



MORE BRIGHT SPARKS

contents

INTRODUCTION

RESILIENCE

RESPONSIBILITY

RESOURCEFULNESS

REASONING

REFLECTION

REFERENCES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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an introduction

The posters in this book are designed for use with young learners. You may choose to use them in a school classroom or corridor, in the reception area or in your own home. The posters are carefully chosen and organized to convey different sorts of learning messages. There are messages about positive attitude, guidance from role models, provocative questions about thinking and creativity and simple instructions on becoming a good learner.

Can you teach creativity? If so, what would creativity lessons look like? As soon as one puts the words 'teach', 'creativity' and 'lessons' together in the same sentence something begins to feel wrong. Creativity involves breaking patterns of thought, expectation or behaviour. Creativity involves the generation of the new. In order to break patterns one must first of all understand the patterns. Surely, then, we need to lay down some rules and some understanding before we disrupt the creative process.

I suppose I could teach disruption. I've certainly presided over upheaval in my past as a classroom teacher, but none of it was planned and very little creativity was developed as a consequence. Intelligent behaviour involves the early recognition of patterns, the seeking and securing of connections, some of which are near and some of which are far, and it also involves identifying categories.

For young learners, encouraging and nurturing their creativity is more difficult than it sounds. At face value it would appear that imitation, mimicry and play – natural dispositions in the naïve learner and framed by millions of years of evolutionary development – are the very core of learning and of creativity. All we therefore need to do is structure more of it and make it less life threatening. In the natural world the classroom is a dangerous environment: a very high percentage of seal pup deaths occur in play. Provided we take care to make play safe for young learners, then we might expect creativity to be developed as a consequence. This feral approach will disappoint. To push a boundary one must have an understanding of the boundary. It needn't be a shared understanding or the commonly accepted understanding, but it must have a recognized starting point.

Creativity cannot be developed in a vacuum. It is argued that if it can be taught, then it can only be taught within a context. Creativity cannot usefully be timetabled for Thursday afternoon. The challenge

is to saturate everyday learning experiences with creative opportunities. To do so in a generic way is hopelessly idealistic. Some children journey in tiny and predictable footsteps while others leap with random energy. Good learning, like good creativity, occurs with a high level of personal responsibility, opportunities to reflect, to make new meanings and to redirect oneself and one's thinking as a consequence. Young learners need assistance in doing this. In the natural world this assistance is known as a parent. In the world of formal learning we call it a teacher.

The teacher nurtures creativity and independence of learning by making it safe to take risks and by creating the best conditions for experimentation. Not easy with 32 six year olds. Active independence – 32 six year olds doing their own thing as and how they please – is fools' gold, but independence of thought, creative and imaginative thinking, is not. The posters in this book are carefully chosen to encourage individual children to recognize that a set of attributes needs to be developed to become a good learner. We call them the 5 Rs.

The first of the 5 Rs is Resilience. Resilience involves persisting in the face of difficulty and being disposed to do so rather than give up. Learners who are resilient focus on performance rather than outcome. They say things like, 'How do I get better?' and are less likely to make comparisons with other, better, performers. Teachers do a lot to develop resilience by encouraging performance improvement strategies rather than a focus on raw scores. Our Resilience posters are drawn largely from role models who have shown the value of persistence and 'stickability' in their lives. Teacher feedback that praises for specific performance improvements, including marking which gives bullet points for improvement, demonstrates the power of little by little improvements.

The second of the 5 Rs is Responsibility. Formal learning occurs alongside others and the young learner needs to show consideration for the learning needs of others. In some instances this may mean familiarity with some ground rules for learning such as asking good questions, exhibiting good listening, and showing tolerance and consideration. Responsible learners understand that their needs operate within the needs of a larger group which is called 'our class'.

To be resolute and responsible is not enough if you are, at the same time, inflexible. Our next of the 5 Rs is Resourcefulness. To be resourceful is to know, or have an instinct for knowing, what to do next. This may mean knowing what to do when you get stuck. It may mean knowing how to think when you reach a dead end. It may mean knowing the best questions to ask and how to ask them. Resourceful learners are those who have been inspired by your model to be confident in their creative and problem-solving approaches and they are prepared to take risks in their own learning.

To be able to reason means that you will eventually appreciate the complexity of learning and understand that not all questions have answers. Our fourth of the 5 Rs is Reasoning. We encourage this by posing problems and by encouraging different categories of thinking. To be able to reason requires learners to gather evidence, to break down problems, to weigh evidence, to assemble pros and cons, to speculate and hypothesize, and to shift their thinking across different modes. Our posters encourage this by moving from the abstract to the concrete and from the imaginary to the real.

The best learners reflect. It is through reflection that habits are changed. Our fifth of the 5 Rs is Reflection. You will find posters that are less direct, more philosophical, more likely to challenge patterns of thought and test values. Learning occurs when thinking time has been structured in such a way to allow reflection on past behaviours and connect them to a possible new set of behaviours. Good teachers facilitate this; many of our posters will help in this process.

The 5 Rs are described in *The ALPS Approach Resource Book* and owe their origin to work done by Guy Claxton and described in his book *Wise Up*.

What other uses can be found for these posters? Our 5 Rs are like a well rehearsed boy (or girl) band. Each offers a different set of attributes; each could have their own promising career but they work better singing together and in harmony. At a practical level you can dip into them and choose a theme for the week, exhibit the theme in the school parent newsletter, talk it up in assembly time, post it around the school. Use designated spaces on classroom walls for the theme or thought or question of the week. Encourage learners to put responses and thoughts on sticky notes in that same space. Do something similar in corridors. Use the posters as raw material for screen saver messages on computers. Place them as scrolling quotes on your website. Hang them suspended as mobiles above your desk. Encourage children to provide their own, to copy them and place them on the fridge at home, to say why they like them and why they are important. Use the posters as prompts for circle time discussion. Share your own favourites with your class.

I hope you find these posters challenging, intriguing and useful, and that you find creative ways of using them. Remember learning is more fun than fun ...

Alistair Smith, February 2003

‘If you think
you won’t do
well – why
not surprise
yourself?’