

Let's change education for the future. A dialogue with Dr. Anne Bamford



Kolbrún Þ. Pálsdóttir



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Energetic, sharp and inspiring - these are amongst the words that come into my mind when attempting to describe Dr. Anne Bamford, an educator, artist, and leader in the field of education. The School of Education at the University of Iceland was fortunate, when going through a self-evaluation quality process in 2022 and 2023, to engage Dr. Bamford as an external reviewer. Dr. Bamford, or Anne, as she allows us to call her - in Iceland we generally refer to each other by given names - visited the School of Education in March 2023. During the two and half days of her visit, Anne had numerous meetings with individuals and groups to gain insight into the current status of educational research within the School of Education.

As Dean and chair of the Self-Evaluation Committee, it was my role to make sure that the visit was productive and that Anne was provided with all the information she needed to make an informed review as well as recommendations on how we might better support our researchers, staff, and students to create important, innovative and impactful knowledge in

the field of education.

The timing of the visit could not have been better. Since early 2022 we have known that the School of Education will move into a new location, the Saga building - a vast and iconic seven storey structure, previously a Radison Hotel, in the heart of the main university campus. As we have been, and are still, working on our vision and the design for our new headquarters, meant to be a new and lively hub for the educational sciences, there are concerns and questions considering what the road ahead looks like: what should we pack for the ride, where are we really going, and how do we, the staff and students at the SoE, make our vision and dreams come true in the new space?

During the intense two-day schedule, I was fortunate to be able to engage in a few wonderful and inspiring discussions with Anne, as we enjoyed two dinners together, a soak in a hot tub, and a quick and cold visit to Öskjuhlíð (a stony hill in Reykjavík with a forested park) where we watched the Northern Lights dancing between the stars. What follows are glimpses of those conversations.

Curiosity and learning

One of the themes that Anne kept coming back to was that academia and research is all about curiosity in learning. What does that mean, for example, for the School of Education in the new building? How should we go about it to make that happen, to create the best environment?



ANNE IN A VISIT TO THE SAGA BUILDING.

If you are an academic your main role is to be curious about the world around you and to inspire your students and others to explore, roll-up their sleeves and be active in their own learning. One of the things that I would do is that I would not talk about “classrooms” within the SoE, but rather learning labs. Every space for teaching and learning should be a learning lab where academics and students engage in learning, exploring and understanding, whether it be pedagogy, music or health. This is important in every academic institution, but especially so in educational sciences. Education is the venue to explore, challenge and ask questions about the way we shape our society and community. Are we inclusive, open, accessible? Do we practice what we preach?

One thing that I see, for example in the SoE, is that most of your core practices happen behind closed doors, both teaching and research. When I walk into the Saga building in 1-2 years’ time, I want to see people learning and exploring together, there should be a vibrant atmosphere and life in every corner, both students and staff have a role to play to make this happen.

One of the things that we are facing is getting student and staff to come to the SoE. Many students choose to participate in distance learning as the majority of the courses are hybrid, i.e. both onsite and online. Also, since COVID, a part of our academic staff has chosen to work considerable amounts of time from home. What are your thoughts on this?

You need to create a community and an atmosphere that attracts people. Students should say: “ I want to go to the SoE because there is a vibrant and interesting learning community, I want to be a part of that!” Staff should also be drawn to be there, to be a part of this amazing workplace that has a hugely important role in the education here in Iceland. Of course, today we can have a lot of flexibility in how we work, and some may choose to work in their homes, cafés or in shared or private workspaces. Try to keep it as open as possible, let people see what the SoE stands for and how you do your work. Avoid building fences, open-up to the public such as in the afternoons and evenings, and give students access to spaces to learn and collaborate after-hours. It should be a community, a community of learning all around.

Fusion skills and role of Arts

One of the most exciting aspects of moving to Saga is the chance to integrate our Arts and Crafts specific learning spaces into the heart of the SoE. Whereas currently, music, painting, woodwork, textile, and theatre education are situated in another building. Can you share some of your thoughts on the role of arts in education, not least when we think about global and local challenges in our societies?

Society is in a period of unprecedented change. These changes have a direct bearing on

education and the responses schools make to the challenges and the opportunities of change. Most schools still have a largely subject-based curriculum even if we know in reality people do not think or work in discrete subject areas. In life, sciences and arts are interdependent and writing or mathematics are of little importance if not combined with creative thinking and aesthetic crafting. As knowledge continues to expand, human understanding requires the interplay of different subjects. We are also witnessing rapid changes in populations. Our schools evidence the effects of both increased globalisation and, at the same time, a push for more individualisation.

There are four main ways that you can boost the arts and creativity in education.

- 1) Education in the arts: This means dedicated curriculum time to music, visual arts, drama, dance, and the media. Look for opportunities to take the pupils to concerts, theatre events, book readings in the local library and visits to art exhibitions or music studios.
- 2) Education through the arts: This is the time when you can sneak lots of the arts into other subject areas. These ideas need little extra preparation for the teachers, but require a lot more complex learning and imagination for the pupils.
- 3) Art as education: Throughout the ages, humans have used the arts as a medium for learning. For example, we can learn a lot about empathy and compassion through watching a film or creating a dance. Instead of always sitting a test or writing an answer perhaps the students can create a poster, brochure, or advertisement or you can use art, music, or dance as a writing prompt or an assessment stimulus.
- 4) Education as art: When you bring a creative, cultural and aesthetic understanding of learning to the classroom you can create the sort of 'WOW Factor' where education itself becomes transformed into an artistic experience. At that point the teacher is now the performer, the curious wonderer, and the pupils have entered into the world of the imagination.

You emphasize that university teachers and students should be co-researchers. Can you elaborate on what that means and on how that can and should be reflected in daily practices?

Being a co-researcher means that you are curious and that this curiosity is both aimed at the object of your curiosity and the process of understanding and learning. As the word suggests, at the heart of co-researching is collaboration and communication. These are core Fusion skills that everyone needs to develop. Moreover, co-research practices are rich in critical thinking, reflective practice, actions and exploratory inquiries. This cocktail of benefits means that adopting co-researching practices can supercharge learning in pre- and post- teacher education and professional development. Co-research practices not only benefit the teacher education students' learning, but also model effective practices that can be used in the classroom. Even the youngest child can be a researcher. I recently engaged

in research with a group of two- and three-year-olds where we researched gravity using a range of materials including feathers, tissue paper, card, buttons, cotton balls and other objects. The children ‘published’ their research in the form of a 3D mural and art installation, where the items with the most force from gravity formed the background, while the objects with less force became the foreground. All learners (of all ages) can become co-researchers if they are encouraged to wonder, puzzle, explore, collaborate, and disseminate their developing understandings. Learners can articulate profound insights into their practice which contribute to theory-building more broadly. Effective co-research uses naturalistic principles of inclusive inquiry to examine both common and individual interests and concerns about learning in the classroom. Ideally, co-research draws upon multiple layered perspectives and so may involve academics, field experts and creatives, teachers, students, children and others. This collaboration changes the nature of the relationship between participants including the nature of the discourse, issues related to agency, reciprocity, autonomy, ownership, control and responsibility. I suggest that you start small and build on the successes you will have. I am a great fan of calling something a ‘pilot test’ – if it works you can spread-out your wonderfully innovative ideas and if it does not work, you can ‘save face’ by using it as an example of your experimental and reflective practice and try something else! So make some brave steps to change learning for the future.

You introduced the concept of fusion skills in 2007, and currently, most educational policies seem to be leaning towards a more holistic and humanistic view of the skills we need to cultivate in our children and ourselves. However, teachers are facing extreme challenges and “the system” does not necessarily provide the infrastructure and support needed to allow for creative and innovative approaches. And somehow, what is measured always seems to be what matters the most. Do you agree with that, and what kind of change, if any, is needed, in your opinion?

The OECD’s PISA test assesses 14-year-olds to determine their level of a set of quite traditional school skills, but are these the most important learning we can give children to secure their future? Also, is the test itself a fair selection? If we test tree climbing, is it fair to dolphins who are without doubt incredibly intelligent and intuitive animals or is it fair to tortoises or crocodiles who have stood the test of evolutionary times? What we focus on when we assess something, means we fail to see other qualities excluded from the lens of assessment.

An Icelandic educator, Ingvi Hrannar Omarsson asked the various stakeholders in schools what were the most important things that children need to learn in schools. Almost all the things that were agreed by parents, teachers and children were things that are the hardest to measure and are rarely assessed in formal assessments. Interestingly, the list of qualities identified by the stakeholders mirror almost identically the 12 Fusion skills which I defined in the following way: communication and presentation skills, collaboration and teamwork,

initiative and problem solving, critical thinking, resilience and creativity, and analysis and evaluation skills. Moreover, these are the qualities that both the higher education sector and over 101 different industry groups in the UK also agreed were the most important things for people to learn. Fusion is a person-centric approach, equipping the future and current workers with the expertise that is necessary for success. Fusion brings together different industries and technologies to spark innovation and create economic growth. Fusion skills use interdisciplinary work as a driver for creativity and innovation.

You worked as an advisor for the Icelandic educational authorities on the quality of arts education between 2009 and 2011 and wrote an extensive report on the subject. Since then you have continued to collaborate with Icelandic partners, specifically within the city of Reykjavik. What is your impression of the status of education here in Iceland and where our strengths lie as well as our challenges? Do you have thoughts to share that may inspire teachers and educators in Iceland?

Icelandic schools are of a high standard and education is highly valued. There are many examples of world leading practice and innovations in education in Iceland. But even the best of systems has room for improvement. Above all, the quality, enthusiasm and skill of a good teacher is crucial. Iceland, like most countries in the world, must continue to recruit and develop high-quality teachers who become innovative, passionate and committed leaders of learning. The aim and vision of teacher education needs to be clear and ambitious. Teacher education students require experience of being co-researchers, developing the knowledge and skills of evaluation, analysis and reflection. The School of Education works in close partnerships with Reykjavik City, the Ministry of Education and other bodies and stakeholders. This is developing a culture of lifelong approaches to teachers' professional development. The educational community in Iceland needs to consider methods of quality assurance that are appropriate to ensure quality keeps pace with innovations and changes. Without robust research and quality assurance, there is a danger of changes "throwing out the baby with the bath water" in terms of not maintaining essential core values and practices that have historically underpinned quality while keeping the practice at the forefront of global educational change and innovation.

Focus on equality and diversity is important to ensure that no individuals or groups are left out. Some renewed efforts are being made in relation to students from a background other than Icelandic, students with additional educational needs, boys' education, and for those students from diverse backgrounds. There are growing partnerships around technology and innovative practices in Iceland. The combination of robust in-person and online learning models means that students from all parts of Iceland can engage actively in the learning. Quality education programmes impact the child, the teaching and learning environment, and the community. Education is given a core position within Icelandic society. It is an exciting time for the School of Education as it moves to its new building at the heart of the

University of Iceland. Given the enthusiasm and dedication of the academic and administrative staff I met during my recent time in Iceland the future looks very promising, and I look forward to visiting you in your new school.



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Kolbrún Þ. Pálsdóttir (kolbrunp(at)hi.is) is an associate professor and dean of the School of Education at the University of Iceland. She completed a BA degree in philosophy in 1997, an MA in education in 2001 and a PhD in education from the University of Iceland in 2012. Her research areas include formal and informal education, interdisciplinary collaboration and youth and leisure pedagogy.

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