

Alistair Smith
with Mark Lovatt and John Turner

Learning to Learn in Practice

The **L2** Approach





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Crown House Publishing Ltd
www.crownhouse.co.uk
www.crownhousepublishing.com

First published by
Crown House Publishing Ltd
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
6 Trowbridge Drive, Suite 5, Bethel, CT 06801, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available
from the British Library.

10-digit ISBN 184590287-4
13-digit ISBN 978-184590287-2

LCCN 2009936663

Printed and bound in the UK by
The Cromwell Press Group, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

Preface

Formation processes and the exploding shed

Structuralist philosophers and lovers of *Star Trek* have a certain fondness for the transporter – the device that allowed the intrepid crew of the *Enterprise* to disassemble themselves and then reappear intact on some remote planet. The transporter worked by converting Spock or Captain Kirk into tiny fragments, which would then be reassembled at the destination; same Spock, different planet, similar storyline. Trekkies loved it! When functioning correctly the transporter could, essentially, deconstruct any crew member and then put him or her back together again.

In 2002 I came across the remains of a shed which had been blown up by the British Army. The shed had been full of personal possessions, garden tools and assorted bits and pieces. It had, like many others of its kind, been someone's pride and joy. Now there were just bits of it left. It had disintegrated to such a degree that only small fragments of burnt and twisted wood, melted glass, shapeless metal, shards of clothing, torn newspaper, earth, grass and roofing felt remained. One minute it had been a shed and now it was – a former shed.

The garden shed is a bit of a British institution. It's the sort of place where, hidden away, secretive and sometimes furtive hobbies occur – model railways, woodturning, paraffin lamp cleaning – all going on undetected. Intimate places with a male atmosphere; partners forbidden, smelling of damp dog, often dimly lit. They are romantic for some, for others an escape from reality but always an expression of the owner's personality. This one had been shattered into thousands of pieces by two pounds of plastic explosive, put there and detonated by a Major Doug Hewitt of the Army School of Ammunition.

This shed had a name, a pretentious name but maybe one which was fitting. It was called *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) and it was an exhibit in the Brit Art exhibition at Tate Modern. It had been reassembled by the artist, Cornelia Parker, to capture the instant after the explosion so all the pieces were suspended in air. She had persuaded the Army to help her transport it to a field in Banbury and then blow it up. Amazing! As you walked around the ragged remains of the now suspended 'shed' it seemed to move and to reposition itself. It was still in a basic 'shed' shape albeit one with an exploded viewpoint but now there was more of it. The addition of different lighting effects made the experience unnerving, with the 'shed' moving around and the shadows changing. It was like the transporter from *Star Trek* on a slightly off day!

The accompanying catalogue got me thinking. Apparently, the creation of such fragments is a process with a name. Professor Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn – formerly Disney Professor of

Archaeology and Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge University – a man with a name and a set of titles to die for—said:

We archaeologists have a name for the transformations by which what were once viable buildings and useful artefacts in the hands of the people who made and used them become buried in fragmentary condition below ground: 'formation processes'.

Formation processes! That term strikes me as a great concept for some of my own contemporary experiences of education – transformations 'which were once viable but which are now buried in fragmentary condition below ground'.

Sometimes these formation processes are buried so deep that no one questions their existence. They have become what some call the 'grammar' of schooling. The grammar is everything that's inherited, rarely exploded though often reassembled: expectations about what schools can and can't do, buildings, terms, periods, curriculum, relationships, roles, accountabilities.

Formation processes and schools

Sometimes this inherited grammar has led to anomalies which, in a culture of testing and league tables, directly affect a student's perception of the value and purpose of learning: we see more risk averse teaching; teachers who teach to the test; students who commodify knowledge and dismiss anything which is not on the test; knowledge which is wrapped up in parcels unrelated to anything beyond school; question spotting by teachers in collusion with their students; exams which reward recall above anything else.

Learning cannot be usefully disembodied from understanding or from context. Out of context it's not learning. The curriculum is not an assemblage of bits. We are asking through this book that schools go beyond focusing on 'bits' and start to see the whole shed! If you must blow up your shed don't try to go back to what the shed once was!

