

project



Stephen Harris is co-founder and director of Learnlife in Barcelona. In 2005, he founded the Sydney Centre for Innovation in Learning (SCIL). His vision is to integrate innovation in schools by leveraging the passion and experience of the teams that have worked with him. He has in-depth knowledge of leadership, innovation and culture. He is a 2017 recipient of the prestigious John Laing Award from the Principals Australia Institute (PAI), given to exceptional school leaders.

Leticia Lipp is one of the founding members of Learnlife. She has been head and leader of the Human Resources and Culture teams since Learnlife was founded. Her current mission is to grow Learnlife's partner schools towards innovation. She also acts as a head-hunter searching for talent such as principals, pedagogical leaders, teachers and learning experience designers.

Learnlife: Creating lifelong learning

An open cultural environment conducive to trust between students and teachers

by Ana Moreno Salvo

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN HARRIS AND LETICIA LIPP

In 2023, [Learnlife](#) was chosen by [hundrED](#) as one of the 100 educational innovation initiatives with the greatest future impact on educational transformation. Can you tell us the keys to the Learnlife transformation project and what makes it different from other innovation projects?

Stephen Harris (SH): I found it interesting that only two of the 100 innovation programmes recognised by hundrED were truly school-based. It was encouraging to see that what we were doing was on a larger scale. What are the keys to transformation? We have managed to define a framework and simply carry it out. We have been aware that in order to create a different model, it is essential

to identify what can limit creativity and thinking. Learnlife has engaged in an evolutionary process towards what we really think is at the core of good learning, that is, what a teacher should be able to understand. Therefore, we can take this model to any context. You have to be able to effect the transformation. Change needs to be actionable at the classroom, school or system level, if needed. The most important thing in learning is for the learner

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to experience a world of functional relationships.

If you enter a community and feel threatened, or if there is a power imbalance, that will limit your learning. The bottom line is to make positive relationships central to everything else. Once that is achieved, you can begin to build trust and a culture of learning in the direction you want to go. I guess the key to our project is understanding where we are starting from with a very clear sense of purpose for each child, each student and each adult. And all this takes place within a mutually positive relational experience.

Learnlife is a very young project, founded in 2017. You had to choose and train teachers in a

brief period of time. How would you describe the role of a Learnlife School teacher?

SH: What makes the difference to us is that, if we get rid of the idea that there is only one way to go, any school or community can get students to do well on a test at age 18.

But, five years after finishing school, the most important thing is: Has that student gone on to learn? Has he or she started to make an impact somewhere in the world, on how to address some of the world's major problems? If there is no evidence of this, then the country's educational system has to be questioned.

I have worked in Rwanda, in central Africa, and the fact is that they manage to get 97% of their children into school, a much higher rate than other African countries. But, despite being in school for twelve years, the unemployment rate is still 85%, as if they had never been to school. The problem lies in what happens at school. The teacher thinks that his or her only purpose is to convey information and knowledge to the children. That is the problem.

How do we select and train our teachers in this brief time? First of all, we have understood that there is urgency. If we look at what has happened in the world of education in the last six months, it seems that AI, the main language models, ChatGPT and so on have suddenly come to schools. But they have actually been in existence for ten years. The world of artificial intelligence did not arrive in November 2022. It's been here for a while, but schools haven't caught on. That's because the systems that train teachers are still focused on very

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narrow goals, such as "your kids have to take this test so they can get into this university". It's a transactional world. For us, a teacher is a person capable of guiding, orienting, training, adapting and being agile according to students' needs. All of these things are part of a teacher's role, and we have sought out the right people.

I don't know if you've heard of Alvin Toffler, the writer. In 1979, he wrote that the twenty-first century was going to be the century of learning, unlearning and relearning. It's a very simple but incredibly insightful statement, because until the advent of the Internet, knowledge was a sort of defined commodity that you got from books or people. Now it's universal. We have teachers coming into our system burdened with an old school concept and the expectation that their job is to keep the kids quiet and the inspector happy or to get the kids to pass the test. We want to get rid of all this because it limits children's opportunities. For us, a teacher is a learning guide.

Our challenge is to focus on finding the right person with the right mindset, because we don't have time to change people's mindsets. Then we can work with them easily because we can show them that things can be different. The problem is that it causes thousands of young teachers to leave teaching after five years, and there is no need for this to happen if their experience is positive and not stressful, as it is in many countries.

