

Fallibroome High School Is “Outstandingly Effective”

An Interview with Peter Rubery and Gavin Clowes by Miguel Kagan



Interviewees

Rubery – Peter Rubery, Headmaster, Fallibroome High School

Clowes – Gavin Clowes, Director, T2TUK; Certified International Kagan Trainer

Interviewer

Kagan – Miguel Kagan, Editor



Kagan: Peter, you run a very special school in the UK, can you tell us a little about it?

Rubery: Fallibroome High School is a high-achieving, mixed comprehensive school, with a distinguished Sixth Form, serving the Macclesfield area in England. We are a Specialist Performing Arts College under the Government's Specialist Schools programme and also a Leading Edge and Training School. We are proud of our history of success and of the national recognition we have received. Fallibroome is well known as “a place for excellence” and our academic, sporting, artistic and community achievements place us in the top ranking of schools in England and Wales. □



Kagan: High schools in the U.S. don't have a "Sixth Form," can you give us a brief description of what this is?

Rubery: The Sixth Form in the English education system is the final optional two years of secondary schooling, years 12 & 13, when students are about sixteen to nineteen years of age. A focus of the Sixth Form is to prepare students for their A Level examinations, these exams are the means by which a student would gain entrance to a university degree course similar to your SAT exams.

Kagan: Tells us a little bit about your status as a "Training School" and the benefits.

Rubery: Training school status brings additional funding which we use to invest in providing high quality professional development opportunities for all our staff and the wider educational community. It helps us maintain our focus on teaching and learning so that we remain at the forefront of the latest developments aimed at raising standards. Our work is enhanced by productive partnerships locally, nationally and internationally. Kagan Cooperative Learning is one our big thrusts for instructional improvements. We have sent teams of teachers to the United States to attend Kagan Summer Academy trainings.



The Fallibroome staff pictured with Dr. Spencer Kagan and Laurie Kagan at Kagan's Summer Academy in Orlando, FL.

Kagan: Gavin, you have been involved with Fallibroome's local efforts to promote Kagan Cooperative Learning. What can you tell us about your work?

Clowes: Over many years now I have had the pleasure to work with Peter and his colleagues at Fallibroome. It is my spiritual home. During that time I have worked with different groups of teaching assistants, teachers, and senior managers. Indeed this weekend I am starting a six-session series called Introduction to Cooperative Learning as an induction course for staff new to the school. I will continue to train this group periodically through the next year.

Kagan: What is the focus of your work with new teachers and teaching assistants?

Clowes: Basically, I am introducing new teachers to the rationale and basic principles of cooperative learning. More than anything, I would like our beginning teachers to experience and learn a range of Kagan Structures that they will be able to take back to their classrooms. We want to enrich their repertoire of cooperative learning teaching strategies so they can generate higher levels of student involvement and accountability.

Kagan: That's terrific. So often after learning Kagan Structures for the first time, veteran teachers tell us they wish they had these instructional strategies when they first started teaching. And that's exactly what you're doing. Getting your teachers off to a good start. What are you doing to support returning teachers?

Rubery: We run our own in-house training, led by four experienced teachers. We have three sessions that run twice in the year. We call the series, the "Cooperative Learning Refresher." The trainers provide a refresher on cooperative learning principles to reinforce what teachers have already learned as well as offer some new structures and ideas. Gavin also does Kagan Coaching with our teachers.

Clowes: Yes, I have adopted and applied Kagan’s coaching model successfully with schools in the UK. The coaching component is quite helpful to ensure proper implementation of the structures in the classroom. Learning a structure in a professional development setting is one thing. Using it correctly in the class is another. The smallest details can make a big difference. With the Kagan Coaching model, we unobtrusively give teachers feedback while they are teaching. Students are so engaged in their teamwork that the coach can work with the teacher to provide correction in the moment. The teacher immediately makes the correction and practices the structure the right way. Teachers love it. It’s an all-around winning situation.

Kagan: I agree, we have seen the powerful difference in-the-moment Kagan Coaching is making. We are making coaching a bigger emphasis in our professional development plans. Ongoing coaching is very helpful to ensure teacher quality.

Peter, a number of years ago you shared with Kagan the impressive results of your OFSTED survey. Can you share what OFSTED is?



