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Why 'learning to learn' is important for heads and schools

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

John F. Kennedy

At the opening of the National College for School Leadership in October 2002, Professor Leo Tan, Director of the National Institute of Education in Singapore, closed his presentation with this quotation. It was a moving message, reminding us that the issues leaders face across the boundaries of space and time and that we who work as professional educators are not unique in our concern for learning.


Most of the technology that middle-aged people use routinely at work and home did not exist when they were at school. We cannot imagine the skills and knowledge that today's five year olds will need when they start work. They will learn as they go, just as we have, but because the pressures of change will probably be even greater for them, we need to do a better job of preparing them.

The Campaign for Learning have pulled together research from relevant fields of psychology, cognitive science and technology to enable a group of case study schools to put 'learning to learn' into practice. It is fascinating reading. There is certainly no silver bullet here, but there are plenty of ideas on which schools can draw to enhance the learning potential of their pupils.

From the start, the National College for School Leadership has put learning at the heart of the leadership agenda. That means that leaders must learn continuously and develop their schools as professional learning communities in which the capacity of staff and pupils alike is enhanced through collaborative learning.

This kind of learning agenda requires a different leadership approach. Power and authority need to be distributed so that ideas spring up and are developed in many different ways by many different people. The head's challenge is to bind these individual initiatives and energies together in a unifying vision and to build the trust that empowers teachers to learn alongside their pupils.

Creating a learning to learn school is far more than a teachers' tool-kit. It has the potential to make us all more self-aware as learners and challenges us to broaden and deepen our repertoire of learning strategies. Those who claim to lead learning organizations have a responsibility to model the behaviour they advocate. We have to be seen to give time to our learning, to be prepared to move out of our comfort zone, to value feedback, to be capable of changing our behaviour. Leading learning is a tough business.



Heather Du Quesnay
Director and Chief Executive
National College for School Leadership
February 2003

Introduction

Creating a learning to learn school is a book for heads, senior managers and teachers interested in developing better schools, classrooms and learners. It is based on two years of ground-breaking research in 25 schools by over a hundred teachers and many thousands of pupils. The research explored a variety of approaches to teaching pupils how they learn and evaluated the impact of these approaches on standards, pupil motivation and teacher morale.

Creating a learning to learn school sets out:

- why 'learning to learn' is important today
- the implications of 'learning to learn' for the government's educational reforms
- what we mean by 'learning to learn'
- the findings from the 'learning to learn' research project
- how heads and teachers can develop 'learning to learn' in their own schools.

Throughout the book, case studies based on the research projects and findings of individual schools are included, along with resources for auditing and developing 'learning to learn' in your school and helpful summaries of key research and the different learning approaches that make up 'learning to learn'. The research findings themselves in Chapter 5 are presented as photocopiable sheets for use in staff INSET, as are the audit questionnaires.

Also included is a colour poster for use in classrooms setting out what is involved in 'learning to learn' for pupils.

Related publications

- *Learning to learn: setting an agenda for schools in the 21st century* (Bill Lucas and Toby Greany; Campaign for Learning. Network Educational Press, 2001) sets out the original thinking behind the project.
- *Teaching pupils how to learn: research, practice and INSET resources* (Bill Lucas, Toby Greany, Jill Rodd and Ray Wicks; Campaign for Learning, Network Educational Press, 2002) sets out the findings from the first year of the research and is aimed at a general teaching audience.
- Separate research reports by Dr Jill Rodd covering years one and two of the project are available from the Campaign's website www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk. The research findings and case studies included in this book are taken from the Phase 2 Project Research Report.

Before you start reading...

Cast your mind back to your own earliest memory of learning something. Was it formal, like learning to spell your name, or informal, like learning that your older siblings always won in the end?

What about your first memory of using a learning skill? For example, a mnemonic to remember the colours of the rainbow or a song to help you remember the months of the year. Did you learn many more such techniques as you went through school? Do you use many of them today in different contexts?

Think of something you have learned in the past year which was challenging. What was it? Why did you learn it? How did you learn it? How might you have learned it better?

If someone asked you what kind of learner you are, what would you say? What if they asked you about the environment you prefer to learn in?

What were the three most useful things you learned at school? Who did you learn them from and how? Were they on the curriculum? How do you use those things today? What things do you wish you had learned at school but didn't? Did you learn about how you learn at school?

How much do you think your own views on and experiences of learning affect the way you work at school? Do your colleagues talk about their own learning? Do they talk about the learning of the pupils?

