

# Human Scale Education

Human Scale Thinking at the  
Heart of a Large School

By Mark Wasserberg

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This is the third in a series of Occasional Papers published by the Human Scale Schools Project, a partnership between Human Scale Education and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

## Human Scale Thinking at the Heart of a Large School

By Mark Wasserberg

Mark Wasserberg is Principal of Stantonbury Campus

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# Introduction

Stantonbury Campus is an 11-18 comprehensive school serving the North of Milton Keynes with 2,600 students. Our intake is fully comprehensive, although overall less able than average in terms of prior achievement and CAT scores.

Demographic changes in Milton Keynes mean that the Campus population is becoming rapidly more diverse and with more areas of relative deprivation. It has a long tradition of being a liberal progressive school with an ethos centred on the crucial importance of relationships as the basis for successful learning. Stantonbury opened in 1974 and has been a specialist Arts College since 1998.

As one of the largest schools in the country but one which has adopted the 'schools-within-schools' principle in its Hall system, we have developed valuable and long-lasting links with Human Scale Education. We have been a mentor school for the Human Scale Schools Project since its inception in 2007. This Project, which is a partnership between the Gulbenkian Foundation and Human Scale Education, engages with the important questions:

- What kind of education develops young people as human beings so that they are prepared for their

future lives?

- Does our current education system meet the needs of both individuals and society?
- What does it mean to have an education system that is 'human scale'?

This Occasional Paper will look at three key aspects of Stantonbury Campus that are relevant to 'human scale education':

- The ethos of the Campus
- The use of 'mini-schools' or Halls
- The development of the curriculum at Key Stage 3.

## **The ethos of equal value and determined optimism**

The ethos of the Campus was established at its inception by Geoff Cooksey, the first Principal, over 30 years ago. Based on core beliefs in equal value and determined optimism about the ability of all students to succeed, it is deeply inclusive. Equal value means exactly that: all people on Campus are known by their first names, there are no separate staff and student

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toilets, no-one pushes in at queues. Mixed-ability teaching is normal, but not exclusive. This produces unusually warm and friendly relationships at all levels of the Campus. The Campus has no uniform, because we wish to develop individuals with the confidence to express themselves, including through their choice of clothes. We also wish our students to be comfortable with the cultural variety of the world they will inhabit as adults. Students at Stantonbury know that they and their families are valued and that if something goes wrong we will work hard with them to put it right.

This ethos also presents challenges for us. The valuing of students and their opinions can sometimes be misinterpreted by them as licence to disturb the climate for learning. Ironically, too, we do not yet make enough use of student voice to provide positive channels for students to feel they have co-ownership of their learning. We are currently addressing both these issues. Overall, however, the ethos is hugely positive, particularly in addressing the key issue of how to

engage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Unless they feel (and are) genuinely liked and treated with respect, they do not engage with learning. Students also develop confidence in expressing their views to each other and to adults. For us, this has been greatly enhanced by our specialist Arts College status.

### **Halls or 'Mini-Schools'**

In such a large school, there are clear issues as to how we create a climate in which students feel valued as individuals and in which parents feel welcome and included. I do not apologise for the size of the Campus – it gives students a range of wonderful opportunities and facilities (including our own theatre, gallery and leisure centre) to enrich their learning whether through the arts, P.E. or exchanges with France, Tanzania and India. But the size has inherent dangers for the well-being of young people, and particularly those who are most at risk of disengagement. So, the Campus is divided into five mini-schools or Halls: four pre-16 Halls and one for post-16 students, each with about 500 students. Although not purpose built for Halls, the Campus is made up of a large number of separate buildings which it was possible to adapt for the purpose. This happened over 15 years ago, as the Campus grappled with its rapid growth and the need for adults and students to know each other well if learning was to be successful.

Each Hall has its own Head, who for most practical purposes as far as students and parents are concerned is their Head teacher, and its own pastoral team and teachers who predominantly teach students from their own Hall. Where possible, tutors stay with their tutor groups for all five years from the age of 11-16. The tutors are the key points of contact for parents and they build relationships with families over time. Normally, children from the same family will be placed in the same Hall to build on relationships already established (although sometimes parents request a different Hall for a sibling). Students in Years 7-9 only leave their Hall for subjects requiring specialist facilities which are shared with one other Hall. In Years 10 and 11 it remains predominantly true that students are taught in Hall-based groups but the advent of new applied learning options at Key Stage 4 means that some groups are formed from paired Halls and a small number go right across Campus. Each Hall has its own Special Needs team of teachers and teaching assistants, which promotes the centrality of relationships in supporting vulnerable learners. Physically, the Halls consist wherever possible of a mixture of learning areas and open social areas. Each Hall also has its own elected 'school' council, with control of a budget and involvement in all Hall appointments. The procedure for all staff appointments is to include a student panel and feedback from students taught by candidates.

