

EDGE LEARNER FORUM

The Edge Foundation is a charitable fund aiming to change the face of education by promoting vocational studies. It funds many projects nationwide, one of which is the Edge Learner Forum. In November 2008 a team from the Edge Learner Forum gave a presentation at the Futurelab conference on student voice at Warwick University. This article is based on a transcription.

Simon Binns, one of the leaders of the Learner London Forum, explained that it is a network of around 200 young people. There are eight forums around the country. Their remit is to promote vocational learning and qualifications and bring them up to an equal status with academic learning. All members, Simon said, are classed as creators not evaluators, and they themselves come up with the ideas for projects for the Edge Learner Forum. Edge funds the forums, but the members' projects are run by the forums, not by Edge. There are no membership criteria. Anyone can join.

Simon's fellow-presenters were Nick Hagan, a staff member for the forum, Huda Al Bander, a university student, Michael Jones, a youth worker, and Ruvimbo Chakawhata, who was still at college..

Nick had been a part of the forum for just over a year, and was doing an internship in London, working on a project called the *Nerve Magazine*, currently in its prototype stages. It is aimed at providing inspiration for young people, getting them interested in different things to do with careers, motivation and vocational work. It had been a suggestion from another member of the learner forum. The forum then found useful contacts and Nick was given a leadership role. It was his opportunity to make a difference.

Huda, now aged 19, had been with the learner forum since she was fifteen. The Edge Learner Forum supported her in the development of one of her ideas, which she had expressed in an article published by Futurelab, which was that schools should be reviewed from within, rather than relying on Ofsted coming in from outside. The idea was successfully piloted at a North London school. Huda said that

she would not have been able to achieve this without the Edge Learner Forum, and now Ofsted are picking up on the idea, and many other people are interested. She feels it makes sense, because schools need to change with the times.

Michael felt that he could never have done what he has, without the support of the Edge Learner Forum, because he comes from Hackney, where morale among young people is low. He has now had the opportunity to meet ministers and speak directly to them rather than just seeing them on television talking at him. Young people sometimes just need a little support. The Edge Learner Forum has a vision which Michael understands. He feels that teachers and others working with young people need allow them a little more responsibility. It will be even more beneficial for teachers than for children.

For Ruvimbo, still at college, who had only been a member for four months, the main benefit of the Edge Learner Forum had been the opportunity to get to know a wide range of different people. It has given her confidence and she has valued the advice she has received. She has become able to stand in front of a large group and tell them about her aspirations and what motivates her.

Simon Binns, the leader of the presentation, had joined the forum when he was a school drop-out and in trouble with the law. Now he has become the leader of the Learner Forum and a trainee consultant, even though he has no degree.

When asked about the future potential of learner voice, Michael said that we need to see young people not just as young people, but as people with their own rights. If teachers would only empower children they would find it really inspiring. The head teachers and the class teachers should be able to sit down and say to young people, "Let's talk about the school. How are we going to improve this and that?" The head teacher and the teachers cannot deal with the problems on their own. The missing link is the young people themselves. There's no need to waste thousands of pounds in getting a consultant to come and deal with a problem like bullying. What Michael wants to see in the near future, is young people having a share in the power, actually taking part in decision-making.

Nick reinforced this point, and acknowledged that this would require a new attitude to education. It should not mean a challenge to the hierarchy, but the establishment of a new hierarchy, in which learner voice is firmly embedded.

Ruvimbo regretted the way we ask school students what is wrong with the system and leave it at that, instead of also asking them how the problems might be solved. It is easy to criticise, but it is important to be asked to think how things could be changed for the better.

In response to a question about whether the degree of participation practised in the Edge Learner Forum would be possible in a school, Simon said that in the current educational hierarchy he did not think it would be possible. The hierarchy has to be replaced by a partnership. Ruvimbo told how she had spoken to her tutor about a problem with another teacher, the tutor had spoken to the teacher and then both the teacher and the tutor had blamed her. At the Learner Forum she would have had the opportunity to discuss the problem and action would have been taken. Michael again blamed the system: teachers are trained to work within a specific structure, and although they sometimes feel brave enough to discuss the serving of the school dinners they cannot accept discussion of the whole school. Huda, now a university student, felt she had had a really good education, but that the emphasis had been too strongly on the academic side. She would have liked to have had the kind of practical opportunity that the Edge Learner Forum promotes.

The last question was about places where change had been introduced, and Huda described the school review system she had initiated, now known as Edge Instead. "When we took the idea out to the school in North London," she said, "the teachers were quite reluctant, because they didn't really want the student view, because they thought that it would be quite negative." However, when they were allowed to present the idea to 150 teachers and the NUT, the head teacher supported them "a hundred and ten percent." Some of the teachers agreed, the idea was piloted, "and word of mouth got around that it was going great, and everybody thought that it was a good idea. It wasn't disrupting any of the classes, it was going really well. That's when they started backing us. They were behind us 100%. The teachers are not the problem, it's just the fact that they're not getting support from the

curriculum and the government. It's not the teachers at all, because why would you become a teacher if you're not passionate about it?"

The Edge Learner Forums have demonstrated once again that when young people are trusted, they behave responsibly. This, coupled with Huda's faith in the goodwill of teachers, makes it doubly depressing that the current hierarchy usually denies school students the opportunity of demonstrating their responsibility.