

# Learning about learning



Helping students to understand how their own learning works can unlock greater motivation and amazing results, says **Chris Watkins** in the latest part of his series on leading learning in classrooms

In the introductory article to this series I suggested that you sit down with your colleagues and identify their best experiences of learning in classrooms, to see what themes emerge. And in the three articles that followed, I've addressed active learning, collaborative learning, and learner-driven learning (for more detailed treatment see Watkins, C; Carnell, E; Lodge, C (2007), *Effective Learning*

in Classrooms, Sage). On occasions when I invite people in a range of contexts – 200 PGCE students, whole staff days, headteacher conferences and so on – to analyse their best experiences of learning in classrooms and then indicate the extent to which those examples were characterised by active, collaborative and learner-driven dimensions, 90 per cent of participants typically indicate a high degree of

fit. This affirms for me that our profession has most of the important knowledge about classroom learning in their lived experience, but that it is often submerged by other discourses which emphasise teaching rather than learning.

On those same occasions, I briefly describe this fourth heading, *learning about learning*, as an explicit focus on learning, promoting talk about learning and so on. And typically up to 30 per cent of participants indicate some degree of fit with their best experiences. Which I have come to regard as a good result. After all, the ideas on which it is based became explicit only 30 years ago, and since then the pressures applied to classrooms are likely to make them revert to the model we have had for 5,000 years: teacher-driven, routinised and shallow. So there has been some movement, even against the grain!

The idea that learners should gain a greater understanding of learning from their experience of school is not controversial: it is often voiced, and has been for decades. But the means to achieve this goal have not been so widely realised, let alone embedded in many classrooms across the system. Part of the problem in developing learning-centred classrooms is that many of the embedded norms of schooling lead us to approach it in a teacher-centred way: "Let's teach them more about their learning", "Let's tell them how to be better learners". The contradictions inside these statements can take a while to spot. Researchers in this field have showed 25 years ago that 'teaching learning skills' has little effect, mainly because learners may come to 'have' the skills, but not use them.

So they then tried to teach some more of the rationale for skills. This begins to increase the extent to which people use them, especially transferring them to new situations. But again the use fades, and application is not flexible. Gradually researchers realised that this was "a problem of [learners'] understanding: they had little insight into their own ability to learn intentionally: they lacked reflection. Children do not use a whole variety of learning strategies because they do not know much about the art of learning. .... Furthermore, they know little about monitoring their own activities; that is, they do not think to plan, orchestrate, oversee, or revise their own learning efforts."<sup>1</sup>

A later review of research reaffirmed that the direct teaching of 'study skills' to students without attention to reflective, metacognitive development may well be pointless.<sup>2</sup> So the most effective combination is to help students focus on strategies at the same time as they think about and monitor their learning. This will help us to move beyond what my friend Guy Claxton calls "learning to learn lite: stand-alone courses, hints and tips, learning styles, neurobabble".

### Language for learning?

The key to real change comes from recognising that classroom and school talk is rarely about learning. We need to find ways to talk more about learning – theirs, ours, everybody's – and in so doing change the culture.

At this point, people often say we need an agreed language for learning. To some extent this is true, but some versions of what gets created are counter-productive. The language of 'learning styles', despite its weak theoretical foundations, dubious measurement and overblown claims<sup>3</sup> can turn into a language of learn-er styles, which then repeats the school tendency towards categorising learners, and no improvement in pedagogy occurs. The language of 'learning power' can bring a focus to learning in the classroom but in some hands seems to imply that by telling learners they have dispositions, these dispositions develop further. The trap in both these examples can be traced to the importation of someone else's specialist language for learning.

An alternative approach to the language issue derives from remembering that:

- Learning is the human process of creating meaning from experience.
- Simply having an experience is not enough for someone to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten or its learning potential lost.
- Human beings relate their experiences to each other through the medium of stories. As we tell the story of an experience we can "rise above" it and create meaning.



The same is true of our experience of learning: we can learn more about learning by telling each other stories of learning experiences, and in the process rising above to develop a richer understanding of learning.

My review of the research in this field<sup>4</sup> examined the classroom practices, and ordered them like this:

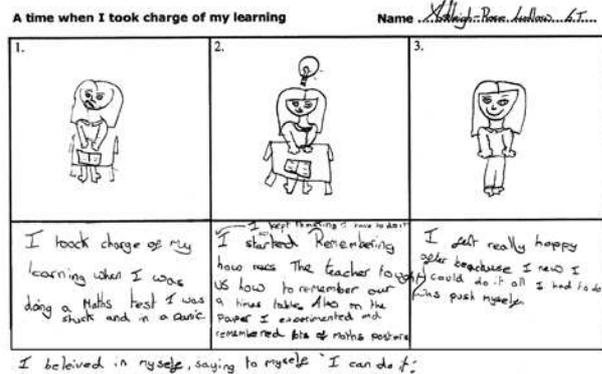
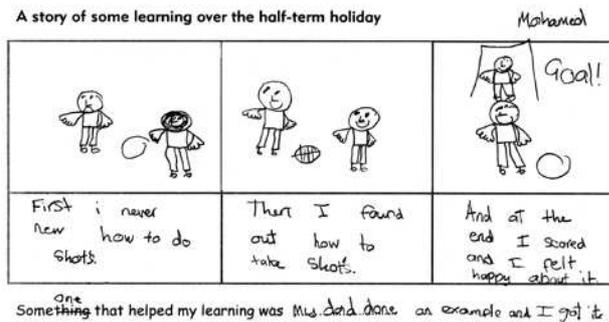
- making learning an object of attention - Noticing learning
- making learning an object of conversation - Talking about learning
- making learning an object of reflection - Reviewing experiences of learning
- making learning an object of learning - Experimenting with learning

All of these can be promoted in a story form of language.

### Classroom practices

Talking about experiences of learning may need some support at first, but the more it occurs, the more we are able to notice aspects of our experience. Early starts, including with nursery classes, utilise supports such as photographs to help learners remember and retell their classroom experience.

Figure 1: Children's storyboards telling the story of their learning



Later, the idea of a 'storyboard' is effective in helping learners to narrate more of a particular experience of learning. This device simply invites them to write and draw the beginning, middle and end of a story of learning (see the examples from Mohamed and Ashleigh in figure 1). With these activities learners regularly display great engagement together with an increased willingness to write. As Lizzie (a Year 3 teacher) put it: "It was great to see certain children (a reluctant writer and a little boy with severe emotional, social and behavioural difficulties) joining in enthusiastically and completing the task with pride."

From early years, children show considerable fluency with such devices as speech bubbles and think bubbles, and great interest in exchanging and reading more of each others' learning stories. Hermione (a Year 4 teacher) says: "The idea of collecting the stories into a book was brilliant and it has been a very popular book in our book corner, with lots of children choosing to read each other's stories."

The themes that provide a focus for storyboards of learning are most effective when they create a positive experience. And a prompt such as the incomplete sentence

can help learners identify their contribution to the positive story. Figure 2 shows some examples which have been used recently with Years 2 to 6.

Figure 2: Some storyboard themes

**My special learning**

Some learning I'm proud of  
 I can help myself be proud of my learning by .....  
 My most impressive learning  
 I can help myself create impressive learning by .....  
 A time when I learned really well with others  
 I can help myself learn well with others by .....  
 A time when I took charge of my learning  
 I can help myself take charge of my learning by .....  
 A time when I persevered with my learning  
 I can help myself continue with my learning by .....  
 A time when I helped someone else with their learning  
 I can help someone else with their learning by .....

Later young people become able to compare experiences over significant timescales, and in the process tell us about how their view of learning has changed (see figure 3, showing Charlie's drawing of her learning at the beginning and end of Year 5). Some schools have started to use such methods to incorporate pupils' voice into the process for reporting to parents, so that the focus of that process is more likely to focus on the learner and learning.

