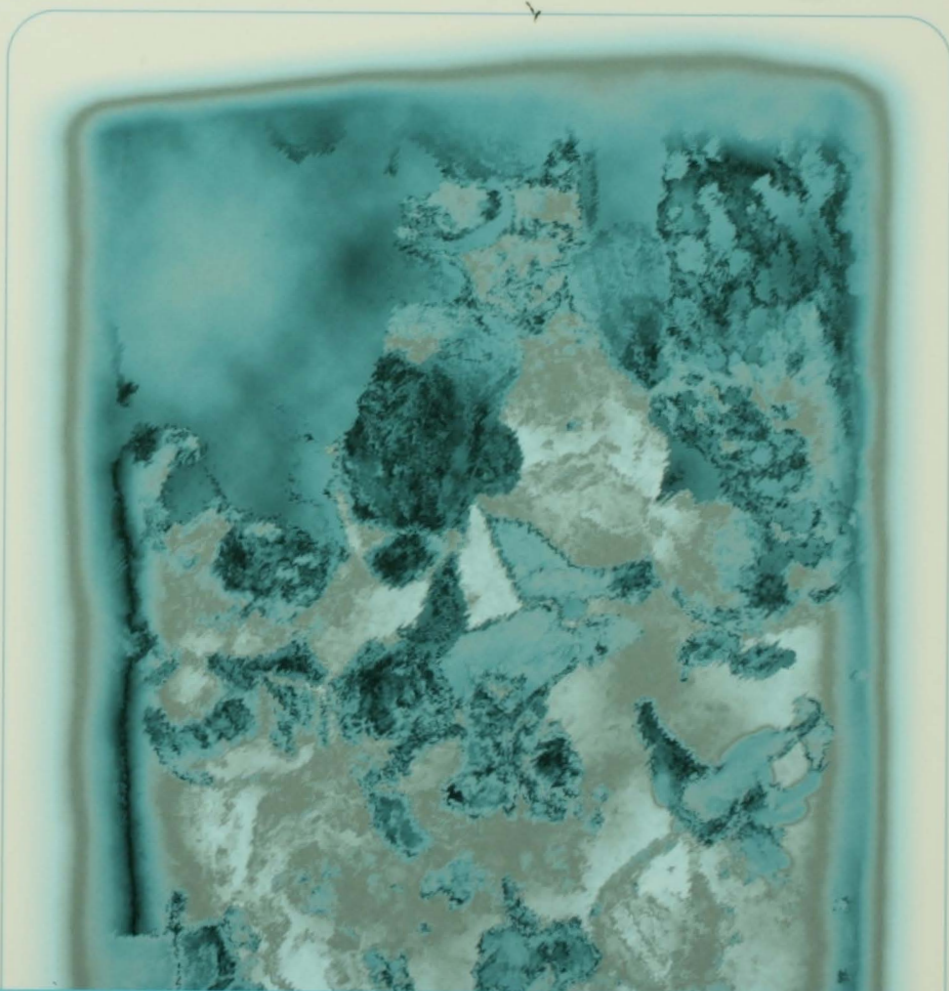# supporting
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learning

Eileen Carnell & Caroline Lodge

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This book focuses on young people as learners and how their learning in schools can be supported. Many teachers will have heard statements similar to this comment by a Year 10 student: 'It's not that I haven't learnt much. It's just that I don't really understand what I am doing' (Harris et al., 1995: 253). Many young people share this student's lack of understanding about how they learn, how they learn most effectively, what alternative strategies they could use, what conditions suit them and so forth. The helplessness expressed by the Year 10 pupil is striking. This young person is saying that if they understood more about what they are doing they would learn more effectively. This book argues that helping young people understand more about learning is a key function for teachers, individually or acting collectively, and for others who have a role in supporting their learning.

We want a focus on learning, not to the exclusion of teaching, or indeed of content. We are concerned that a focus on teaching and teachers in UK schools in the last 15 years has distorted the relationship between teaching and learning, by excluding the latter, or by assuming that learning will result from effective teaching, as if the learner and the learner characteristics are irrelevant. We argue in this book that now and in the future we need learners who are expert in learning, because they live and will continue to live in rapidly changing circumstances. Expert learners have developed a capacity to make sense of their experiences of learning, in different contexts and for different purposes.

The purpose of this book is to examine aspects of secondary schools that can contribute to the development of this capacity and so enhance young people's learning. It is a distillation of new knowledge, thinking and experiences, intended for busy teachers.

Our first purpose is to support the shift from teaching to learning. Effective learning requires an explicit focus on learning. To be explicit we need the language to express our ideas. Our vision is to develop a rich learning language through dialogue. Talking about learning extends the learner's capacity to learn. We use a number of different theoretical perspectives to inform

teachers' practice. For example, we show a cycle of learning that can be used at a meta-learning level to help make sense of one's experiences of learning. Learning is not easy or straightforward, but complex and multidimensional. The more the learner understands this, the richer their learning will be.

