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# Natural Born Learners

A conversation between  
Lene Jensby Lange, Autens, and  
Diarmaid Lawlor, A&DS

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**Lene Jensby Lange, founder of Autens - a leading Danish consultancy dedicated to re-imagining education and creating schools of the future.**

**Lene will deliver the keynote on Day One of the Education Buildings Scotland Conference on 27 November 2019 at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre.**

**In advance of her talk Lene spoke with Diarmaid Lawlor, A&DS Director of Place. This is an edited transcript of their discussion.**

## Learners Leading

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *When we spoke before, one of the key things I got out of it was about learners leading, you know, about giving learners both the opportunity and the tools to lead. We use that phrase a lot "learners leading" and sometimes people say it, but actually we don't invest it with the opportunities. What's your experience of that phrase and how it works?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** I'm always thinking about it, too! I think there's a lot of versions of that and there's a lot of things you can be leading as a learner. And we typically always have the teachers still leading – as overall responsible – but then we distribute the leadership and it can be of many different things. When we talk about spaces – to me one of the most important things is that children have choice. Basically, that people have choice – it doesn't have to be a lot of choice, but that you are able to do something about your work situation, to really help yourself get into the good work mode. It can also be about well-being.

Actually, in many schools, kids only have one choice which means they don't have a choice at all. In my opinion it sometimes leads to unnecessary conflicts over things that didn't need to be a problem but it will be a problem if we don't allow people to have just that little space where they can make good decisions around themselves and what they're doing.

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *Yeah. It's a complex thing, isn't it? Different people would like **some** spaces, but not like the other spaces. So how have you found trying to create environments that afford these choices? What do you do? How do you go about creating these environments?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** If these environments are school environments, we talk both with teachers and with students, and we also play together and we try to enact some situations and we really look at the whole purpose of why we are there. Which is about helping young people grow their minds, grow as a person and grow their lives and nurture

whatever it is that they are going to do.

It's always very complex, which means that when you open the door to a school, you would need a lot of different activities there. You would need a lot of interaction and collaboration, but you'd also need the opposite: time to reflect, to study and sort of make sense of what you've experienced.

I think talking about what it is, what is meaningful, and why we're there and looking at it and how that plays out in terms of what is going on in a space, leads to a good discussion. It naturally leads to a space that's much more varied with much more choice and opportunities for both children and teachers.

I just had a workshop with some teachers the other day and one of them literally said he was in a classroom where he has desks in a row and he feels like he's been taken hostage by the room - by the furniture, by the blackboard, the whiteboard, smart board or whatever it is that he has. He's not able to be a creative teacher. He's not able to really listen to the students and find out where they are, and how he can scaffold the learning around that and help them in the best way possible because the room has taken him hostage. It really affects how he can work and how the students are able to learn in that space.

## Teaching Techniques

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *That's interesting on the scaffolding and the teaching techniques. This teacher is interested in the individual, interested in the person. Fundamentally he's talking about relationships and about the way that each relationship would be different, and the learning experience would be different. But he needs the environment to help him get to the key thing, which is the relationship.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** As a first step he needs the environment not to *prevent* him from doing it. He's able to send the students out to some breakout spaces outside the classroom. So that's where they go to work. But still, you

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Lene Jensby Lange

could make so much more sense of things if we designed spaces as more "brain friendly" environments.

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *In our experience we find that teachers are focused on learning and teaching methodologies, sometimes focused on the results, maybe focused on inspections. You know, there's a lot of pressure on teachers and space is probably not one of those focus areas. Either that they don't understand it, or they don't understand how it can help them. Have you had that experience? How do you make space available as a resource? You know, the idea of space. How do teachers start to get bolder and more creative and more demanding and using the space as a resource?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** I think it varies from country to country. I suppose a lot of teachers here [Denmark] never really thought about the classroom being a didactic toolbox for them. If you look at the U.K., actually, as I understand it, inspectors also look at how you design your classroom - at least in primary school. So, I guess there is a general understanding of the importance of space and what you can do within a space.

Then you move to secondary and I don't know what's going on there... I think some teachers have a good feeling of how classroom spaces, or indeed the set-up of a space, can help what they're trying to do. And to others, it's a new world.

This is not rocket science. It's something every teacher should just try out. Experiment and make it a conversation with the kids so that they can navigate the space. They can redesign the space just in micro ways to really help suit the students that are there and the purpose that it needs to serve.