Before we leave the shed, let's consider the human effect of taking something cherished and questioning its deeply buried formation processes. The major who had positioned his plastic explosive where the original single light bulb had dangled so carefully became a changed man. When he visited the exhibition later he said:

I was stunned when some months later I walked in ... The single light bulb, now in my mind representing the core of the explosion, threw out the debris that in turn projected dramatic shadows onto the stark white walls, floor and ceiling – such a powerful image. I had never considered modern art before, but if this was it, I was a convert.

He had attempted to utilise the idea of the bulb throwing out energy and so had become embroiled himself in the artistic interpretation. He had to disintegrate the shed while distressing and distorting as many of the items as possible without destroying them. His explosive couldn't exceed the safe limit for the site, nor could he disperse the contents of the shed over too large an area as he had to collect them afterwards!

The major had experienced a paradigm shift. He had been affected by the experience to such a degree that it had altered the way he saw the world of art. So there we have it. A powerful mind-changing experience arises when just enough of an explosion occurs in a much loved,

well-established edifice to expose its formation processes. This is not unlike a teacher having a breakthrough experience and seeing themselves and their profession in a whole new light.

I hope that this book plays some part in helping us to see what we do in a whole new light. We will argue that it is important for teachers and schools to be clear about the outcomes they seek. In the context of our students' world – a 21st century world experiencing an information explosion – ask the question: What do we want them to leave school with? Use the outcomes to guide thinking about what the curriculum should offer. We will also argue the importance of finding and applying fundamental principles (in our case the 12 essentials of learning to learn) to guide thinking about how the curriculum should be offered. We would say that schools should address the need to provide coherence: think in terms of students, staff, the school community, parents and carers and immerse what you do in the prevailing technologies of the age. To help in all of this find out, as we have done, what others are doing – borrow from the best and re-invent where there are gaps.

We designed our own L2 Approach described throughout this book as a means of taking learners from dependence to independence. The adoption of a learning to learn approach is a journey rather than a moment in time, a single commitment or a yes or no decision. Every context is different, so start from where you are at rather than where others would wish you were at. Sometimes to get to the deep you have to practise in the shallows and, whilst it can be exciting and invigorating to plunge in at the behest of others, it can also be dangerous. There is merit in our journey school concept of 'adopt then embed then spread'.

Finally, and without wishing to sound too far fetched, this is what we think learning to learn, properly thought through, can do for teachers and for a school. It will provide an assault on some of the more cherished processes, the everyday assumptions and ways of doing things and, as a legacy of the assault, it will prompt questions about the shape of things to come. People who are involved will be changed as a consequence as it is very, very difficult to remain a passive observer when there is so much reassembling happening so quickly.

Alistair Smith, May 2009



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2. Process sensitivity

This is what Ellen Langer calls ‘mindfulness’. She contrasts an outcome orientation which is about results and a fixation with completion, with a process orientation which is about solutions and steps along the way. This is really about heightened self-awareness. In this case, the awareness is about the processes of learning. In order to promote it in classrooms we take care of the labels we assign to experiences and to behaviours. We get more of what we deliberately reinforce so we talk up effort, practice, trial and error, drafting, and we do so by deploying our ‘process investigators’ and our ‘process promoters’.

Process investigators use the tools of the detective. They are students who take their turn in observing the processes of learning as they unfold in front of them. We pull them aside, give them a digital camera and ask them to look for evidence of a process being used. It may be great teamwork, or reflection, or the use of a thinking tool, or good use of questions. The evidence is recorded, shared and examined. Process promoters engage in advocacy and agitprop for their specialised learning method. They may be the class expert on memory mapping or Kipling Questions or Anderson’s revised taxonomy or on search engines. They are encouraged to develop and share their expertise as and when required.

3. Learner behaviours that are well defined

Start with the outcomes in mind. Ask ‘What is it that we want our learners to leave with?’ We define our outcomes in terms of a body of knowledge about learning, five core attributes or personal qualities – which we call the 5R’s of resilience, resourcefulness, responsibility, reasoning and reflection – and a set of personal learner skills which can be transferred into different contexts.

4. Language of learning

Those of you who have ever taken part in a consultation with a student around learning targets will have quickly become aware of the constraints of their language.

Without a vocabulary to describe the processes of learning and their experience of those processes, a learner is disenfranchised. We teach and use an extended vocabulary of learning. A 12-year-old child is expected to understand and use words such as these from the various Key Stage 3 subject disciplines: *perception, artefact, polemic, multi-modal, interdependence, sustainability, causation, chronology, genre, notation, polynomial, loci, dissipated, doctrine, secular, pluralism and interfaith*.

And yet we cannot find time to introduce and use a vocabulary of learning. Without a vocabulary it is more difficult to make and describe connections. It is the capacity to find and secure these connections between what would otherwise be discrete units of information that accelerates learning. Researchers Newmann and Wehlage talk of the importance of ‘substantive conversations’ which comprise considerable interaction with the ideas of a topic, consequently building a collective understanding of the topic and sharing it.¹⁴ We have developed bronze, silver and gold vocabulary banks from which students can develop their ability to describe their own learning and have these substantive conversations. You will find these in Appendix IV.

5. Systematic debriefing and reporting

There are two dimensions to this process. The first is to build into the everyday learning experience opportunities to give and receive purposeful feedback. This we do by developing coaching and assessment skills at individual, pair and group level. This can be achieved by a combination of direct teaching with support resources such as Profilers, Success Mats, Electronic Portfolios and Electronic Assessment Tools of the type we discuss later in the book.

The second, and equally significant dimension, is in whole school reporting. We strongly advocate reporting to parents against the 5R's. Doing so removes at a stroke the cul-de-sac of effort and behaviour grades and provides a genuine mechanism for student voice, target setting and focusing on core purpose.

6. Coherent structure to learning

We organise our learning experiences around an informed pedagogy. We choose the 4 stage accelerated learning cycle of Connect–Activate–Demonstrate–Consolidate described in detail on pages 100–102. This provides the school community with a mechanism for sharing understanding about the component processes of learning.

The latest research affirms the common sense view that rote, rehearsal and regurgitation – sometimes fed by the need for ‘coverage’ and the desire to have ‘pace’ – are of little or no value for true learning.¹⁵

7. Engaging experiences

Quality learning to learn experiences should provoke curiosity whilst being relevant, extend whilst being accessible and scaffold challenge. We know that children recognise and choose different strategies to remember, speculate, hypothesise and solve problems and we want them to apply their choices in very different situations. Learning to learn whether it takes the form of lessons or challenges – where they are experiences extending over time or opportunities – or where they arise in the debriefing of subjects, should be exciting, refreshing and equivalent to ‘the best party in town’. A worthy approach saturated with teacher check-lists, paper based activities and occasional balloon games will not do this.

8. Thinking fluency

Developing the ability to think independently is more than the ability to use a given thinking tool. It requires the learner to become more adept at analysing a problem, generating alternative solutions and using appropriate modes of thinking – which could be supported by a ‘tool’ – to work through to a relevant conclusion that can be evaluated and adjusted for improvement. This should happen to such a degree that the learner becomes fluent in problem solving and thus capable of transferring this set of skills into every context.

9. Team and personal challenge

In our approach, challenge is more than pace and rigour in a lesson. It's more than differentiation by task, duration, method or outcome. It is about individuals – and teams comprising those individuals – habitually setting and being set extending tasks and being given space to evaluate the factors contributing to their success. A 'challenge' could, for example, comprise a student or group of students undertaking some new learning in or out of school and then using our 5R's framework of competencies to detail what factors contributed to progress. Most of our learning to learn lessons are set up around 'challenges'. All modules require authentic presentations.

10. Co-operation skills

Participation in any group requires a high level of process skill. We deliberately identify, share and develop the skills of learning in a pair, in a small group and in a class. We work on the premise that 'you get more of what you reinforce' and so we would draw attention to examples of good group work, reinforcing the underpinning behaviours whilst building the language so that learners have a vocabulary of co-operation.

11. Independent enquiry

The capacity to conduct independent research is the equivalent of a 'learner superhighway' lending momentum to the skills of finding, sorting, judging and presenting information.

12. System rigour

Learning to learn approaches can be easily marginalised in the life of a school. Schools differ in their vision of what it can offer and bring different degrees of enthusiasm, but without commitment the whole enterprise will perish. To have an impact, our approach needs clear leadership, status, resources, talent and a high degree of scrutiny. Simple things give off powerful messages: no reporting, no home learning, no accreditation can equal no worth in the eyes of students and the wider school community.

It is entirely possible for these approaches to occur within one solitary 'pioneer' classroom or across a school community as a whole. The latter is more desirable and obviously so; the former is more likely to be the starting point.