Rubery: OFSTED stands for Office for Standards in Education. In the UK, for accountability and improvement, schools are inspected by an independent and impartial inspector. They write a report that summarizes their findings; the findings are made publicly available.

Kagan: The inspector made a number of glowing comments about your use of cooperative learning.

The first is a flattering comment for you as an instructional leader:

“The school has a total commitment to raising standards through a clear strategy and approach to teaching and learning based on an American strategy for ‘co-operative learning’. The driving force for this comes from the headteacher who has shared the vision effectively. All staff are totally convinced in favour of the strategy.”

Clearly, you have done a terrific job of sharing your vision for the school and bringing your staff on board.

Clowes: Peter’s fabulous leadership is a major factor in the school’s success with cooperative learning, as well other school initiatives.



Rubery: Thank you. I have a terrific staff.

Kagan: The inspector reported on the achievement of different groups of learners and honed in on what I take as the number one benefit of cooperative learning— instructional strategies that successfully reach all groups of learners. From the inspector’s letter:

“The co-operative learning model is effectively supporting learners not only in groups but as individuals. Individual learning needs are being met appropriately through this agreed approach. This has meant that the school does not have any specific group or category of pupils who could be identified as underachieving.”

Rubery: Yes, our school admits a full range of ability. Students of all levels of attainment, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make excellent progress.



Kagan: The inspector emphasized your use of numerous positive instructional practices. I quote:

“The co-operative learning model is developing and encouraging many aspects of outstanding teaching and learning and there was clear evidence that the theory was working in practice. Some outstanding features include the pace of the lessons, the team work and co-operation between pupils, the use of various teaching/learning techniques, and pupil’s attitude to work.”

Rubery: The report was quite flattering on a number of accounts. The inspector rated the lessons observed from “good to outstanding.”

Kagan: Observations from “Her Majesty’s Inspector of Schools” (I love that title) are unequivocally positive. But that’s observational data. What about hard data — test scores.

Rubery: Our recent exam results outshine the observations. Fallibroome’s 2008 A Level students have smashed the school’s records. When the results came in, there were scenes of joy as students and teachers celebrated their success and reflected on results that ranked the school as one of the best in the country.

Kagan: Gavin, do I recall you telling me Fallibroome even outperformed one of England’s top-rated schools?

Clowes: Indeed, this year in the national exams they gained better A/B grades in the national ‘A Levels’ than the selective ‘Grammar School’ in the same town. Most Grammar schools are fee paying schools who select their students via an entrance exam; students are accepted based on ability. Compared to state schools Grammar schools have vast resources and smaller classes. This Grammar school has been established on the same site since the 1500’s, it had never been ‘beaten’ in the exam table ever until this year.

Kagan: Gavin, I saw that your son contributed to those high scores — he was one of 33 students who achieved nine or more A grades on the test. That’s a terrific feat. Not to mention that your daughter was on the UK’s Olympic gymnastics team in Beijing.

Clowes: Thanks for the compliment. I have three great children. All three of them have attended Fallibroome High; they are each so different with such different needs. As a mark of a great school, Fallibroome did a great job by all three of them.

Kagan: Congratulations to you two gentlemen for your accomplishments. You have much to be proud about!

Clowes: Thank you. It is a privilege to be able to work with such a motivated school and to be able to share in their phenomenal success. Kagan structures have literally changed my life. From the enormous difference it made to me and to my students as a class teacher; to my current role as a Kagan International Trainer bringing those same opportunities to a much wider group of students and schools. When I think of Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures a phrase that has always stuck in my mind is: ‘low energy - high leverage’. Kagan Structures are very very simple to learn and to implement (they take very little *energy* if you will) yet they produce such fabulous gains across a wide range of social and academic outcomes (high leverage).

Rubery: School improvement is at once a complex and simple business. At its heart is the quality of our students' learning experience, every hour of every day. We are convinced that the key to success is investment in high quality professional development for teachers. Our focus on the Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures has been fundamental in giving teachers the means to become more effective. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Spencer and his team for providing such inspiration to my staff.

For Kagan Coaching and Professional Development in the UK, please contact Gavin Clowes directly.

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