As this form of talk develops, so the culture of the classroom starts to change, and young people literally talk themselves into being learners – a step on from the normally available classroom identities of compliers, workers or performers. Numbers of different themes emerge from the stories, each of which can be a focus for development and revisiting. The environment of the classroom starts to reflect the changing culture, and the messages on the walls are more often about learning and more often in the pupils' voices. If groups of pupils are addressing similar themes in learning, their combined wisdom is a great source for classroom posters. Here is a draft on the theme of 'How to take charge of our learning' from a Year 5 group in Strand-on-the-Green school:

1. Don't give up
2. Keep practising
3. Say to yourself "you can do it"
4. Keep believing
5. Try very hard
6. Think about how to solve the problem
7. Close your eyes and concentrate
8. Write your ideas down
9. Make a time when you can practise it
10. Decide for yourself what to do

The fact that each of these points was derived from the lived experience of the group members means that they are much more than generalised well-meaning advice. They are part of bringing learning processes and experiences of all the children into the open, rather than have them hidden and unvoiced behind a wall of teaching, or smothered by adults' advice and exhortations. With activities such as those above, everyday classroom sessions can develop a rich focus on both process and product (rather than the current domination with only product). After all, there is no product without a process. And "if you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you're doing."<sup>5</sup>

In this way, learners develop:

- greater independence from teachers
- capacity to learn from a greater number of sources
- greater sense of themselves in control of their learning
- extra ways of overcoming difficulties
- a changed conception of learning, as active, collaborative and learner-driven, more of a journey which focuses on meaning and understanding, rather than on techniques, in which developing ideas through dialogue becomes emphasised and learning is seen as a function of groups and communities, connected beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

## Developing more

The 'Learning How to Learn' research project identified just one condition in the school which was key for classroom practice to develop: inquiry. So we need to do everything possible to support teachers inquiring into how they can develop more of a focus on lived experiences of learning, not merely importing packages. This requires us to foster exploration, and remove a climate of fear and compliance. In education, the biggest risk is not to take one. We also need to ensure that our systems of reward in school actually reward learning and learners among the staff. For some schools this brings on a review of how 'performance management' is handled, and the need to reclaim it for learning.

The need is to treat teachers as learners, and that in turn requires managers to treat themselves and present themselves as learners. So we'll need to talk about our own learning, and in that sense become a model ourselves, not necessarily an expert. Practices can include starting off all meetings with a round of recent learnings.

As classroom practice develops, we can also develop methods for monitoring the ways in which those environments carry messages which are supportive to learning. That's a focus for the school and corridors too. Just try looking at the key messages displayed in your school's corridors – is that learning? Or is it teaching, results and work?

As we pay more attention to the language in our schools and its effects, we also affect the stories that are told. This is how the culture of an organisation changes, so that

managing the development of a learning culture is about changing the stories that are told, so that we come to hear stories of learning.

As we build a commitment to learning in a school it can be instructive to review many of the methods of management: policies, mission statement, school motto etc. Do they have learning as their central element?

There will be the usual voices raised against change. Here is a sample with very brief responses:

"We've never done it before, so why start now?" Because the world has changed.

"Our current practice works well enough." Only for some, and it could be better.

"It's a luxury" (meaning something we can't afford). It's at the core, and we can't afford not to.

"It'll end in tears – behaviour will get worse." Actually it gets better.

"We need quick results." Results come in their own time.

"It sounds like more work/more time." It is more time – on what matters.

"Ofsted wouldn't like it." Have you checked that?

"The pupils wouldn't like it." Try it and see!

"I don't know much about learning." Fair point, but you can learn, alongside your pupils.

To conclude, experience suggests that when classrooms become more learning-centred, they become less stressful, while behaviour and engagement improve, and performance and satisfaction follow. It is as though we have at last met the challenge set nearly 400 years ago: "Let the beginning and the end of our didactics be: seek and find the methods where the teacher teaches less but they who sit in the desks, learn more. Let schools have less rush, less antipathy and less vain effort, but more well-being, convenience and permanent gain."<sup>6</sup>

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