The second purpose is to help learners understand better the importance of context. We discuss how learning is different in different contexts. Learning needs to be made sense of in a variety of contexts, within and across the school and outside school. Through an awareness of their context and its effects, learners are able to have an influence on this context and to understand the differences between contexts. Again we argue that this awareness is essential for learning in the twenty-first century.

Our third purpose is to help those in schools understand the value of creating a learning community and experiment in developing them in their classrooms, tutor groups and in the whole school. In a learning community, the learning of all members is richer than it is in isolation. We promote the idea of all the different layers in the school learning together to reinforce and complement each other's activities – tutor, classroom teacher, pastoral teams and the whole school organization. In this community we see learners occupying different roles, and they have opportunities to learn in reciprocal learning relationships. We look at learning communities at different levels and with different combinations of people.

Our fourth purpose is to help learners make connections. Lives in the twenty-first century are complex, and effective learners are those who make connections with previous learning, other learners and different contexts. We also examine connections in young people's learning, especially between their learning in and outside school and with their parents and others in the community.

Our fifth purpose is about encouraging teachers' learning about learning. If teachers are able to understand themselves as learners they are more able to support the learning of others, both young people and colleagues. From this perspective we address how teachers can enhance young people's learning.

Because our purpose is to encourage a rich, complex and explicit conception of learning among members of the school community, we have not written a how-to-do it manual. In this book you will not read about how to improve your performance or teaching skills and competencies. It is not a book about knowledge, or curriculum subjects or about thinking or study skills for young people. This would not be congruent with our conception of learning. However, a focus on effective learning will undoubtedly help young people and teachers.

We invite our readers to imagine learning schools. What would we notice about people and learning in these schools?

In schools for learning we would notice that:

- Learners are effective – active, responsible, collaborative in their learning, aware of their purposes, feelings, strategies and contexts. They use meta-learning strategies to make sense of their experiences of learning. They embrace complexity and difference in their learning. (See Chapter 1.)

- Classrooms are rich learning environments where learners are flexible, collaborative, resilient, resourceful and reflective. They are engaged in challenging tasks that involve learners in dialogue, in assessing their own learning and in using feedback as part of their learning. The language of learning is developed as part of classroom activity. Students are less dependent on their teachers and hierarchy is less evident. (See Chapter 2.)
- Many people come together to pool their resources to help young people whose learning is at risk. They adopt a holistic approach, taking account of the context in which the young person is living and expect to meet different needs differently. The strategies used to minimize risks to their learning take account of complexity. (See Chapter 3.)
- Tutoring is seen as a key role for supporting learning and the tutor is developing a special position in relation to the students and the context in which they learn. They are helping the tutees to connect their learning across the curriculum and they are developing a programme for learning about learning. (See Chapter 4.) Tutoring for learning through individual learning conversations is structured using the *Do, Review, Learn, Apply* cycle. The focus is on learning targets rather than performance targets. Meta-learning is used to help young people make sense of their experiences of learning. (See Chapter 5.)
- Schools are developing deliberate and explicit connections between parents, teachers and others in the community to support young people's learning in different contexts. Schools' organizational patterns and approaches are changed by these connections. (See Chapter 6.)
- The pastoral teams are developing a special position to support the learning of young people. They look at the whole young person, taking account of their personal, moral, spiritual and academic development. They provide a structure for feedback and guidance for young people's learning. To the wider community they provide a coherent view about young people's experience at school, searching for patterns that promote learning. (See Chapter 7.)
- The teachers use research to encourage rich learning environments for themselves. They take risks, try out new ideas, and involve young people in their research, their responses and views. They talk about their own experiences of learning. (See Chapter 8.)
- The school's relationships, structures and routines support learning at every level. Schools are places where people want to be together, learn together, research together, generate new knowledge together, are excited together and feel powerful together. (See Chapter 9.)

This is our vision, where schools are essentially places of learning, learning which connects to the complexity of young people's lives now and in their futures. These are the schools that our teachers and our young people deserve.

To engage the reader in thinking about rich learning experiences we have drawn on a number of different voices. We include in every chapter a number of examples or case studies to provide illustrations from schools where these ideas are being realized. We have chosen a range of different practitioners with considerable expertise and understanding to offer. They speak from their

particular contexts and are often lead learners in their organizations. Many of these practitioners have been involved in research and investigations in their own places of work. They often indicate how they are reflecting on their changing practice. We also include research that draws on what young people themselves say. These young people provide important insights into their experiences of learning, both at school and elsewhere.

We have written this book because of our experiences at the Institute of Education, University of London in an academic group called Assessment, Guidance and Effective Learning (AGEL). The members of this group engage in collaborative learning projects that include research, writing and teaching. We have an explicit focus on learning – our own as well as that of others. It is a rich learning community that stimulated us to think more deeply, take directions in research, read widely, discuss, teach courses and engage with teachers in many different ways about learning. This interaction has helped us to see that the kind of book we would like to refer to did not exist – until now.