Leticia Lipp (LL): "Learning guides", the name we call teachers at Learnlife, are people who promote passion and put the responsibility for learning back on the children. It's not about controlling classroom behaviour and trying to differentiate" it's about establishing a positive relationship and accountability. The student's responsibility is the student's, not the teacher's. That is an essential difference. Students should not have the attitude of "I have to follow the rules", "I don't want to get

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kicked out of class', "I have to behave", "I have to get good grades to make my parents happy". This still happens far too often. Children don't do it for themselves, they do it for their parents or their teachers. And that is what changes with learners and the relationship between the teacher and the learner in guided learning.

Learnlife schools are called Hubs (Urban Hub, ECO Hub). Why did you choose this name? How would you describe the learning environment you are trying to build?

SH: To get people out of their previous thinking about schools, like "classroom", "hallway", "bell", "schedule" and everything else, we wanted to create a different universe of words so that kids would see what was happening in a very different way. So we decided to stop using the word "school" because for many children it is loaded with negative connotations. Interestingly, when we started, the word "maths" was the most negative word for children. "School" was the second and "teacher" the third. In contrast, the word "hub" is just a word used in business. You have business hubs, which can be an entire city, part of a city or even a small community. So, basically, we chose the name because it was different, it was simple and it shows that this place is a specific community.

The Urban Hub is a community of teenage students attending a programme in the centre of Barcelona. And the Eco Hub is a community of younger students attending a more nature-based



programme in Castelldefels. How would we describe the learning environment? Well, we want to create a community where the learning culture is very strong. If we take into account the world in which children live, we know that social media have an impact on them. Is screen time limited? Are cell phones limited? Some countries prohibit ChatGPT. What we would say is that we don't want children to feel that their culture, their parents' culture, their ethnic culture, their love of soccer, sports, surfing or shopping is wrong or not valued. What we want, however, is a stronger culture that they adopt subliminally, without thinking, when they enter the hub, so that when they arrive they get the sense that they are here to learn.

That is what we are trying to

establish: an environment where the learning culture is strong and unconscious. It is there, and it drives the individual in their choices and behaviours and desire to participate in the programmes.

Why design a new age-based learning pathway for students unlike the usual one: adventurers, discoverers, pioneers in primary school and explorers, creators, changemakers in secondary school? Can you briefly explain the role of the teacher in guiding students along these pathways?

SH: When we talk about the students' pathway being different from the usual one, it actually isn't. If you look at virtually every country in the world and check their curricular documents, they are all based on step-by-step

learning. In the vast majority of documents, one stage covers two calendar years. In other words, six and seven years old is one stage, eight and nine years old is another. What we have done, again, is change the word. We have removed "Stage One", which means nothing, and called it "Adventurers". It's a much more interesting word to get kids to join the programme. I think about the number of schools that have the names one, two, three, four, five, six or just completely meaningless

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bureaucratic names on the classroom doors.

I prefer to get kids into an Eco Hub as "Adventurers" to stimulate their thinking. So our "Adventurers" are usually six and seven, "Discoverers" eight and nine, "Pioneers" ten and eleven or so in elementary school, and then in secondary school our "Explorers" are twelve and thirteen, "Makers" fourteen and fifteen and "Changemakers" sixteen or older. All we have done is say why should a child who can speak six languages and is very good at intuiting scientific concepts sit in Adventurers when she is clearly capable of so much more? We are not rigid in saying "just because you are seven years old, you have to be sitting in this room". We have a set of competencies that must be visible and measurable for a child to move from one programme to the next. So if we look at Creators who are going to become Changemakers, we ask: Do they know how to make a public presentation? Can they write? What projects have they been working on? What is the evidence of their learning? Is it enough for them to move up to the next programme? Are there any projects they are passionate about? Have they been successful or have they encountered any difficulties? It is good for someone to make an effort as long as they recognise what the struggle is all about. These criteria for passing are the guide to what the kids need to demonstrate to us so we know they are ready to move on to the next programme.

The teacher's role is to intervene when necessary. If you have a child who has difficulty engaging, you don't just tell them to sit down, shut up

and look straight ahead. You need to find out what is blocking their engagement. What can we change as adults to unleash a love of learning? To me, that's a fundamental change that any school and any teacher can make. If there is an obvious problem with a child, don't blame the child. First look at the system, because it may be the cause of the problem.

What are the key aspects of training to become better teachers, or "learning guides", as you call them?

SH: Trust is the most fundamental aspect. If there is no trust in the community, teachers are going to have difficulties. There are many areas where it is very easy to lose trust. And if you don't have trust, you're not going to move forward. Teachers around the world are told they have to teach a new generation to collaborate, but the reality is that probably 95% of teachers are awful collaborators because they have never been taught.

