

## Talking Teaching: Season 03 Episode 05 Transcript

Genevieve:

I'm Genevieve Costigan, and this is Talking Teaching.

John:

My frustration is that so often, our politics of schools and our politics of government is finding failure and fixing it. I want to turn that on its head. I want to find success and upscale it.

Genevieve:

On this episode of Talking Teaching, I talk to Laurette Professor, John Hattie from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, as he reflects on the lessons learned from COVID-19 and discusses what he believes education systems need to keep from this extraordinary experience. John is of course best known for his groundbreaking study, Visible Learning, which is believed to be the largest evidence-based study ever into the factors that improve students' learning.

Genevieve:

Thank you for joining us today on Talking Teaching, John.

John:

Pleasure to be here, Genevieve.

Genevieve:

Of course, the greatest factor affecting teachers and students in schools this year has been the COVID-19 pandemic, and you've described it as a great unplanned experiment. So, what do you think COVID-19 has really shown us about our education systems, and what should we keep that we've learned, and what should we discard?

John:

If I went to our ethics committee and said, "I want to close almost every school in the world as we know it and make the kids stay at home and the teachers use technology," I would have been laughed out of court, but that's actually what's happened. I think the thing that is the most stunning is that teachers have changed almost overnight from the old grammar of schooling to teaching via internet, hybrid, distance, whatever you want to call it, built up skills to do that, and as the evidence is starting to come in with remarkable success given that everybody thinks that students have got nothing for the last three or six months, and here in Melbourne, we've been out for a long time. That's actually not the case. I don't know a single policy in the world that's helped teachers and school leaders deal with new ways of teaching other than whether a school should open or close or not.

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John:

This also is probably the greatest teacher-led revolution we've ever seen. That's the first observation I want to make about this. But bottom line here is that as COVID hopefully starts to disappear and we go back to regular schooling, if we don't learn anything from that COVID teaching, I think that's the biggest travesty of this whole year. I think it's very unfair to the students of today and tomorrow if we just rush back to the old normal, which unfortunately we're starting to do already.

Genevieve:

That's disappointing to hear, but what were the things you did that you thought were the most revolutionary that students in schools were achieving through this time?

John:

Well, let me start by looking at some of the evidence that's now starting to come through. Here in Victoria, the state department has done a stunning evaluation of many, many, many thousands of students and teachers and parents and school leaders, and showing that there's actually been some really good gains for the majority of the students, as many students, if not a touch more, are more engaged in learning online than they were in the regular classroom. I know all the naysayers pick up the negatives and say one in eight kids are not involved in the internet. That's pretty impressive compared to what it was in the regular classroom. The work out of New Zealand's showing that, if anything, scores in math are going up. Reading is slightly down. The biggest problem is writing. It's down quite a lot because there's less writing when teachers aren't physically present.

John:

They little study, it's fascinating because the headlines from that study is 20% Learning Loss. But when you actually get the study and look at it, the effect size was minus 0.08, which is pretty trivial and can be easily fixed by a boost. So, if anything, the evidence has shown that teachers did a remarkable job during the COVID teaching. That's the first thing to know. I think the other comment is, again, out of a U.S study, is that teachers talked less in COVID teaching. There were about 60% less teacher questions, and given they asked between 150 to 200 a day, I think that's kind of a good thing, but they moved more to a triaged kind of system where they listened more to what the students were thinking, what they weren't understanding, what they're not understanding. They talked less, there was less of those fire questions that typically happen in the regular classroom.

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John:

It was more management about where the individual students were, the groups of students were. So, I think that's the message we have to learn from COVID teaching, but probably the one that's the most powerful. We discovered this ourselves in our own research about five years ago, but it's been accelerated in COVID, is that students are much more willing on social media, partly because they use it all the time. They're much more willing on social media to talk to teachers and to talk to their peers about what they don't know, what they're misunderstanding. We can show you in many of our studies they're prepared to do that on social media even when the teacher is standing beside them.

John:

So, many teachers are saying, "We got to know our students differently," and that's the biggest message I want to bring back. We could do that in the regular classroom. But the message I want to get across here is that I think this is a message for school leaders. I would, as I've been arguing during COVID, keep a learning log of what worked and what didn't work, and make sure over the next six months, we really make a concentrated effort to learn from what happened in COVID. Let's not forget that there were good learnings, and there is a new syntax of learning that could replace the old grammar.

Genevieve:

So, it seems like there were a lot of unexpected benefits of the COVID-19 learning experience, John. But what do we really know about those students who struggled with the move online?

John:

The biggest losers in COVID were those students who are most dependent on the teacher, regardless of achievement. Some of our brightest students are very, very dependent on the teacher. Teachers need to think more about the notion of the gradual release of responsibility. They need to teach the students how to be self-regulatory and understand their own progress, because that's what they need when they leave schools to go to tertiary, to go to the workplace. That's what we've seen in COVID much more. The conspiracy here, Genevieve, is that many of our students above average, when we interview them and we do surveys, they prefer the teacher to have control. They prefer the teacher to talk lots. They prefer the teacher to talk about the facts all the time, because that's the game they're good at. That's the game they're with us. It's not doing them any favors. So, I think this is the messages I want to learn from it.