How would the pupils in your school describe the school? How would they describe learning? What would their responses be to the questions we asked over 2000 11-16-year-old pupils in the survey below?

Which three of the following do you do most often in class?

	2000 (%)	2002 (%)
Copy from the board or a book	56	63
Have a class discussion	37	31
Listen to a teacher talking for a long time	37	37
Take notes while my teacher talks	26	20
Work in small groups to solve a problem	25	22
Spend time thinking quietly on my own	22	24
Talk about my work with a teacher	22	16
Work on a computer	12	10
Learn things that relate to the real world	11	12

Source: MORI Omnibus Survey, 2000/2002

Since we cannot know what knowledge will be most needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.

John Holt

For pupils ('learning to learn') has definitely changed their learning experience – a more positive atmosphere, an improved understanding of learning and it encourages them to be far more independent.

Teacher in 'learning to learn' project school

Overview

This chapter sets out why we believe teachers and senior managers in schools should consider developing a 'learning to learn' approach for their school. It provides a very brief overview of:

- what 'learning to learn' involves
- the research findings from Phase 2 of the project that indicate what 'learning to learn' can help teachers and schools achieve
- what developing an approach in their own school might mean in practice.

'Learning to learn': a new key skill?

What actually happens when we learn something? Does it differ for different people? Are some people better learners than others and how could the learning of everyone be improved?

'Learning to learn' is the search for answers to questions such as these and the ones on page 10. It is described in detail in Chapter 3 but, in brief, it offers learners an awareness of how they prefer to learn and their learning strengths; how they can motivate themselves and have the self-confidence to succeed; things they should consider, such as the importance of water, nutrition, sleep and a positive environment for learning; some of the specific strategies they can use, for example to improve their memory or make sense of complex information; and some of the habits they should develop, such as reflecting on their learning so as to improve next time.

In recent years knowing how to learn has come to be seen as the key skill required by employers in the twenty-first century. To paraphrase action learning guru Reg Revans, as everything changes around us we must learn at or faster than the rate of change to survive. People who know how

to learn, and who can therefore adapt and change to new situations more effectively than those who must always be taken through new procedures step by step, will clearly be far more effective in a fast changing world.

Over the past two decades huge advances in technology and science have begun to reveal what actually happens when we learn, while cognitive psychology and other disciplines have begun to show how we can learn better. Most schools have not yet begun to engage with much of this new research and thinking. One thing that seems certain is that the old chalk-and-talk approach does not develop better learners. Peter Shrang was right when he said that the greatest distance in the world is that between what leaves the teacher's mouth and what enters the student's brain. Surprisingly, as the pupil responses to the MORI question on page 10 show, most classrooms have changed remarkably little since the days when their parents were at school.

From teaching to learning

'Learning to learn' gives you a renewed interest in teaching.

'Learning to learn' has transformed the way I teach and the way I think about teaching and learning.

Teachers in 'learning to learn' project schools

Why should heads, teachers or pupils be interested in how learning takes place, or how we could learn to learn better? Why not just focus on what is required by the National Curriculum or what is needed for the next test?

One good reason is the evidence for what 'learning to learn' can achieve from Phase 2 of the research, which is summarized in the boxes on pages 14 to 18 and set out in more detail in Chapter 5 of this book. In brief the research suggests that focusing on learning how to learn can help:

- raise standards of achievement
- raise teacher morale and motivation
- most importantly, make schools more effective, inclusive and motivating for a wider range of pupils.

Another reason is the testimony of the heads and teachers quoted throughout this book whose schools have been researching the impact of 'learning to learn' approaches over the past two years. Their view is that it is not enough for schools to be good at teaching, they must focus relentlessly on learning and on giving pupils the attitudes, skills and knowledge they need to carry on learning throughout life.

My priorities as a head are to enable the school to be in control of its teaching and learning environment; to promote a culture of professionalism and debate; to empower staff and children; to raise the self-esteem of pupils and to create learners who will take on the world (or feel they can).

Neil Baker, Headteacher, Christ Church Primary School, Wiltshire

Learning about learning is central to our school, not just learning stuff. The future is uncertain and what is needed is people who have confidence and belief in themselves as learners.

Steve Byatt, Headteacher, Ellowes Hall School, West Bromwich

The Phase 2 research project: headline findings

The research process is described in Chapter 4 and a more detailed version of these findings is included in Chapter 5. The full findings and related information (including an explanation of what data the schools collected and reported) are included in the Phase 2 Project Research Report available at www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk.