

ASK

ATTITUDES
SKILLS
KNOWLEDGE

How to Teach Learning to Learn in the Secondary School



Juliet Strang, Philip Masterson & Oliver Button

Edited by Bill Lucas
Foreword by Paul Ginnis

Attitudes **S**kills **K**nowledge:

how to teach learning-to-learn
in the secondary school

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LEARNING

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Introduction to Part 1

Part 1 describes the first section of the journey by the staff at Villiers School to discover more about how students learn and how to create a school where opportunities for students to become effective lifelong learners are maximised. The ASK approach is described and some strategies are outlined that we firmly believe go to make up effective learners.

In the remainder of the book, ASK is explained in more detail. Part 2 provides some exemplary materials for teaching ASK. These examples have been devised, tried and tested by teachers at Villiers. Suggestions are supplied for how to apply these 'learning episodes' in different subjects and how students might be expected to make progress in the different areas of ASK.

Part 3 gives illustrations of ASK outside the classroom: our learning-to-learn student conference and our student lesson observers. And, finally, there is a discussion on some aspects of the implementation of learning-to-learn at Villiers in order to give useful ideas and highlight some of the issues for teachers and schools wishing to introduce learning-to-learn.

1

About learning-to-learn

'We should try and 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

COMING UP IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ▶ Why learning-to-learn?
- ▶ What is learning-to-learn?
- ▶ What approach did we take and why?
- ▶ The outcomes and benefits of learning-to-learn.
- ▶ A vision of the future of learning-to-learn.

Why learning-to-learn?

Teaching has been described as the art of pushing string. In other words, the hard work teachers put in is not always rewarded by the learning outcomes they expect. Juliet describes the following early experience as a trainee teacher:

'I had just started out on a PGCE course and had just been teaching a Year 9 group the topic "Microbes". I was travelling home for the weekend and marking their "end of unit" test on the train. The disappointment I felt at the poor quality of their answers obviously showed on my face, as a fellow passenger smiled and said: "Not as easy as you thought, is it?"

At that moment, I realised that up to then my own learning and success had been directly related to the effort and hard work I had put in. But now it was not so simple: getting other people to learn is not at all a straightforward process.'

Has anything like this happened to you?

What is learning-to-learn?

In a nutshell, learning-to-learn can be described as learning the attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to become a more effective learner. When learning-to-learn is not built into the curriculum, students may learn these skills by default, by discovering the best ways to learn for themselves. High-attaining students, in particular, often have better developed learning skills than others

and arguably this is why they are successful. However, even these students may have some learning skills that are not well developed, relying too much on their ability to memorise large amounts of content. Indeed, one could argue that when employers complain that young people today are not well equipped for the workplace by their education, that they lack the essential skills of communication, teamwork, time management, planning, and problem solving, they are really beginning to talk about what it is to be an effective learner.

Our approach

Good teachers have always been interested in the process of learning, and insightful educators have written about this process over many decades. But it is only comparatively recently that interest has focused so intensely on the way we learn how to learn and on its likely benefits for students. In the USA, Howard Gardner and David Perkins have transformed our view of intelligence and how it is 'learnable'. And nearer to home, a long list of thinkers and practitioners, including John Abbot, Guy Claxton, Paul Ginnis, Bill Lucas and Alistair Smith, have paved the way for the topic of learning itself to be taken seriously.

A tipping point for us was the launch in the late 1990s by the Campaign for Learning (CfL) of a major national research project into learning-to-learn. Their first report, *Teaching pupils how to learn*, contained a tentative finding – that schools tend to approach learning the wrong way round. They start with **k**nowledge, then develop **s**kills and finally – in rare moments – focus on the **a**ttitudes of students: a 'KSA' approach. Yet what those schools in the CfL project seemed to be doing was to start with the attitudes of lifelong learners – 'ASK'. Like the CfL, we had a strong sense that attitudes were very important, along with the knowledge and skills of learning.

In the early days, we were worried by the fact that many of our students appeared to be unable to tackle learning without being 'spoonfed' by their teachers. They needed a kind of never-ending saline drip of pre-packaged knowledge, making our desire for them to be independent learners a real challenge. But, when we tried to encourage independent learning in lessons and through homework, we found that the majority of students could not do it. They did not know how to organise their time, select resources to use, find out relevant information from text, work together in groups, connect ideas together, plan and so on.

The frustration felt by all of us at Villiers was most acute, and happened every year between October and March when the Year 11 students were in the final stages of preparing for GCSEs. We recognised that by then we were fighting a losing battle. We decided we needed to start in Year 7 and that we needed to teach our students to learn explicitly by including in our curriculum the attitudes, skills and knowledge they would need to become expert learners. The result of all of this at Villiers is that we have developed the 'ASK' approach to learning-to-learn so that it forms the cornerstone of our thinking – our means of helping teachers to help students become effective learners.