In order for a teacher to be the best "learning guide", we need to focus on the problems that may prevent them from getting there. We have to make sure that they have a psychologically safe environment in which there is trust. We have to make sure they understand where they're going and why things are a little different, because otherwise it's very tempting to just go back to where they were. They have to understand what works. John Hattie's research clearly shows that timely feedback is one of the most powerful determinants of learning growth. How many schools keep a child's project or essay for three or four weeks before returning it to them? You have to have a system where you have that relationship and those conversations that allow you to give immediate feedback, because that is the powerful change. That's how trust grows. The impact of trust is that you can move from cooperation to

collaboration. The impact of positive relationships is that you can feel safe enough with me to raise any difficult issue because I'm not going to question your loyalty or anything else. I will try to help you grow in that context.

Faced with a project as innovative as Learnlife, what is the process of creating a teaching team that works effectively?

LL: At Learnlife we had the luxury of building the team from scratch. We were very thorough in the way we recruited and chose people. Typically, an interview with a group of experts or discussions with adults are held. In our case, it all started with a conversation, but we wanted to see people in action with the children in an assessment context and a team context, because we were looking for people who had the right "why". That is, they personally wanted to innovate and change education for themselves as a kind of intrinsic motivation. We wanted them to have the ability to be good collaborators and build positive relationships with the children. In this way, we make decisions with the children about who their learning guides and team should be in the future.

It was an inclusive form of teambuilding. Genuine trust is essential. As Stephen was saying, having a culture that creates a safe space or even a brave environment for people to say when things are difficult for them is essential in that hiring process.

SH: As leaders, as recruiters, we have to have the skills to know how to manage a team. There are many school principals who have never been taught that skill. There is a

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fundamental problem if a school leader does not know how to listen, create a safe space or build a team.

Once on the team, everyone needs to grow and feel that they contribute to the mission. Could you tell us the keys to getting each person in the right “seat”, given their profile and aspirations?

LL: We are clear about the competencies needed to be a good learning guide. We conduct a very thorough competency assessment. The goal is to demonstrate flexibility and agility, as well as keen self-awareness and the ability to recognise emotions and to set and maintain healthy boundaries. Executive functioning, decision-making, collaboration, positive relationships, creativity, the ability to design learning experiences... all of

these are essential.

We do not have a set curriculum, but we do partly use the state curriculum. Our intention is for them to change it and turn it into play-based learning, challenge-based learning, nature-based learning and so on. A learning guide is a designer, but also a planner and a facilitator. Learnlife people have changed. They came in as product managers and are now learning guides.

What am I good at and how could I use these skills? For example in the primary programme we find that the different learning guides on the learning team have complementary skills, so some people are engineering- and coding-minded, others are very good with digital media and videos and others are caring. Others specialise in special needs or deal with health and

safety. We try to assemble teams that complement each other and to ensure that people change, grow and evolve. I guess this is also a reason why we don't really need a retention strategy.

Just today I read an email from a person who has been with us for five years, who came from elsewhere and now has a completely different role and is very happy to have been able to grow and evolve. This is one of the reasons people stay, as well as because from the beginning they are strongly aligned with your purpose. It is much more than a job. This is meaningful to them, and they come here to be who they are. They don't just come to work.

Leading the team of professionals at Learnlife must be a complex task. What types of leadership are



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needed? How is this leadership structured and energised?

LL: Everyone at Learnlife has to be a leader. Self-leadership is the most essential factor because that is the only way you can lead a team or a programme. It is more about listening than talking. It is practical leadership. You are a role model. If you go into the urban school, you don't know who the founder is, who the learning guide is or who the teenage learner is, because everyone is more or less at the same level. It is a distributed leadership model. I would say that everyone can have an influence, everyone can take a decision, as long as the people affected by that decision are consulted, and experts are consulted. I guess that's also what keeps people here: the opportunity to visibly see the impact of their work and their ideas.

SH: Leaders have to learn throughout their lives. You don't get to this position to say, "I've made it, I've got an office, I've got people working for me". Learnlife is nothing like that. There is no office. The space is shared by everyone. So I have to be able to rid myself of any perception I may have that leadership is about hierarchy, because leadership is about leading and it's about serving. If a chair needs to be moved, if there's a faucet that doesn't work, I'm not going to ask someone to fix it. I will try to solve it myself, because what we want the kids to learn are the same skills that I show in problem-solving, in challenge-based thinking, in creative thinking. If I can't do it right, how are they going to learn?