The curriculum also encourages the development of meaningful relationships between adults and students based on real knowledge of individuals and families. English, History, Geography and R.E. are taught as an integrated English and Humanities course with the same teacher. Combined Science is also taught by one teacher for a group. Wherever possible we also timetable the tutor to teach his or her group.

The Halls provide students with a secure, friendly base, an identity and sense of belonging and with the opportunity for participation in competition with other Halls. Students readily tell you they belong to the 'best' Hall as part of their identity on Campus. They also value the close relationships they develop with adults in their Halls.

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Part of the value of our link with Human Scale Education is the challenge it offers. A conference hosted by Human Scale Education in 2008 was addressed by James Wetz, building on the 'Dispatches' documentary he made with Channel 4<sup>(1)</sup>. This film focused on his vision of small Urban Village Schools and drew on his experience of the small school movement in the United States, in particular the Urban Academy in New York and the Boston Pilot Schools. He made me reflect on our Hall structure and made me realise we still have much to do to make personal relationships with students and families the bedrock of successful learning. The compelling case for why this matters is the success the American small schools are achieving with precisely the disadvantaged urban young people English education is struggling to engage effectively.

Some key features that underpin the work of the Urban Village Schools are:

- Every teacher should know every student
- Every student should know every other student
- No teacher should teach more than 80-90 students in a week
- Teachers have responsibility for building the curriculum and learning approaches to suit their students
- There is a maximum size of about 450 students above which some of the other principles become difficult to achieve<sup>(2)</sup>

For a variety of reasons, our Halls, despite their strengths, do not match up to all these key features.

Size is a key issue. Because of the buildings we have now, but also because of how we organise our teaching and learning, it would be very difficult to create smaller Halls or to timetable our mixture of Hall-based staff and cross-Campus faculties within smaller Halls. We currently have an opportunity to develop our buildings and as part of this we are considering introducing a fifth pre-16 Hall, bringing the size of each Hall down to 420 students, with 84 in each Year group. This offers exciting opportunities to increase the effectiveness of the Hall structure.

Beyond integrated English and Humanities and Science, we still operate essentially a subject-based curriculum, taught by specialists. So, an ICT teacher will teach two lessons a week to a number of groups in Years 7-9. Dance, Music, Drama, Art, Design and Technology and P.E. similarly have teachers working with a number of groups who do not, therefore, have the opportunity to establish the deep relationships with students that seem to make such a difference in the American small schools. Specialist teaching gives students a rich learning environment, fired by the enthusiasm and skills of the teacher, but there is a cost. We remain concerned that our Year 7 students in particular experience too much of a change from their primary school experience on arrival

at the Campus.

Teachers in their training learn to concentrate on the successful delivery of their subject and this is, of course, a very important part of their preparation to enter the profession. But we need to do more to develop the understanding that first of all we teach children, not subjects.

Despite these shortcomings, our Halls make a significant contribution to the success of relationships and the support of quality learning at Stantonbury Campus. They also create opportunities for giving students a fresh start. A move of Hall across Campus for a young person can be like a change of school, but with the same ethos, location, curriculum and extra-curricular activities. For some young people at risk of permanent exclusion this flexibility has made a huge difference to their lives.

### **'Rich Tasks' and the development of the curriculum at Key Stage 3**

Stantonbury has always been an innovative school and in the last five years the curriculum has undergone further radical change. The development of the 'Rich Tasks' at Key Stage 3 can be seen as an extension of the Stantonbury principle of valuing each student and tailoring teaching to the needs of each student. In smaller learning communities where students know each other well and where the

relationships between students and adults are close, it is possible for the kind of problem-based learning, team-working and co-construction of the curriculum that underpin the Rich Tasks curriculum to flourish.

In preparation for making these changes to the curriculum, 12 colleagues have studied the 'Learning, Curriculum and Assessment' module of the Open University M.Ed. We operated as a seminar group and were grateful to the Open University for providing us with our tutor. The research projects we undertook all related to the Campus and our discussion of the reading and assignments was critical to creating the climate for curriculum change. Approaches to learning that emphasised co-construction, the making of learning together and the importance of talk, working in teams and problem solving – ideas derived from Bruner, Dewey, Vigotsky, Rogoff, Lave and Wenger and others – were central.

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Two critical essays have been particularly influential. The first introduced us to 'Teaching for Understanding' by Martha Stone Wiske.<sup>(3)</sup> This Harvard-based project has been inspirational. It works with trans-disciplinary projects and has four key elements:

- Generative Topics
- Understanding Goals (what are the big learning objectives for the topic)
- Performances of Understanding (that allow students to demonstrate what they have learnt and creatively use their learning in new ways)
- On-going Assessment that provides feedback on process as well as outcome

We like both the theoretical rigour of the approach and the robust practicality that it brings to developing what we have called Rich Tasks. It also matches well with elements of 'Deep Learning' being developed by David Hargreaves and others.

The second key article was by Howard Gardner and Veronica Boix-Mansilla, 'Teaching for Understanding in the Discipline and Beyond'<sup>(4)</sup>. The authors argue strongly and persuasively for the value of ways of thinking associated with subject disciplines. Our own view was that the enthusiasm and expertise of teachers for their subjects contributed to the success and enjoyment of the learning. For these reasons we have sought to develop trans-disciplinary Rich Tasks that show and exploit the

connections between learning in different disciplines, rather than the competency-based learning of the RSA's 'Opening Minds' project<sup>(5)</sup>, inspiring though this has been.

We approached the DfES Innovation Unit for support with the development of our ideas and the Unit provided support for a link with Homewood School in Kent which was also developing innovative approaches to Key Stage 3. We took the outcome of our learning and thinking to a whole school training day in February 2005. We agreed we would create two Rich Tasks in each of Years 7, 8 and 9. Teachers and Teaching Assistants were excited by the opportunity to take back responsibility for the curriculum after the professionally arid period of the imposed National Curriculum. Working in cross-Hall and cross-faculty groups, colleagues proposed possible 'Generative Topics' for Key Stage 3. By the end of the day, we had 30 topic webs and ideas as to how different subjects might contribute to the learning.

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From these we have so far created and run five Rich Tasks:

- Year 7
  - Staying Alive
  - Heroes and Villains – creating a marketing campaign
- Year 8
  - Patterns, Sequences and Transformations – A Murder Mystery
  - Milton Keynes – A City of Diverse Identities
- Year 9
  - The Industrial Revolution

The last Rich Task to be developed will give students the opportunity to engage in a variety of enterprise activities.

We did not initially involve students in choosing the Rich Tasks which, with hindsight, was a pity. However, we have made extensive use of student feedback about their experience of Rich Tasks and how they can be improved so that the students’ own development is furthered. We have also made self- and peer-assessment essential elements of the Tasks. This means the Tasks are evolving. To aid this, a different senior colleague is asked to lead each Task and the

leadership rotates to bring fresh ideas and thinking. This happens under the overall leadership of one of the Vice-Principals who ensures the principles behind the Rich Task curriculum remain clear and consistently applied.

## What does a Stantonbury Rich Task look like in practice?

There are many common features, although we have tried to make each Task different so that the learning remains fresh and exciting for students and staff. The length of a Rich Task varies from 6 to 8 weeks. Each Rich Task has:

- An agreed set of over-arching learning goals (the Understanding Goals from *Teaching for Understanding*)
- A Performance of Understanding that involves, as far as possible, a real task for a real audience
- Students operating in teams to solve problems and develop their performance of understanding
- Schemes of work in a variety of subjects (different for each Rich Task) that show how the concepts and content required for students to develop the Rich Task are built within a subject discipline – each scheme of work using the same over-arching learning goals
- Work that brings together learning from a variety of subjects, normally through a collapsed timetable day or days

Perhaps an example or two will help. In ‘Patterns, Sequences and Transformations – A Murder

'This rich learning culminates in a conference held at the Campus, at which 60 members of the local community representing the rich variety of ethnic backgrounds, faith groups and occupations of the city are interviewed by students.'

Mystery', students study the importance of these concepts in Science, Mathematics, Art, P.E., Music, and Dance. The mathematical Fibonacci sequence is used as a starting point for a musical composition, which in turn provides inspiration for a piece of dance. Simultaneously, students are divided into teams of four or five and become a detective agency. They are given a murder mystery to solve. The site of the body is marked with chalk near the main entrance to the Campus. A variety of witness statements have been recorded on CD and are also available in the booklet issued to every student. Each subject's learning culminates in a clue for students to solve, which will allow them to eliminate suspects. At the end of the Rich Task, students present their solution to the mystery, Poirot-style, and the most complete solution in each tutor group wins. The Performance of Understanding comes next with each group creating a murder

mystery of their own, with a whole new set of clues based on patterns, sequences and transformations. The winning group in each tutor group presents their murder mystery to invited guests, including members of the police and local solicitors, who attempt to solve the murder. Each group makes several presentations to different sets of guests. Marks are awarded and the best overall murder mysteries are awarded prizes and certificates. The winning group in each Hall this year then visited the local Magistrates Court to learn more about how the justice system works.

