are or are not learning from their activities and to respond accordingly" (104).

18. "When we look at what students remember of their classroom experiences, we find the curriculum content wrapped up in the nature of the experience, which means that how students experience an activity is as much a part of what they learn as is the intended curriculum content" (104).
19. "We need to focus on major questions or problems that provide the most pay-off for students, namely those that are significant in the discipline and in the lives and cultures of the students and . . . those that subsume smaller linked questions or problems" (Wilkinson and Anderson, 162).
20. "Because much of what students learn comes from their peers, we need to become involved with the peer culture and to work with it to manage our students' learning . . . If you are a high school teacher, you might need to develop an alternative culture that entails mutual respect and co-operation – a culture where everyone feels he or she has something to contribute to classroom activities, where everyone takes responsibility for learning. This is what researchers and practitioners mean when they say teachers need to develop a 'learning community'" (Wilkinson and Anderson, 162).