The 12 essentials	Benefit for students	Benefit for classrooms	Benefit for schools	Benefit for parents
Three dimensional success criteria	Better motivation and engagement	Clarity over what is to be learned, how it will be learned and why	More consistency in briefing and debriefing	Easier to understand the point of lessons
Process sensitivity	Increases a sense of responsibility for their own learning	Demystifies all the 'processes' of learning	Ensures teachers regularly question their practice	Opportunity to talk with children about methods
Learner behaviours that are well defined	Know what it means to be a 'great' learner	Constant focus on the most important learning behaviours to develop them	Core purpose is built around what we seek to do for our learners	More easy to understand what the school is trying to achieve
Language of learning	Better able to describe progress in their learning	Groups of learners who can talk about learning	More sophisticated learning conversations	More meaningful conversations
Systematic debriefing and reporting	Involved in identifying the steps to become better at their all round learning	Better structure to each learning experience	Changed emphasis on what is reported and how	Easier to measure all round progress and be involved in helping improve
Coherent structure to learning	Structure of lessons is understood	Easier to design and deliver learning experiences	Planning, delivery, evaluation and improvement of learning is easier	Easier to understand lesson plans
Engaging experiences	Remain excited about learning	Teachers can promote the joy of learning	Improved morale	Fewer behaviour problems at home
Thinking fluency	Transfer into life beyond school	Fewer passive learning experiences	Improved depth of engagement	More mature approach to problems <i>cont.</i>

The 12 essentials	Benefit for students	Benefit for classrooms	Benefit for schools	Benefit for parents
Team and personal challenge	Creates positive bonds	Brings energy and pace	More opportunity for different abilities to shine	Creates a focus for family discussion
Co-operation skills	Improves understanding and acceptance of others	Good learning behaviours	Transfers into all lessons and learning experiences	Can be shared at home
Independent enquiry	Provides opportunities to practise learning skills	Allows for differentiation	More independence in learning	Can be continued at home
System rigour	Students can see that learning to learn matters	Assessed formally in classrooms	Given status across the whole school	Reported on to parents

Bestselling author Alistair Smith brings you the definitive learning to learn resource book for all schools, whether already running a learning to learn programme, considering implementing one or just interested in the benefits of creating truly motivated independent learners.

This detailed re-evaluation introduces 12 essentials of learning to learn and explains their impact for students, schools, teachers and parents. Packed with easy to apply common sense ideas and guidance, *Learning to Learn in Practice*:

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- Gives guidance on embracing Web 2.0 technologies
- Shows how to involve parents
- Explains what works and what doesn't

Move away from teacher dependence towards learner independence and prepare your students for the challenges of the 21st Century

"... pulls off the amazing trick of blending things together: good advice with practical steps to apply, comments on the way we do our work with the story behind them, logic on why we should adopt a different approach with analysis of why it is not always easy – and what we could do to get started."

Mick Waters, Professor of Education, President of the Curriculum Foundation

"*Learning to Learn in Practice* presents a brilliant case for placing the 'learn to learn' approach at the centre of the curriculum experience ... The review of theory is comprehensive, the resources are exceptional and the twelve principles are clear. For those who are hesitating it is a great 'way in' and for those who are well down the road it will greatly enhance what they are already doing."

John Jones, writer, presenter and educational consultant

"This is an invaluable, deeply practical, but structured and thoughtful guide to creating a generative approach to learning which generates more learning and able learners as its main outcome."

Charles Leadbeater, author of *We Think, Personalisation through Participation* and *21 Ideas for 21st Learning*

"... sets out a vision, taking you well beyond current data-driven imperatives to the core purpose of every intelligent, modern school. It equips you, both intellectually and practically, to get on with the real job of teaching, the moral job, funnily enough the old-fashioned job, of letting educational insights rather than political dogma determine practice and of seeking to give students the best chance of lifelong success as they stride out into their adult world, not ours."

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Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus, OISE/University of Toronto

Alistair Smith is an internationally known consultant, author and trainer. He has spoken to tens of thousands of teachers across the world and has written a number of books including: *The Brain's Behind It: New Knowledge about the Brain and Learning*, *Help Your Child to Succeed: The Essential Guide for Parents* and *Accelerated Learning: A User's Guide*. He is the designated learning consultant to the Football Association.

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Education
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Crown House Publishing Ltd
www.crownhouse.co.uk
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ISBN 978-184590287-2



9 781845 902872