## Eco Systems of Learning

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *I was really interested in your work as a HUNDRED ambassador, the kind of doll's house approach and making the idea of space easy and accessible. I was really, really struck by what you said, that every time you've used this in schools with teachers, at the end of it, nobody has wanted to be in "the hostage space". And it's really interested in how does that work? What what's the magic that goes on? What do you do?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** I have to go back to why we designed this and why did we develop that kit and the whole thinking behind it. We have been part of a lot of school building projects, school design projects and also learning space design.

To me, it always has to start with pedagogy and with how we learn and what it is that we need to learn today. Building community, well-being, relationships and all of that. The spaces have to become an answer to that and to help support the approaches that you find meaningful and important.

However, we could have all these discussions with teachers, and they would have brilliant ideas, and their vision of learning was super and you'd really like what they would try to do. But then when it came to looking at spaces they would all just turn back to the classrooms, and the same desks for everybody. Maybe they would add a couch in the corner and a little more - such as more whiteboard space or spaces to exhibit things. But that was it.

So that was basically not disrupting the whole sort of traditional way of teaching and learning. It was completely not aligned with the thoughts and discussions we'd just had. So we were really thinking a lot about what we could do to hack that process and make them sort of cross the bridge to what they truly believed in and then actually **do** that - creating spaces that reflected that. Spaces that would invite students and teachers to work in different ways.

So, we created the learning space design lab that has then since been selected by HUNDRED as one of the top 100 global innovations in education. We use this all the time. The whole idea is to work hands-on, collaboratively, to experiment and prototype. It is playful; so all of the ingredients that we know are really brain friendly when it comes to learning, we apply them with teachers, and with students, to explore how their future spaces might look.

We use it both for designing schools and for learning space design – both when its very big projects with a big budget and also when people have no money at all to just reimagine what their school might look like going forward.

We've worked with thousands of teachers now. Since we started working with this tool, we've not had a single teacher asking for a traditional classroom. What we also see is that they become more collaborative and then sort of leave their classrooms and the 'private teacher'. They're thinking more about being a team, a professional learning community really, around a larger group of kids, to be able really to be more flexible with the way they organise learning in terms of what different kids need or different projects or hands-on things that they are doing. So it becomes a learning community that, in my opinion, is much more alive and much more varied and more complex and allows for a lot of different opportunities for both adults and kids.

## Peer to Peer Learning

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *And so that the teacher is a learner in that community as well. They are learning from each other and learning from the students then and, presumably, peer to peer learning.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** And you're creating another kind of ecosystem around learning. School buildings are... well it's an architectural infrastructure for an organisation and for how it works. So you really have to think about what kind of infrastructure you need for learning to take place today – and in my opinion; it's not classrooms. The same 25 students and the same teacher all the time... I think we need to

## *You don't need a teacher to decide everything here because a student can lead part of their learning or lead themselves in the learning situation.*

design new organisational models to really obtain what we are aiming for.

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *It feels quite ecological the way you describe it. It feels like a habitat with nooks and connected systems. So, it's describable. I guess, within that habitat one of the issues emerging here, and presumably for yourselves as well, is that we all have different needs and those needs change.*

*For some learners, maybe confidence is an issue. Maybe there's things going on at home, maybe you have learning disabilities, maybe being around a crowd is difficult...*

*Sometimes when we create a special space for them, it's an isolating experience. "You go over to that space" when the ambition is to be more integrated. But in this ecological world that we're describing - how do we support every learner to be the best that they can be, even in the moments when they really need support and privacy? I would like to hear your experience of how that's been playing out in these communities?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** I can share an example with you; we worked with this little school that really didn't have any money to change anything, but they desperately needed to change things. So, they had a new idea and a new philosophy of learning going forward and were very keen to transform in many ways.

But it was a school full of classrooms, all full of furniture and no floor space. Furniture was the same, all over the place. And they really didn't see how they could change, but they could see a lot of kids that needed something different.

It was actually where we pioneered the first design lab prototype - and we could see the effect it had and that's why we kept on developing it and we use it all the time now.

What they ended up doing was they took out a lot of the furniture and then they put in extra pieces, but they had created a lot more floor space. They created a varied landscape of learning where students are able to go to the

space that support them in whatever it is that they're doing. They have a place where they get everybody together at the start of the day and talk about what's going on and how people are feeling. Everything you need to sort of just settle in and be ready for learning.

Then they start the learning day. They go out to different stations. Sometimes they choose themselves. Sometimes they have fixed seating, but every student can always negotiate with the teachers. They find a good model that works for each student.

### **Pupil's Choice**

I remember one of students explaining to me that before the change she was always sitting next to the same person when they were collaborating, doing group work, projects - it was always the same person. And whenever she got up she was disturbing everybody. She was a student who struggled a bit in life with Asperger's and ADHD. It was so difficult for her to be stuck in that situation where she didn't feel she could do anything about it. When she started to do something it was disturbing everybody and was sort of a bad cycle.

In the new environment she can get up when she needs to get out of a situation. She can take a break from it and go back. She can sort of select and choose herself and find something that works for her. She's able to really thrive in that school and focus on learning. It doesn't mean that she doesn't have those challenges in her life but it's a very inclusive environment that can cater to many different needs, different students.

You don't need a teacher to decide everything here because a student can lead part of their learning or lead themselves in the learning situation. So at this school she had that choice. When she, and also other students with similar challenges, when they move on to the next school, which is a pretty traditional secondary school we can see some of them end up in special needs school instead of being able to be where all the other kids are.

# *When you trust people, they pay you back with trust. So that's why we're trying to create environments that really build on trust.*

Lene Jensby Lange

## Transitions

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *It's interesting what you say about transitions. The young person's experience needs to be lifelong, you know? Sometimes we think of a school project as an individual building, but the student moves through buildings. And I wonder, have you had any experience of seeing if you've changed a primary school should we be simultaneously trying to work on the secondary school? You know, as you do in in this ecological model, you're talking about that seems an interesting problem.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** In my opinion the biggest experiment in education today is schools that are not changing. I sometimes hear the argument that if secondary school looks like this (traditional) we should try to model that because how else would students know how to work and learn in secondary school? But I have had many students tell me quite the opposite: they look you straight in the eye and tell you that if you don't teach them how to lead their own learning, how to be innovative and work in creative ways and collaborate, they are not gonna get it at the next level and where does that leave them then?

The concern that the next level might not be the same - I don't think that is something that should stop you. I think it always helps the student better if we create a learning situation that is much more consistent with how our brains are wired and what our societies look like today. We do have schools and further education and places where students are stuck in very traditional systems. But we should not stop changing other systems because of that.

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *With the Learning Lab model there are techniques that allow us to seed the possibility of new ways of doing things. There's something very scalable about your lab model. And you've emphasised that the school that started didn't have a lot of money. So, we could see relationships and systems scaling.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** The workshop is kind of helping organisations cross a bridge and doing it collaboratively.

So, it can't just be two or three teachers that have an idea of what they might change, and when others use that classroom, it doesn't make sense - it will just go back to the way it was before. It needs to be a collaborative effort. It needs to be a whole school strategy to really work. The design lab is sort of a door that can open for possibilities and you see 'hey, we could be able to do this'.

Because we work in ways where we really tap into our resources in our minds and our intuition we see teachers dream of what a school could be manifesting itself in a different way. A way where they can see themselves in it because they've worked with it, they've had their hands in that whole setting and understand it from within. It doesn't mean that it's an easy transition afterwards, but they can begin to play with this. They can begin to open that path and redesign things as they go.

## Seeing the Person

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *It's interesting. There's something about really seeing the person and then supporting the person in a community where it's understood that that we welcome you as "you". If you develop that, then as a citizenship idea as you start to develop - people moving through this community of learning have learned the tools of collaboration and empathy. It's an exciting way to think about a future society.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** Yes, schools are creating our future creative communities, or they are part of our communities and it's creating the future of who we are.

We really need to think about what it is that we are developing here. What we are trying to develop; compassion, citizenship and generosity towards each other, empathy, all of that because it's part of being in a society and taking things forward.

And there's also that thing when you look at how the brain works. If we do not create environments that feel safe and welcoming, we do not have access to our neocortex which is where we really learn and put things together.

If students are too much in the 'reptilian brain' - which is the case with the student I've described before where she often found herself in a situation where she could not escape from it really in any positive way. She had no access to that part of the brain where learning takes place and where she can grow as a person. You want to create quite happy environments, helping you create this feeling or that atmosphere of everybody being welcome.

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *That's interesting. To enable people to feel more empowered, we need to create the environments where somebody feels safe to be able to be themselves and safe to make decisions. That access to neocortex and the other parts of the brain. That's interesting, because I think that we've not really always talked about the conditions for everyone to be the best that they can be. You're linking it to the brain is fascinating.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** And it's about being able to feel okay as who you are, and giving you enough empowerment to actually be yourself in a positive way.

That doesn't always happen if the opportunities are too narrow and everything is decided for you.

