

# **Towards Successful Learning**

Introducing a model for supporting and guiding  
successful learning and teaching in schools

**Diana Pardoe**

**HAWKER BROWNLOW**  
EDUCATION

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# Foreword

I think the only thing we can guarantee on our journey through life is that we will sometimes get stuck, sometimes get fed up and sometimes get lost.

If our education system is to be of worth, it must teach our young learners what to do when each or all of these happen in their lives.

What makes us successful in life is not necessarily what we know, but our capacity to respond positively when we do get stuck, or fed up or lost on our learning journey. The attitudes we develop when we are young will help or hinder us as we search for the ‘treasures’ that learning offers. The attitudes we model as adults impact on young learners with some force, positively or negatively. Our responsibility, as older learners, is to make sure we model what we want young learners to do. I often ask teachers these questions:

- When you stand up in front of your class do you model how to teach or do you model how to learn?
- How many of your children will be teachers when they grow up?
- How many of your children will be learners when they grow up?

Many teachers can share what they do to demonstrate good teaching but too many teachers find it a struggle to share what they do to demonstrate good learning. This book explores the ideas of good learning and emphasises the importance of co-responsibility in the learning process.

I would like all adults, not just teachers, to model a love of learning, to inspire children to want to find out more, to demonstrate what a motivated adult looks like when they are learning and to enable our young learners to remove the barriers they come across on their journey.

Let’s make sure we practise what we preach.

Tom Robson  
Advisory Team Leader (Learning, Assessment and Science)  
Wiltshire County Council  
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# 1

# Introduction

*Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.*

W. B. Yeats

Learning is a journey not a race. This journey takes us to many places – some of them are bright and sunny, some are dark and less comfortable – all, however, teach us something if we are prepared to learn from our varied experiences and help us towards the next destination.

Recent research into learning and the emerging philosophies promote an approach to learning that focuses more on the ‘active participant’ than on the ‘passive recipient’. However, in the twenty-first century we still live with a system that measures the achievements of our young people using a series of narrow, high-stakes assessments that focuses more on the acquisition of knowledge than on the development of young people as learners.

Because of the constant pressure schools are under to perform and raise achievement, and to ‘set and get’ ever-increasing targets, teachers live with conflict and tension.

Is it more expedient to grab at a ‘quick fix’ that seems to solve the immediate problems, or follow a route that requires a longer-term investment?

This book explores the relationship between the levels of students’ engagement and independence in their learning, their intrinsic motivation and experience of success, and the impact in terms of deeper levels of learning, where there has been negotiation and collaboration with learners regarding their tasks.

Surely the major ‘stakeholder’ in education is the learner? Yet, students have often been expected to perform in a vacuum where they are given a set of instructions in

order to complete a task without being given the purpose of the task or how it fits into a meaningful context.

We need to ask ourselves some serious questions:

- Why are so many young people disaffected?
- Why are ever-increasing numbers of young people committing suicide – particularly boys and young men?
- Why do so many young people turn to drugs for some sort of solution to their problems?
- Why is youth crime at an all-time high?

Could the way in which we educate our children be a contributory factor to any of the above? If the answer is ‘yes’, surely we have an obligation to do something about it!

It is well documented that learners demonstrate increased self-esteem, greater independence and ultimately higher achievement when they are involved in the development and understanding of their own learning experiences. Students can frequently become disengaged, disenchanted and, subsequently, disaffected. Yet, when given greater opportunities for decision making and greater autonomy in their learning, they generally demonstrate greater motivation and perseverance.

The more learners are encouraged to ask questions and to seek solutions, the more they are likely to become intrinsically motivated by the learning process.

This book examines the key principles that underpin successful learning and draws significantly upon the research in assessment for learning of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998), the Assessment Reform Group (1999, 2002) and the work of Shirley Clarke (2001, 2003).

## **The Successful Learner Model**

The Successful Learner Model is drawn from classroom practice; however, frequent references are made to research and literature that support and underpin the principles of the model. I have been developing the model over the past two years, working with colleagues in action zone schools. The teachers with whom I have worked have played a hugely significant role in the way the model has evolved, and Chapter 5 contains some case studies from these schools where the model has been implemented.