The following example illustrates why students need to learn learning attitudes and skills as well as their subject knowledge. It describes how a Year 8 group tackle a task without the help of their teacher. The class have not been taught ASK, but they have had two lessons on how to write for newspapers. The class was observed in order to find out how students tackled the problem, with particular emphasis on assessing group-work skills. The observation formed part of an evaluation of learning-to-learn. This was a year group that had not benefited from learning-to-learn teaching and they were to be compared to the year group that had followed learning-to-learn. These students would be asked to do the same task in the same context when they reached Year 8 and so provide comparative data on group-work skills for those who had and had not been taught ASK.

.....

Discovering group-work problems

A Year 8 class enters the school library. The class has been divided into groups of four or five students and each group is asked to sit at a table where a task and some resources are ready for the students. The teacher introduces the lesson and sets the task: to produce the front page for *The West London Times*. Specifically, the students are asked to:

- write the headline
- write the first paragraph of the scoop
- decide on a photo to use
- choose which quotations to use from interview sheets provided.

The teacher explains that the students will be working together in groups, but without help from their teachers.

Each group has been given details of a story; key vocabulary; a front page from the previous week and access to interviews with key witnesses. Resources are available for students to help themselves as needed.

Figure 1.1 shows how one group approached the task and other groups were similar.

Students in the group did not communicate with each other about the task at hand. It seemed that they did not have any deliberate strategy to use to work together, to share ideas or to plan their learning. When one girl tried to do this, her attempts were ignored by the others. Furthermore, the group did not seem to have the desire to work together.

How often does this type of situation happen in classrooms across the UK? Have you ever observed anything similar? Perhaps not exactly as in this example, but in a situation where students are asked to work together in groups and they are not able to do so effectively. How much learning time is lost? How many students feel frustrated by a process they cannot engage with?

4

Understanding yourself as a learner

'I'm afraid you're not making much progress in this subject.

Why do you think that is?'

'You're the teacher, you tell me!'

Introduction

In his classic film *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin clearly illustrates the demotivating effect of working on a factory conveyor belt – busy all day doing but without any awareness, understanding or ownership of the process or purpose of the work. He was excluded from knowing anything about the process he was involved in. He was not consulted about any decisions and had no input about what was done when, or how something was to be achieved. It is difficult to care, be motivated or want to change something if you do not know anything about it or feel part of it.

Sound familiar?

If we are honest, we as teachers make most of the decisions and hold most of the control in our classrooms. We decide when something is studied and how it is to be taught. We decide whether the students work in groups or individually and we decide the tasks they will be set. We decide the learning objectives, outcomes, the tests and content of the tests and we decide the environment the students will learn in. Why do we do this? Well, we have a list of very good reasons for this autocracy: we have a curriculum to get through, we are the subject experts, we have data on the class that informs us about how they best learn and, finally, if we left it to the kids to decide, nothing would get done, they would not have a clue what to do. And why is this? Well, they are not in the know. And so it becomes a vicious circle.

But could we be missing a golden opportunity? We want students to make progress and recognise that they ultimately are the only ones who can do this. We know from research that it is difficult to bring change about without at the very least shared ownership and understanding between both teacher and student.

A learning-to-learn school is a school where everyone is learning together, teachers and students: it is a shared process. You cannot be in charge of your own learning unless you have a sound understanding of how you as an individual best learn. Teachers often report the difficulty of discussing learning

with students they teach because of the students' ignorance of the teaching and learning process. Yet is this surprising if from the choosing of a scheme of work through to the planning of lesson through to the teaching, assessment and feedback, the students are kept entirely separate from the explicit process. The first time we talk to students about their learning and ask for their input it is bound to be a superficial discussion at best. Yet if we keep going with the discussions and the involvement, then slowly, over time, as their confidence, their vocabulary and their experience increase, so the competence, expertise and quality of their involvement will grow to such a level that it is not impossible to imagine them playing a full and, at times, independent part in the decisions about what they need to learn and achieve and how they learn and achieve it.