If we look at adults it's actually one of the big factors behind stress related leave when you feel you don't have any influence over your work life for instance. You're not able to do anything about your situation.

And we have students in that situation every day who just have to deal with this - and that's where they are. They're not able to quit their jobs as we are as adults. They are sort of stuck in that system. So, I think we really owe it to them to be respectful of who they are as a person. And they, of course, also need to be respectful in the system.

## **Building on Trust**

When you trust people, they pay you back with trust. So that's why we're trying to create environments that really build on trust. On the ability to be yourself in the system.

And also that you're able to impact the spaces in different ways, that you're able to sort of put your mark on things. That it can become your space as a class community, or larger learner community, and that you feel at home and you feel welcome.

There is research to support that it is important it is a factor in how much we learn.

## Engagement at the Early Stage

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *Linking up to our earlier chats – it's about the early conversations about changing schools. We need to design in time and methods of listening and engagement rather than rushing to building the thing quickly. So, I was really interested in what that time looks like and the value of that early time and the process to do this, to understand the people. What's been your experience of that early time in the process?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** We do a lot of work around the early stages of such a process. And it's because when you build a school, if you don't think about what it is that you want and really what kind of life are you aiming for for these young people - what is it that you want them to get out of their experience of interacting with all the teachers, the school and each other - if you don't find out, then you might build something that's an answer from the past and not something that responds to what we need going forward.

It's super expensive to build a school. To not spend the small budget in the beginning - which might seem like a lot of money - if you don't get it right from the beginning, you're going to build something from the past and you're going to build something that's not responsive to necessarily how the brain works, how we support well-being and relationships and how we support a lot of things that students need to learn going forward.

### New Solutions

The world works in a different way today than it did 30 years ago. They need to be able to invent their lives. They need to be able to invent their professions. They need to be able to find solutions, or at least try, to a lot of problems or challenges that really has no solution now.

This is both sort of big scale and small-scale stuff. You're not going to get a job if you if you need somebody to tell you exactly how to do it. You need to be able to figure out how to both listen and understand what kind of knowledge you

need for which purpose and how you can apply it and maybe make a difference.

So that's a whole different way of learning and working and a whole different approach to knowledge than we've traditionally had in schools.

Today it's not about just accumulating a lot of knowledge. It's not going to help you as such. You need to know how to apply it and how to really identify the right knowledge you need for certain situations.

I had a long discussion this morning with a scientist who's an expert on creativity – about how you can wire your mind to become a creative person. We talked about how we can support children in becoming creative people that are able to respond quickly, with creativity, to situations that are difficult. You need to be able to try out a lot of stuff. You need to be able to fail. You need to be able to experiment. And you need to be able to connect with a lot of different environments.

So, we're talking about a whole different landscape of learning today. We need to address that from the beginning, in the early phases of building a school. Otherwise, we're just going to build a traditional school, which is not going to help.

### Investing Time

We need to invest time in those discussions, those conversations with teachers, because it's also new mental models that we are developing. And that's not just something you can state and then it's there – you need to allow time for that conversation to take place, to allow for ideas to emerge and to begin to manifest themselves in new ways of working, learning and organizing. And then you can begin to add the architectural infrastructure that helps all of that come to life.

We've seen so many examples of really brilliant, wonderful future thinking school architecture. Then we see people move in – they look around and say 'what were they thinking about? They don't know the first thing about education!'

# *Most people are curious about things that could be better, work better, and every educator I know is so interested in how they can best help young people.*

Lene Jensby Lange

It's not the building that's wrong and it's not the teachers that are wrong. We hear too many architects saying that teachers are not innovative enough but if you don't invite them on the journey of a new conversation of learning that's what happens. The architects are not the ones we should turn to to ask 'what is the future of education?' They need to respond to the education community's ideas of where we need to take it.

It's so important that we get everybody into conversations and then into creative processes where they can ideate, where they can really explore what it might be in the future and then find out what's important to them where they are and in their community. What's of value to them and how do we then create that school? So it's maybe adding a few extra months to the process and then it's adding an extra project really of not just a building project but also a transformation project. The school begins to develop those new practices enabling them to meet the building in a good way so that it can merge together really well. But it does take support to get to that, and to also move into a new building - it's a whole new sort of technology that you have available to you when it is different from what you know.

You need to help the organisation find a way to work well in that new environment.

## **Collaborative Discussions**

***Diarmaid Lawlor** It feels like the way that the conversation happens, early doors, in an open, curious, interesting, collaborative discussion are almost like the Lego blocks of the kind of culture you want to see in the school itself. Your discipline of coming together and working out how to work together is something that we're asking the young people to do. It seems a helpful resonance, you know?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** That's true. Another component is that people don't respond very well to "being changed".

