

# Blended learning, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the post-pandemic classroom

An interview with Ian Smith

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## About the author

*Ian Smith is the co-author of **IMPACT: In the Moment, Purposeful, Action** and has promoted enterprise learning in schools across Europe for twenty years. He has been a senior leader in the UK and internationally and most recently has taken up post as the Head of Senior School at GEMS World School in Kochi, South India.*

Ian has promoted an entrepreneurial mindset for innovation through student advocacy and agency throughout his career.

Starting as a teacher in the state sector, Ian introduced enterprise learning to Ranelagh School in Bracknell, Berkshire as Head of Sixth Form in 1998. He moved to the independent sector as a Deputy Head and, between 2004-2015 in two schools, he steered enterprise learning and social entrepreneurship as a strategic focus.

Throughout his career, Ian has developed social enterprise networks with a variety of charities – notably being part of the delegation to Vancouver led by Holly Branson to establish WE Day in UK. He has lead initiatives locally and globally with the International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International, Princess Diana Award, Wildhearts, Wings of Hope, Young Enterprise, SANCHild and Rotary International.

Since 2010, Ian has collaborated with Derek Browne and Entrepreneurs in Action to integrate 'Classroom to Boardroom' in both Surbiton High School and The International School of Geneva. In Geneva, he facilitated a variety of collaborative challenges to provide work experience and promote 21st century workplace skills with a variety of NGOs and corporates, including Global Fund (2016), Red Cross (2017), CERN (2018), INEOS (2019) and UNICEF (2020).

Ian has led workshops and given keynotes to embed the UN SDGs at IB Global Conferences 2017-19. He has co-created the Global Entrepreneurial Leaders (GEL) Youth Summit for over 500 students with Wildhearts hosted at UN, Geneva. In 2017, Ian became a second cohort #TeachSDGs Ambassador ([www.teachsdgs.org](http://www.teachsdgs.org)). Ian is a lifetime holder of the Queen's Award for Enterprise Promotion and has achieved an MBA in education leadership.

Ian co-authored UNleash2020 with Derek Browne for COGNITA in April 2020. He has most recently developed **IMPACT: In the Moment, Purposeful, Action** with Extend Education in 2020.

## About the publisher

*Extend Education publishes resources that challenge and inspire students to become active, engaged and autonomous learners. They are proud members of the SDG Publishers Compact and aspire to develop sustainable practices and act as champions of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.*



'Being a registered member of the UN SDG Publishers Compact means that we actively promote and acquire content that advocates for themes represented by the SDGs, such as equality, sustainability, justice and safeguarding and strengthening the environment. We are proud to act as advocates of the UN SDGs to all our customers and stakeholders by promoting and actively communicating about the SDG agenda through our marketing, websites, promotions and projects.'

Extend Education, 2020

This short, informal interview with Ian Smith looks at the current opportunities for educators to fully embrace blended learning and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in classrooms, in order to prepare students for a post-pandemic world.

# 1: Why do you think blended learning is so important for today's students, especially in relation to the post-pandemic classroom?

One of the most fundamental, post-COVID concerns for schools is the insecurity and ambiguity of existing structures. Due to lockdown's impact on schools globally, the pandemic has shifted parameters. Technology has been both disrupting and has granted continuity. Schools, therefore, need to future-proof for the post-pandemic world and think outside of the box that defined pre-pandemic learning – the classroom.

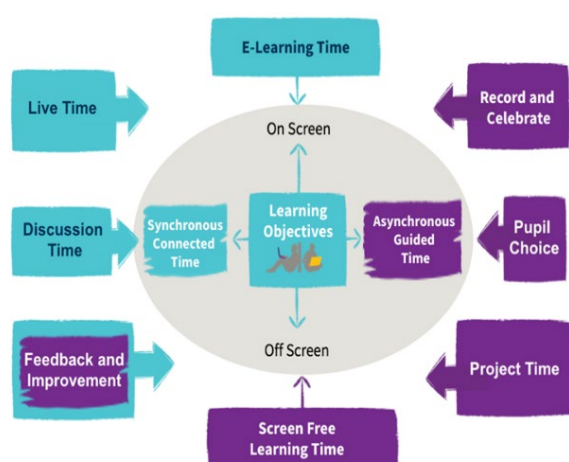
School closures around the world have forced educators to embrace technology in a way that will likely change the education system forever. What is clear is that schools needed, and continue to need, a Plan B – a Plan Blended. Whether at macro-strategy level for schools or at classroom level, project-based learning needs to be considered in the face of potential waves of closures for making a curriculum exciting and 'in the moment', to promote autonomy in learners.