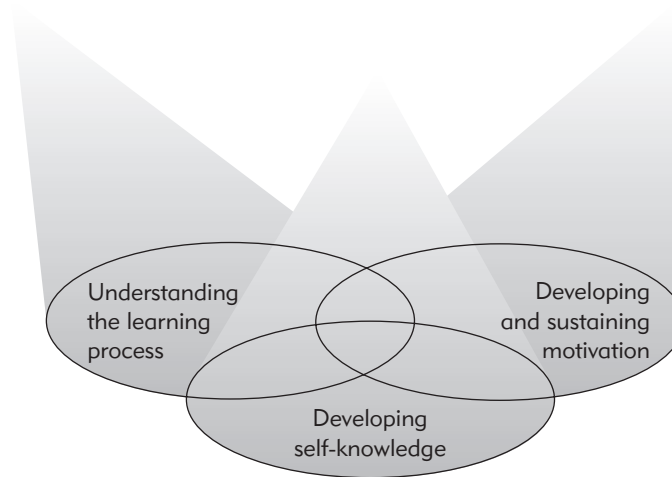
The original purpose of ASK was to develop more independently motivated students who have a greater understanding of the learning process and of how they themselves learn; meaning that they are more capable of taking an active role in their learning, in their lessons and in school life in general. This means reaching a point where teachers are able to introduce a topic, to plan with the students what the relevant aims and objectives might be, to get the students to plan how those objectives could be met, to decide what activities would be effective based on the purpose of the task and to decide what the learning outcome will be.

This first skill and knowledge area from the ASK curriculum is the first step to gaining that expertise.

Attitude development

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Resourcefulness | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Resilience | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Responsiveness | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Reciprocity | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Reflectiveness | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

Skills and knowledge breakdown



Understanding the learning process

- ▷ Be aware of the learning-to-learn curriculum and how it fits together and that each part is needed to make up the whole
- ▷ Know that during learning, performance can get worse before it gets better
- ▷ Know some ways of talking about learning styles
- ▷ Explore new thinking on intelligence
- ▷ Set targets to build on strengths and eliminate weaknesses

Developing and sustaining motivation

- ▷ Use the language of responsibility
- ▷ Recognise personal strengths and weaknesses
- ▷ Celebrate strengths
- ▷ Use positive affirmations
- ▷ Visualise a successful outcome
- ▷ Explain the causes and effects of stress
- ▷ Use a range of strategies to cope with stress
- ▷ Identify long-term goals
- ▷ Set achievable short-term targets
- ▷ Create positive inner dialogue
- ▷ Know how to turn weaknesses into strengths

Developing self-knowledge

- ▷ Work within personal concentration span
- ▷ Choose techniques to suit personal learning styles and sensory preferences
- ▷ Know learning styles framework. Minimum: VAK
- ▷ Know multiple intelligence theory
- ▷ Reflect regularly on learning experiences to build a picture of personal learning styles and aptitudes
- ▷ Make study choices in school and at home based on awareness of personal profile
- ▷ Set targets to build on strengths and eliminate weaknesses
- ▷ Conduct regular self-evaluation

Introduction to Part 3

In Parts 1 and 2 we introduced:

- the rationale for learning-to-learn
- the ASK curriculum
- practical ideas for teaching the elements of learning-to-learn.

Now we go beyond the classroom to suggest:

- ways of involving the students in creating an ethos for learning-to-learn
- ideas for staff development
- some of the leadership issues related to developing learning-to-learn across a whole school.

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Learning-to-learn and student leadership

by Amarjit Garcha

'The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.'

HENRY KISSINGER

'To lead people, walk beside them ... When the best leader's work is done the people say, We did it ourselves!'

LAO-TSU

COMING UP IN THIS CHAPTER:

- ▶ Our approach to engaging students.
- ▶ How we planned and delivered student conferences.
- ▶ How we developed student lesson observers.

So far in this book, we have concentrated on the development of ASK within lessons. Indeed, we have stressed the importance of learning-to-learn taking place within the classroom and being the responsibility of the subject teacher. As we have already explained, this ensures that relevant sections of attitudes, skills and knowledge can be applied and transferred in different subjects when they are most needed. This model also gives ownership of the learning-to-learn curriculum to teachers and therefore hopefully to their students.

However, learning-to-learn and ASK are bigger than just classroom subjects. An aim of the learning-to-learn curriculum is to develop lifelong learning attitudes, skills and knowledge that are relevant and helpful in all areas of life. This needs to be reflected in the environment around the school and not just in the classroom. A learning-to-learn school continues to encourage and develop its principles and ethos everywhere – from the school canteen to the playground, from the corridors to the changing rooms, from its caretaker to its governors. It leads to a fundamental change in the attitude of the school's population, so that the staffroom is buzzing with positive 'learnacy' talk and everywhere there are 'learnatic' students actively seeking to extend their experiences.

There will come a time when students who have been taught a more learning-orientated curriculum will naturally need to 'try out' some of the new knowledge they have. The school will also understandably want to find ways to see the impact that learning-to-learn is having on the students and how they cope in different situations and challenges.

In addition to this, there are, as would be expected, some students who develop faster and master their new learning-focused curriculum more quickly. They

are not necessarily the more able students, but are often those who have already developed fairly sophisticated approaches to coping with the demands of studying many different subjects and making progress in most areas without necessarily being consciously aware of the skills they are using. We found early on that each class had one or two students who naturally seemed to take to learning-to-learn and quickly developed a learning vocabulary.

It was for these reasons that we began to discuss the creation of a leadership team of students for learning-to-learn. A leadership team was an appealing idea, not only to find ways of taking manageable numbers of learning-to-learn students outside the classroom, but also to find ways of stretching the knowledge and experiences of the few really talented students in this area. These students also offered a powerful insight into what was happening in different learning-to-learn lessons. Like the student lesson observers, discussed later in this section, they provided essential information about classroom practice from a student perspective.

There are many ways of choosing students to play leadership roles within school and different schools have their own models. We simply asked form tutors to collect feedback from teachers about students' learning-to-learn performances during lessons. The same names cropped up in many subjects and we quickly built up a picture of students who were ahead of the majority of their peers. We spoke informally and formally to all nominated students and assessed their enthusiasm and vision for learning-to-learn. We decided upon having two 'leaders' in each form group. The students selected were invited to an initial meeting and were asked what they thought the potential was of having student leaders for learning-to-learn. As you might expect from any group of hand-selected students, they were very enthusiastic!

The team now has, over the course of each academic year, the following responsibilities: the production of whole-school and year-group assemblies; the dissemination of learning-to-learn developments to their peers during tutorial time; leadership of Year 6 students at learning-to-learn student conferences; monitoring the regular teaching of learning-to-learn in subject areas; participation in reflection and evaluation sessions for the development of the learning-to-learn curriculum in the future; and many are student lesson observers.

These students are as instrumental and important to the development of learning-to-learn at Villiers as any subject or cross-curricular group with a responsibility for learning-to-learn. The next two chapters illustrate in detail some of the ways these young leaders are able to use and develop their learning-to-learn attitudes, skills and knowledge.

Learning-to-learn student conferences

'I know things you don't, and the other way round. I can do some things better than you, but other things you can help me with. We all lead sometimes.'

Fardowsa Ali, Year 8

ASK ATTITUDES SKILLS KNOWLEDGE

Villiers High is one of the first secondary schools in the country to introduce a fully developed curriculum designed so that students can learn how to learn. The results have been remarkable, with year on year improvements in public examination results and an increased student hunger to learn.

ASK: How to Teach Learning-to-Learn in the Secondary School is a serious exploration of the new science of learning. Full of tried and tested learning strategies, this book will transform the way teachers see their subjects. All the lesson ideas detailed in the book are easily applied to any curriculum subject. When used across different areas of the curriculum, they quickly become a transferable map which can help students make sense of their learning and thus accelerate their progress.

"A treasure-trove of material. I heartily commend this book to you. It is the real work of real teachers in a real school. They have forged an approach to the nation's most pressing education issue that translates the theory and rhetoric into classroom action. You can adopt their template or customise it; you can read this book as a stimulating case study or as a blueprint. Either way, it will enrich your thinking and practice and ultimately bring great benefits to your students."

Paul Ginnis, trainer and best selling author of *The Teacher's Toolkit*

"ASK is an important and most valuable resource that every secondary school ought to study and apply in their work. It is vital that ASK messages become an absolute basis for educating future generations of secondary school teachers. Learning-to-Learn (along with the ability to think creatively and to respond positively to change) is the most urgent issue facing education and cannot be ignored: ASK shows how to do it."

Dr Eva Hoffman, author, Founder and Director of Inspired Learning

"It is increasingly evident that to meet future demands, schools need to shift from being places of teaching, to places of learning. This book offers useful tips and techniques which can be embedded across the full age range, and the section on pupils as observers contains materials all schools will find particularly relevant. It provides a supportive toolkit for schools wanting to begin a curriculum revolution. Long live the revolution!"

Dave Harris, Principal of Serlby Park (3-18 Business & Enterprise Learning Community)

"Learning-to-Learn is one of the essential life skills that will equip young people for the uncertain world of tomorrow. This essential guide provides a simple framework and a range of down to earth, practical strategies that can be used straight away to help students gain their personal toolkit for learning. A must for all those who value lifelong learning."

Brin Best, Managing Director, Innovation for Education Ltd

"ASK is based upon real work, done by real teachers in a real school. Every child and adult in the school is part of a learning community where teachers learn from students as much as students learn from teachers. This book explains the practical strategies used by staff in order to create that learning community."

Emma Sims, Development and Research Coordinator, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

"ASK is a practical handbook that not only introduces you to what learning to learn is all about but also tells you how to implement it both in your classroom and across the whole school. ... a thought-provoking and practical book on learning to learn that is essential for any teacher keen not only to do their best for their students but also to work smarter, not harder."

Julie Gibbon, The Gillford Centre (PRU), Carlisle

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