***Diarmaid Lawlor** Yes!*

**Lene Jensby Lange** But most people are curious about things that could be better and work better. Every educator I know is so interested in how they can best help young people. That's why they teach – otherwise they would have chosen something different.

So, it's a conversation that's very close to our hearts. When you trust people and invite them into the conversation, they're going to respond to that trust and also develop something which is good and that they then have ownership of and then they are ready to also take on the task of really making it work.

The whole thing about working from the very first step - really like the first day of these projects - working with ownership, engagement of teachers and young people to make it a conversation for the whole community is so important for the value that comes out of such a building.

***Diarmaid Lawlor** Absolutely.*

**Lene Jensby Lange** We've seen a lot of school buildings where that is not the case. A beautiful, wonderful building but it never really provides the value that it could have done. The potential is never really realised there because of such a big gap between teachers and the architecture. You really need to merge the conversations.

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Lene Jensby Lange

## Natural Born Learners

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *In the way you're describing it it sounds like "the product" is the conversation. It's the community. And then that uses buildings, it uses relationships, it uses different things. So really, we're about making community that needs buildings as opposed to making buildings that the community have to use.*

*The way you talk about it, you come across as one of the most enthusiastic, interested, generous ambassadors for learning that I've come across in a long time. I'm just curious, what's your story? What how did you get into this?*

**Lene Jensby Lange** I've wondered about that myself! It's really important to me. I think it goes back to when I was in school and when I was a child. I had the fortune of really experiencing a lot of freedom myself to do the things that interested me. I did a lot of creative stuff when I was a kid. Nobody ever really stopped me doing what I wanted. So that's one thing. And that requires some free time for kids so that they're not in school all the time! That was really valuable to me.

Another experience is that I found it very easy to go to school and to learn to just sort of comply with that system, but it is a game and it is about compliance really.

I could see that for a lot of my peers it didn't work. I had a lot of friends or people in my class who didn't find it easy to learn. Who didn't find it easy to sit down, to sit still during lessons. It generated conflict and it created all sorts of inequities that were unnecessary. It's just that general unfairness and the whole system is wired to create inequity. And I'm not only talking about social or economic inequity, but in terms of how we learn.

I think for me, it's like - how can we open learning up? Because we are all excellent learners. We are all wonderful, excellent learners because we learned how to walk and talk and those are really complex, complicated things to do. So

how can we tap into the resources of each person? How can we enable them to learn in ways where they can feel confident about who they are and feel that they're a good learner?

I find we have too many young people, way too many young people, leaving school not knowing what they're good at, really not having an idea of what they want to do in life, what they're interested in. Where one of the the biggest, most important things they learned is that they're not good learners, which is a tragedy because they need to learn every single day going forward.

## Everyone's Potential

Learning is wonderful. We are natural born learners where it actually produces endorphins – we love learning! It's a struggle, but it's also very rewarding. When we teach kids in ways where they get a lot of unsuccessful experiences, or experiences that they're not OK, then it's then a tragedy.

It's a tragedy when they do not have an idea of what they are passionate about. Because one thing that's really going to carry them into the future is finding out what they are good at because the job market is changing fast, rapidly and really immensely, so the most important thing we have are things that we're really interested in because there's a chance we'll become really good at those. There is no chance we ever going to get a job at things we are really crappy at! To build our own lives, our future professions and our future lives in general, we need to find things that are meaningful to us and provide joy and that we want to invest our time in.

**Diarmaid Lawlor** *Everybody has potential. But it's about creating the invitation to everybody and the opportunity for everybody and that leadership behind that decision to support everybody. It's a difficult thing to do. I'm really struck by how human and how focused on the person this discussion is and not the infrastructure that enables things. It's about the humans. I think that last point about the tragedy of not investing young people with confidence and being themselves - I couldn't agree more!*

## **Education Buildings Scotland 27 - 28 November 2019**

Scotland's Learning Estate event brings education built environment and policy professionals together from early years, schools, colleges and universities for two days under one roof. It is an opportunity for everyone involved in education to come together with those directly involved in creating great buildings to discuss how the built environment can support the best possible educational outcomes for our children, young people and wider communities.

<https://www.educationbuildings.scot>

The logo consists of the letters 'A & DS' in a white, sans-serif font, arranged in two lines. The top line contains 'A &' and the bottom line contains 'DS'. The text is centered within a dark grey square background.

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