In 'Milton Keynes – a City of Diverse Identities', students study the richly diverse nature of their community through English and Humanities, Art, Dance, Drama and P.E. (in which students research and then play games from different countries from which citizens of Milton Keynes originate). Personal histories are explored and family trees created: this often involves students in fascinating research at home. The Living Archive, a local history resource in Milton Keynes, is used for research into the different patterns of immigration the city has experienced. Push/pull factors are studied and applied to the personal and wider experience of local people. The 'Escape to Safety' bus, which takes students on the journey taken by refugees fleeing from danger, is visited by all students. We have a church on Campus, which is also visited by all students. This rich learning culminates in a conference held at

the Campus, at which 60 members of the local community representing the rich variety of ethnic backgrounds, faith groups and occupations of the city are interviewed by students to learn more about their personal histories and how they reflect the experience of the city. Ten of the visitors this year came from the local retirement village. Their meetings with the Stantonbury students went well beyond the stated purpose of the conference. Following the conference, for which students working in groups prepare questions to open up the conversation, tutor groups discuss what they feel are the pressing issues for Milton Keynes that local councillors should hear about. Then a representative is elected from each tutor group – 15 students or so. They are taken to meet a group of local councillors at the Council chamber and put the points forward that have been raised by their groups. A fortnight after this meeting, Councillors are invited to the Campus to lead assemblies so that the year group can hear their responses to the issues raised.

We are still developing our Rich Tasks and learning from the experience of running them with students. A particular issue for us is that we have not yet fully embedded the Assessment for Learning approaches that help students reflect on what and how they are learning. However, they have been exciting for students and staff alike. They also provide interesting models of learning that

are affecting how subject departments prepare other elements of their schemes of work. Teachers who see the excitement and quality of learning generated by the Rich Tasks are introducing similar ways of working into the subject-based curriculum. For example, Mathematics is working hard to create learning outcomes that students can see have relevance to their own lives. These outcomes also fit well with the new Key Stage 3 curriculum.

One aspect of Rich Tasks that is both a challenge and an opportunity is the relationship between work in subjects and the Rich Task. As staff turnover brings new colleagues to the Campus, there is a constant need to undertake professional development in the underlying pedagogy of Rich Tasks. Otherwise there is a danger that teachers do not understand what we are trying to achieve in terms of student learning. The value of the training spills over into other aspects of teachers' subject-based work thus creating richer learning for students.

At the heart of Rich Tasks is the desire to make learning an active process for students that links to their lives and experience and which involves them in working together to solve problems and creatively demonstrate their learning. So far, feedback from students and staff suggests this is working. For example, for the Year 7 'Staying Alive' Rich Task, which was remodelled this year on the basis of

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student feedback, 92% of the students sampled gave the experience 4, 5 or 6 out of 6 for enjoyment. The percentage of students who said they had improved their skills 'quite a lot' or 'a lot' as a result of the Rich Task was as follows: making links between different subjects (60%); teamwork (68%); ability to be creative (72%); ability to be resilient (72%).

schooling. It is a system that is out of step with the realities of many students' lives and aspirations and, I would suggest, with what society and the economy need. Radical change is needed and in this context Human Scale Education is making an important contribution to the debate about what education for the 21st Century might look like.

## Final thoughts

Our involvement in the Human Scale Schools Project has enriched developments at Stantonbury Campus. Its principles challenge us and its passion for children to experience an education that is personal and nurturing inspires us. It has brought us into contact with excellent practice in this country and internationally. In England we have an education system that is still shaped by the factory model of

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## Conclusion

### A Practical Manifesto for Education on a Human Scale

Human Scale Education suggests the following eight key practices that schools might follow. These practices are facets of educating on a human scale and were planned originally to represent the seven sides of a fifty pence piece.

1. Smaller learning communities.
2. Small teams of teachers of between 4 to 6 teachers, learning mentors, learning support assistants who will see no more than between 80 to 90 learners each week.
3. A curriculum that is co-constructed and holistic.
4. A timetable that is flexible with blocks of time which make provision for whole class teaching, small group teaching and individual learning. Teacher planning and evaluation timetabled.
5. Pedagogy that is inquiry-based, experiential and supported by ICT. Assessment that involves the Assessment for Learning approaches of dialogue, negotiation and peer review and develops forms of Authentic Assessment such as portfolio, exhibition and performance.
6. Student voice involving students in the learning arrangements and organisation of the school.
7. Genuine partnership with parents and the community.

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4. Gardner, H and Boix-Mansilla, V. (1999) 'Teaching for Understanding in the Disciplines – and Beyond', in J.Leach and B.Moon (eds.) *Learners and Pedagogy*. The Open University and Paul Chapman Publishing.
5. Over 200 schools are now involved in the RSA's 'Opening Minds' project. For a way into the excellent work it is promoting, visit:  
[www.thersa.org.projects.education/opening-minds](http://www.thersa.org.projects.education/opening-minds)