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Genevieve:

Yeah. Very interesting. The other thing that's become very clear was the sort of rise of the esteem that teachers are held in, which can only be a great thing. But how do we keep that going, that we keep parents feeling like that in our society, valuing teachers, and how do we keep the new knowledge about the concepts of learning fresh in parents' minds and also in teachers?

John:

Well, this is a responsibility of the profession. I'm trying very hard in my actual role to capitalize on this increased esteem, because it has been. The biggest resistors often are the educators themselves. They are very quick to deny their expertise, saying things like, "Oh, it's the students that did the work. It's the parents who did the support. It was the technology that made the difference. It was the funding that helped." It's not. It's that expertise that really, really makes the difference. So, I think how do we capitalize on that right throughout the system? How do we get that teacher educator voice at the table so that they initiate policy? Whereas at the moment, they're always told to implement it from above. I'm not pretending for a second that that voice is unison. It's not. But I think there is an opportunity here to find ways to bring that voice to the high tables and certainly trying to work hard on that.

John:

I also think that as a profession, we really need to look at this focus on expertise. I think every parent has realized that it's tough to teach your own kid. It does require specific expertise. I think that's the thing that we need to capitalize on in terms of getting our parents, our voters to realize that expertise and investing in it. One of the things that I think would be really exciting is to look at the structure of our teaching professional at the moment, which is primarily based on years of experience. It takes 27 years on average for a person becoming a teacher to become a school leader, and it's just not sustainable in this world we live at the moment.

John:

I look, for example, to Singapore and other countries, where after four or five years as a teacher, you make a decision to become more expert, either as a teacher, like a highly accomplished lead teacher, or a school leader, or a specialist, like a reading specialist or assessment specialist or wellbeing specialist. Your career is structured on improving your expertise and recognizing that expertise. People coming into a profession today don't want to wait 27 years before they are allowed to be a school leader.

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Genevieve:

Is there resistance from older teachers when these young graduates come in and they're working collaboratively and they're working in new ways?

John:

There is a bit, because many of them have learned to come to the staff room to relax and not talk about the impact of their teaching, and then go back to their classroom, pull up the moat close the door, and indulge in their passion. But unfortunately, we need more than that. In some schools, some of those highly accomplished and lead teachers are stunningly brilliant at being collaborative. Again, with them, we're certainly trying to push them to say it's not about sharing your resources. It's not about asking these new teachers to come into your class and watch you. That's the last thing you should do. It's listening to them. It's hearing how they are constructing their world, it's helping them think in ways that you do successfully.

Genevieve:

You've talked about helping teachers to see learning through the eyes of the students that they're teaching. How do you actually get teachers to do this? What's the difference that you see when teachers sort of adopt that mentality?

John:

An example that we use in our work all the time is when we first go and work with a school, we ask the teachers about what does it mean to be a good learner in the school? It's more often than not an incredibly rich discussion. It's quite varied, which is the first point we want to make. Given the variability about what a good learner is, do you see that every student in your school, every time they have a new teacher, there's a new concept of learning? So, many of them get confused. Many of them think it's got low credibility because they're all so different. So, what's the theme of learning in this school? That's first. Then we ask the students the same question.

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John:

In so many schools, when you ask a student, who's the best learner in this class, or what does it mean to be a good learner? They say things like, "Look, a good learner is someone who's well-behaved, sits up straight, answers the teacher's question, gets on with the task, and watch the teacher work." Then we put that in front of the teachers, and they're often shocked that their students are thinking that's what good learning is. So, that's the first, but sometimes we actually do it with the parents as well, because if schools have problems with parents, it's often about what their conception of learning is. Then our argument is let's have some synergies here. Let's have agreements here. That sometimes take six to eight months or a year to get some discussion about what it means to be a good learner. That's the first point I want to make, is that's hearing voice about learning.

John:

I'm not a great fan of the word student voice because too often it's putting kids on representative councils, all this kind of stuff. I want it to be about learning. So, that's one of the ways we want teachers to see learning through the eyes of kids. The other one is Graham Nuthall, a New Zealand researcher, did this really impressive piece of work over many, many years, probably decades. He published one book called *The Hidden Lives of Learners*. What he discovered is 80% of what happens in each classroom, the teacher doesn't see or hear. I'm not a great fan of teachers reflecting on what they think they saw when they only can see and hear about 20%. I want other voices. This is the point of having other adults in the classroom, not to watch the teacher, but to help the teachers see the other 80% of their impact. But you've got to remember the other half of the sentence, teaching students to become their own teachers, which is my way of talking about self-regulation.

John:

One of the things that we've discovered, in fact, we've invented the new term, sorry about this, educators, we call it teach back. The school that I'm working with in the U.S, they have teach-back Tuesdays during COVID, and every Tuesday, the students had to teach back to a colleague, to a friend, to a teacher what they've learned during the week. Now, it's kind of like peer tutoring, but peer tutoring often means that you teach a student who doesn't know, or you teach a bright versus a not so bright student. Yes, that has a good impact, particularly on the person doing the teaching. But some parents get very upset with it because they didn't send their kids to school to teach another kid. But this notion of teach-back, the best exit ticket from any lesson is can the child teach someone else?

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John:

Isn't it kind of ironic that we as teachers do an incredible amount of preparation to teach, and then walk into the classroom and talk. What if we got the students to be involved with preparing lessons and understand it, because that's where we as teachers learn the most as we prepare the lessons. Then why don't we get the students to actually do it, the teach-back notion? This is what I mean by getting students to become their own teachers.

Genevieve:

Is this something that we're prioritizing in our own teacher education programs?

John:

The issue in teacher education, we've got so much we have to get through, that sometimes some of these things get missed. I'm working with a university in the U.S at the moment which has based its whole system on this mental mind frame that it's about seeing it through the eyes of the students. It's teaching students to teach back, and they're having stunning success. But so often in many teacher education programs, we load the students with so much knowledge, so many tips and tricks. It's no surprising that when you look at the research, teachers after a year or so start teaching like the best teacher they ever had. It's very hard, actually, to find a lot of evidence that teacher education makes a difference to how they teach, which is a problem, because too many programs don't have a mindset. They have a whole lot of knowledge and facts. So, I think, yes, this is a pretty critical thing. When I look at Linda Darling-Hammond and some of the work she's taught with teacher education and the way she's able to change that mindset-

Genevieve:

Turning to politics, what do you think about the Victorian government's plan to merge vocational and academic subjects into one VCE in Victoria?

John:

Well, we do have a problem with the notion that there's better and worse. Going to university is better, going into vocational is worse. That's not helping our students at all. I want to go further than that. I think our current system in many states of Australia is still too geared towards university entrance, not only in the assessments that we have, but also in the hierarchy of teachers in schools. There are certain subjects that are more privileged, teachers teaching certain subjects seem to be more privileged than others. That's just not sustainable. The retention rates through to the end high school, the economist of education can show us that the best predictor of adult health, wealth and happiness, is not achievement at school. It's the number of years of schooling. Our retention rate in Australia, which hovers around 80 to 85%, is just not good enough.

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John:

One in five kids who start high school don't finish high school, and given the evidence, that's pretty miserable. So, I'm a fan of going and saying we should abolish the notion that our job is to select a university. But I think we need to move our whole focus of high school for certifying kids on the basis of what they can do and what they can do well, and then say to the professions, "If you want a panel beater, if you want a chemist, this is the profile." Certainly, every university worked out very quickly how to capitalize on that system and also get the students they wanted in the programs they wanted. So, yes, good move, but not enough.

Genevieve:

So, you're retiring at the end of this year, although it seems to me that academics don't actually ever retire. So, I'm wondering what's next for John Hattie?

John:

Actually, in about May/June this year, I went on long service leave. So, in that sense, I've been on retirement since then, and COVID has obviously sped it up. What I want to do over the next few years is we've set up Hattie Family Foundation, and the object of that foundation is to give back. I'm going to be obviously a key part of that, not taking any salary or anything, continuing on the research. I want to get financial money and grant money to employ graduate students to keep the research going and keep me going in terms of the research side. We want to find ways to support schools that typically could not afford the visible learning program throughout the world. We're looking in various parts of South America at the moment, and looking in Africa to say how do we do that? We're doing a lot of work on global South and the issues there. I've got plenty to do over the next many years, and more books to write, more research to do.

Genevieve:

You certainly have a lot of energy. What keeps you going, John?

John:

One of the beauties of what's happened with visible learning is it's opened doors right around the world. What keeps me going is I travel the world, I see so much excellence in schools. My frustration is that so often, our politics of schools and our politics of government is finding failure and fixing it. I want to turn that on its head. I want to find success and upscale it. I ask my academic colleagues, how many articles can you find in the history of education that researches upscaling? I'm up to seven. I think this is a phenomenal turnaround, and I think if I asked any academic, any principal, any teacher in the world, they could talk about excellence. Now, it may not be as prevalent as we want, but my research shows that here in Australia, probably 60 to 70% of teachers in schools are in environments where the oldest students make more than a year's growth for a year's input. That's impressive.

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John:

Why aren't we talking about that? Why aren't we upscaling that? Now, I know why. It's much easier to get funding for failure. It's much easier to label a kid to get funding. The worst thing you could do is fix that kid because you lose the funding. It's much easier to say, "Things are broken. Give us money." It's harder to say, "We have success. Scale it." But if I have any influence in the politics of Australia, I want to reintroduce that word of expertise, and I want to introduce the notion that we need to upscale success. That's what keeps me going. There is so much excellence out there.

Genevieve:

Well all the best with that, John, and Thank you for joining us today on Talking Teaching.

John:

It's a pleasure, Genevieve. Thank you.

Genevieve:

Talking Teaching is produced by Zane Kingi, Karl Smith, and myself. Thank you for joining us this year on Talking Teaching, and we'll be back in 2021.