The model is designed to encapsulate and hold together the key elements of what constitutes effective learning. It attempts to identify what learners need in order to be successful and, therefore, what it is that teachers need to do in order to enable successful learning to take place. Underpinning all the elements is a commitment to the development of successful learning.

The Successful Learner Model takes the form of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. The top layer identifies the key principles that underpin successful learning, while the second layer offers a more explicit description of these principles. This will be explained in greater depth in Chapter 3.

The top layer of the learner puzzle is presented on the following page, since it is helpful to see the model at an early stage. It is, however, very important to take time to encourage focused discussion about the nature of learning and the optimum conditions for learning before engaging with the model itself.

## What is it that learners NEED in order to be successful?

The next step is to explore what needs to be in place to enable successful learning to happen, where successful learning incorporates all the actions identified.

Learners need to know what they are learning and the purposes for that learning and how it 'fits' into a bigger picture that is relevant and meaningful. They need to know what is expected of them and how they can achieve success. They need to be fully involved in the whole learning process, developing the skills they need to identify how they are doing, what they need to do next and, crucially, how to 'close the gap'. Learners need time to reflect, time to ask questions and to seek solutions, and time to talk to and collaborate with peers and adults.

The central aim of the Successful Learner Model is to support and guide teachers in maximising the involvement of students in their own learning, and gradually transferring some responsibility of the learning to the learner.

Learning is complex and multifaceted, and thus visual representation is not easy. After exploration of a range of ideas and concepts, the final outcome has taken the form of a jigsaw puzzle, where all the pieces have to be in place for learning to be really successful. Just as completing a jigsaw puzzle is an experience very common to both children and adults, so too is the frustration of being unable to complete the picture because a piece has been lost! The concept of a puzzle also seems to be appropriate, since learning is a puzzle and it is possible to create the big picture in many different ways and to start from different points.

Clearly, if learners are to have all the puzzle pieces in place there are very important implications for teachers. These are identified and presented in a complementary jigsaw puzzle identifying what is needed to enable learners to experience success. The learner puzzle and the teacher puzzle are colour co-ordinated to link explicitly the learner need to the teacher requirement.

I have been asked on occasion about the significance of the position of the individual pieces of the puzzle. Someone once suggested that the most important pieces should be at the corners, as he always starts with the corners when completing any jigsaw puzzle! This would require decisions to be made about the priority order of the pieces and makes the assumption that everyone begins jigsaw puzzles in the same way. It has also been suggested that numbering the pieces could be helpful. Again, a priority order would be needed and I believe that many of the pieces have equal importance and that it is difficult to take any one of them completely in isolation from the others.

It is for those using the model to make decisions about any positioning or ordering of the pieces – it is, after all, a model and can therefore be adapted to suit the teachers/learners/school using it!

The model is made up of more than one layer. The top layer identifies the key principles that underpin successful learning. Further explanation of the terminology used to describe the elements of learning as they appear on the puzzle pieces is clearly necessary, and so the second layer provides more explicit detail.

The ‘learner’ puzzle is headed by the sentence starter:

### **To be a successful learner I need to ...**

which then precedes each piece.

The ‘teacher’ puzzle is headed by the sentence starter:

### **To enable learners to be successful we need to ...**

‘We’ is now used on this puzzle after development work with teachers clearly identified that this needs to be a collaborative, whole-school approach.

It is important to emphasise, however, that the real impact of the model comes from groups of individuals, such as staff teams or groups/classes of children, making independent interpretations of the model through engaging in discussion and debate about learning to deepen and share understanding. The examples included here are intended only to guide the development work of any group in creating their *own* second ‘layer’, which will reflect their interpretation of the key elements as stated on the top ‘layer’, and so create a powerful sense of ownership.

Even more important than the end product is the *process* of developing this second ‘layer’ – it is critical and central to the successful implementation of the model and subsequent practice. It is the process, after all, where significant discussion and debate is generated, and this contributes to deeper understanding and to the recognition of the need for consistency.

Further thinking behind the different pieces that make up the model and the explicit links between the ‘learner model’ and the ‘teacher model’ is offered on pages 32–43 as explanatory notes.



# To be a successful learner I need to ...