At my school in India – which has experienced remote learning for eight months to date – we actively encourage our teachers to incorporate asynchronous projects to provide variety and flexibility, alongside the synchronous sessions, developing a hybrid model to build capacity and resilience at all levels.

The integration of e-learning and front-of-class lessons is key to a blended learning model. It is a necessary step in the evolution of pedagogy and school systems from 19th-century industrial models to the creativity that Sir Ken Robinson so eloquently championed.

Combining e-learning technologies and more traditional learning in a modular way caters for different student needs and modes of delivery, whether synchronous or asynchronous. Different modes of delivery could include:

- Targeted lessons delivered to small groups of students online.
- Online lessons with large groups of students.
- A combination of online lessons, in-class lessons and self-learning.
- E-learning and m-learning to support teacher-directed learning.



Blended learning is not just a mix of distance learning and in-person lessons. Learning can alternate between teacher-directed learning and self-directed learning with the support of technology. This means it is a possible option for technology-assisted education and may well be the model used in the future, as a direct result of the circumstances created by COVID-19. What is clear is that schools have quickly adapted to and adopted this new reality.

(Diagram from Naima Charlier, Director of Teaching and Learning at Nord Anglia International School Hong Kong, *The key elements of 'blended learning' in our Virtual School (VS)*  
<https://www.nordangliaeducation.com/article/2020/5/12/what-is-a-blended-learning-approach>)

## 2: Where do you see the opportunities for schools to move from 'one-size-fits-all' teaching towards individualised learning?

New technology and methods of accessing content can create opportunities for specific personalisation of learning. Of course, there are practical advantages of technology – for example, students can access material from anywhere, on any device, at any time. However, it goes beyond this. Students are more committed and engaged. They receive better feedback, can set their own learning goals, retain information better, and are given more opportunities to go beyond what they are taught. All of this offers wellbeing gains alongside autonomy – which is particularly interesting for learners with introverted preferences.

Meeting the needs of the individual learner goes beyond students using technology on their own, as outlined in a report published by the American Institutes for Research: *Learning with Others: A Study Exploring the Relationship Between Collaboration, Personalization, and Equity*. In this research, the authors determine that effective collaborative exercises need structural and dynamic quality. They state that *structural quality* refers to 'those aspects of high-quality collaborative opportunities that are planned in advance by educators, such as in the design of activities or the intentional composition of collaborative groups'. They refer to *dynamic quality* when talking about 'those aspects of high-quality collaborative opportunities that are realized in real time as students engage in a collaborative task, interact with their peers, and respond to teacher facilitation strategies'. Evidence suggests that structural and dynamic features of high-quality collaboration are highly interrelated.

Elements of High-Quality Collaboration	
Structural Quality Elements	Dynamic Quality Elements
Student-centered, culturally responsive activities	Responsive, respectful and inclusive interactions
Activity requires group interdependence	Constructive exchange
Balanced group composition	Shared leadership and decision-making
Group norms and task clarity	

(Surr, Wendy; Zeiser, Kristina L.; Briggs, Olivia; Kendziora, Kimberly, (2018) *Learning with Others: A Study Exploring the Relationship Between Collaboration, Personalization, and Equity*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592089.pdf> (American Institutes of Research, Boston) p. 4)

Individualised learning grants students the space for innovation, adaptability, agility, and resilience. Interacting with others demands collaboration to resolve complex problems and create integrated solutions reaching beyond productivity to humanity – a key competence for social interaction, social cohesion, harmony and justice. It is not just technology that enables individualised learning. It is the content students are interacting with as well. For example, embedding global issues such as sustainability, or specifically teaching the UN Sustainable Development Goals, enables awareness, sensitivity, and advocacy for collective challenges and opportunities at a local, national, regional, and global level. It entails multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual perspectives to embrace diversity – cultivating a personalised and purposeful curriculum.

### 3: How can students feel empowered every day to make decisions?

What is key, is the transformation from engagement with knowledge to empowerment with respect to critical thinking as an independent learner, embracing an interdependent and collaborative 21st-century environment. This thinking is at the core of the International School of Geneva's La Grande Boissière and UNESCO's Universal Learning Programme:

**Highly engaging environments promote empowerment because they focus on student agency and ownership. The moment you add student ownership to student engagement, you create a climate for empowerment. We want students to be creative, critical thinkers. We want them to rewrite the rules and to be original. In education, we throw around words like 'lifelong learning' and 'critical thinking citizens', but this begins with a mindset of self-direction, yet with a collaborative disposition to share and scale.**

(Adapted from: <https://sites.google.com/ecolint.ch/ulp/ULP-EN/ulp-philosophy>)

A fundamental feature of a climate of empowerment is for teachers to transition from giving choice to inspiring wider thinking around possibility. Sharing examples or providing options can stifle creative risk-taking, but in equal measure it can increase self-efficacy to stimulate big-picture thinking around the possible. As John Spencer determines:

**Self-starters know how to initiate learning. They don't wait for permission to learn. They simply go out and do it. But self-starting without self-management leads to unfinished work. Self-managers are able to manage projects, set goals, and check for progress. Yet self-management without self-starting leads to complacency and lacks innovation - empowered students demonstrate both.**

(John Spencer, <https://spencerauthor.com/empowerment-shifts/>)

Visual prompts are often helpful to promote both discovery and a confidence to dive deep into wonder. Tapping into student interests is liberating. Teacher-directed, deductive learning has its place, but to empower students allowing them to delve into the realms of complexity and ambiguity tends to stimulate the instinct to challenge and question, particularly when faced with real-world questions which are in the moment and authentic to their perceptions of the world.

The process of learning is iterative. Mistakes are made when learning – just as they are when innovating, when playing, and when discovering.

Watching children on gaming sites illuminates the reality that they assess in the moment. They learn by doing, rather than by taking. In an education context, empowered learning can take the form of setting goals, checking progress, and adjusting actions for improvement. Not necessarily independently, but rather interdependently and collaboratively – using self-reflection, peer assessment and open dialogue. Empowered students have expanded perspectives because they are interested about their world. They also know that they can question the answers to their questions.

Being a critical user or consumer of information is key – to analyse, then seek alternative decisions or ideate through inspiration or questioning. John Spencer's work on design thinking for step change is powerful in this context and I really recommend his podcast, *The Creative Classroom*.

## 4: How can focusing on the UN SDGs help teachers and students to cope with uncertainty?

The UN SDGs have always provided an incredible opportunity for every young learner to see how leaders struggle to anticipate need and implement responses to global problems. They expose students to ambiguity and complexity – to the big ideas of our current, in the moment, world. Never has this been truer than now when a pandemic has brought the world together and shone a light on our interconnectedness and shared experience.



Global Goal 13 provides the most visceral example of uncertainty – yet prior to COVID-19, school leaders were behind the curve of student advocacy and agency, most powerfully demonstrated by the leadership of Greta Thunberg.

A passion to nurture the progression of young people, academically, emotionally and socially, needs to define our approach to pedagogy and people development.

As we approach the second quarter of the 21st century, it is evident we live in an interdependent, globalised economy and that personal, societal and environmental concerns have morphed radically. The COVID-19 pandemic has enveloped the world and generated a paradigm shift in every sector from employment to education. Policymakers and educators have, for generations, grappled with the daunting challenge of ensuring that they equip young people with skills, attitudes, dispositions and knowledge that will prepare them for a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous future. The crisis exposes local and global inequities, from the dependency on high-speed broadband for online accessibility to the supportive environments needed to nurture learning in the wider context of teacher shortages and competency.

Moving students from a place where they see uncertainty as undesirable or uncomfortable, to a place where they embrace it, has to be the goal.

Being comfortable with uncertainty, and behaviours associated with it, are often related to resiliency – the ability to bounce back, manage anxiety or endure stress. High-level challenges, often evident in the experience of Oxbridge interviews, probes this lack of certainty and prompts innovation and creative thought. Not knowing the path ahead creates the possibility for innovating, hypothesizing, and testing theories and prototyping.

I suggest that we have socialised our students into believing that we must be certain. That not being certain is a bad thing. As a result, students can be unwilling to take a risk and demonstrate their vulnerability – there are interesting associations with anxiety and wellbeing in this space.

We should create the opportunities for a little uncertainty in order to stimulate higher order thinking, analysis and evaluation – and also to embrace the complexity of our world and expose young people to it intellectually and physically. This forces students out of their comfort zones and encourages informed risk-taking through learning by doing, stimulating them to evaluate what they know and what they do not know, and address problems to realise solutions collaboratively.

In reality (the real world of employment, research and voluntary impact), the uncertainty principle is an inextricable element within mathematics, statistics and science. Students that feel confident in the face of uncertainty are better prepared to look at all possibilities before settling on the most appropriate answer or course of action. Students need to be less concerned about being told what to know and be more concerned with understanding why it should be known and how to know it.

Here are seven competencies to reduce knowledge uncertainty, from the seminal work by Rebekah Tauritz, 'Uncertainty: learning and teaching in times of accelerating change':

**How to handle knowledge uncertainty: learning and teaching in times of accelerating change**

1. Being able to find and evaluate information
2. Being able to judge the credibility and cognitive authority of information sources
3. Being able to reason (inductive and deductive reasoning)
4. Being able to respond in accordance with the underlying probabilities
5. Being able to assess one's own ability to achieve a desired outcome
6. Being able to engage a supportive network
7. Being able to formulate a plan of action to deal with uncertainty

Rebekah L. Tauritz, 'Uncertainty: learning and teaching in times of accelerating change',  
*Learning for Sustainability in Times of Accelerating Change*,  
 (Wageningen Academic Publishers, Wageningen, The Netherlands) p.306

*Uncertainty and mystery are energies of life. Don't let them scare you unduly, for they keep boredom at bay and spark creativity.*

R. I. Fitzhenry

**5: Which skills do you think are essential for employability and lifelong learning, especially in relation to the 2030 labour market?**

We live, work and play in a complex and challenging world. With developments in artificial intelligence, robotics and instant access to information, the education paradigm needs to evolve. It can develop from a system for children passing tests to embrace neuro-divergence and multi-intelligence to cultivate whole human beings capable of harmonious living, empathy and creativity. Emotional and spiritual intelligence is key for this new age of collaborative living based on shared common virtues. Compassion, patience, tolerance, humility and sharing provide the qualities for personal growth; being safe, trustworthy, joyful, respectful and responsible represent the values for harmonious living. These are my values within pedagogy, leadership and living to build bridges for deep understanding, nurturing lifeworthy competencies and the confidence, through advocacy and action, to create social impact.

The 2019 WEF report, [The Future of Jobs](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf), emphasises the importance of helping children to become the next generation of global problem solvers 'who innovate as technologists, think as entrepreneurs, and act as social change agents'. ([www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Future\\_of\\_Jobs\\_2020.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf))



Our interconnected and interdependent world requires that we equip students with risk tolerance, drive, agility and open-mindedness, placing mastery of academic disciplines in a wider context of deep understanding in areas such as micro-finance, impact investing and digital augmentation. Education that is fit for purpose needs to provide accessible opportunities for all learners to realise their talent, think creatively and build learning power through compassion, collaboration, engagement and empathy, to grasp complexity and innovate to address issues of inequality, sustainability and development.

I believe that education must encompass both the tangible and intangible measures for enriching life-long learning. Joy-based education recognises that the brain is neuroplastic and by opening the amygdala accelerates retention and recall, linked with good hydration, nutrition, exercise, meditation and sleep for creative thought and agency. Promoting competence and confidence within a wellbeing community, in school and beyond, will foster opportunities for creative expression and harmony by always putting the student at the centre of leadership and learning. A passion of nurturing the progression of young people, academically, emotionally and socially, defines my approach to leadership and pedagogy. Cultivating a climate for the wellbeing of all learners will create an innovative and progressive environment to enthuse, engage and empower learners at all levels.

**Ian Smith, December 2020**

## Find out more

*Ian's most recent published work is IMPACT: In the Moment, Purposeful, Action – a transdisciplinary challenge for 16–18-year-old students that encourages learning in the moment and design thinking against the backdrop of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19.*

**FIND OUT MORE**