We have written the book needed by teachers who want to ensure that schools reclaim the agenda – it is about learning. It is all about learning: teachers and teaching are about learning; schools are about learning; education is about learning; assessment, curriculum, even standards and performance are about learning. Yet, too often schools find they have not contributed to learning and may even have blocked it.

Our separate histories mean that together we have used our experience, all our thinking about learning, the knowledge we have gained as learners and our many connections with learners. Eileen began her career in a comprehensive school in London. As a form tutor and head of year she found great satisfaction in helping individual young people gain access to learning. Later she became involved in an action research project developing Personal, Social and Health Education programmes (PSHE). Other responsibilities include working as an advisory teacher, a director of a teachers' centre and an inspector for professional development and PSHE. Caroline's career began in a rather ad hoc fashion, and continued in this way through almost every post in secondary schools, including tutor, class teacher, head of department, head of year and faculty, deputy headteacher and headteacher. We are now both students and lecturers in education. Among our joint experiences has been running workshops for the National Association for Pastoral Care in Education (NAPCE) and for other organizations. This led us to write materials for teachers' professional development, and then to this book.

We have been through a period when educational experts, the educational establishment and those in schools have been derided and their cumulative and separate knowledge ignored in successive policy initiatives. Most ignored of all have been the young people for whose benefit these policy reforms have been made. Young people are tested more times than ever before. The curriculum has been firmly directed from central government agencies. Young people's achievements are downplayed in order that the media can talk about failure in international tests, pursuing their obsession with failure.

Recent government initiatives have led schools and teachers to focus on performance, intended to do something usually called 'driving up standards'.

It is a distortion to believe performance in tests relates to the quality of learning. Many tests which youngsters undergo have their origin in a concern about school standards, and are used to evaluate the quality of schooling. Caroline's daughter came back from school one day, when she was in Year 9, saying, 'I thought schools existed to help me, but they say I should do well in the SATs tests so that the school can say it is doing well'. A second distortion, then, is that young people are there to serve the interests of schools. This book is for those teachers who want to support young people's learning.

So we find ourselves wishing to write more, to follow up more ideas, projects, case studies and examples. This is not the end. It is our position at the moment. As we go on thinking and talking about learning we realize there is so much more to understand. We would like to continue examining the complexities of learning and to do this with teachers. We would like readers to get in touch with us to continue the dialogue to broaden the discussions we have enjoyed so much in writing this book. We would like you to contact us at c.lodge@ioe.ac.uk and e.carnell@ioe.ac.uk, or through the Institute of Education website www.ioe.ac.uk.

1

The Learner and Learning

Schools exist to promote young people's learning. This book explores how young people can become more effective learners and how schools can promote more effective learning. This chapter focuses on young people as learners and sets the scene for the book by exploring what is meant by learning and by examining some different models of learning. We draw on the fast-expanding field of theory and research into learning to consider how young people can become effective learners.

We introduce some themes that will be developed further throughout the book. We consider which of three models of learning is most likely to promote effective learning. We describe effective learners as active, responsible and collaborative in their learning, and able to reflect on and develop appropriate learning strategies. In order to become effective learners, we argue that learners need to become aware of their purposes, strategies and feelings and of the effects of learning and the contexts of their learning. The most important theme developed throughout this book is that both learners and teachers should be explicit about the ways in which young people are learning, that is, about their learning at a meta-level.

In pursuing these themes we find ourselves confronting the distortions in learning that are produced within schools because of the busyness and complexity of daily life, the tensions that can arise between the need for order and creativity and the current emphasis on performance as a measure of learning. We find ourselves challenging traditional views of learning: for example, that it is a private activity, undertaken individually.

The chapter examines the following aspects of learning:

- conceptions of learning;
- models of learning;
- effective learning and effective learners;
- learners' beliefs;
- learning styles;
- learning relationships.

Conceptions of learning

We begin by noting that the word 'learning' covers a range of different meanings for people. Everyday conceptions about learning include the following:

- getting more knowledge;
- memorizing and reproducing;
- applying facts or procedures;
- understanding;
- seeing something in a different way;
- changing as a person (Marton et al., 1993; Saljo, 1979).

These different conceptions may be held by different people or by the same person in different circumstances and for different purposes. The list begins with a mechanical view of learning: taking in or consuming more information. Learning to recite your 'times tables' is clearly in the second meaning of memorizing and reproducing. Applying those tables to help solve mathematical problems involves the third meaning of applying facts or procedures. The list moves on to include seeing the learning as making meaning, interpreting events and constructing knowledge or understanding. Later in this section we will consider what constructing knowledge means.

We should not overstate the final conception of learning in this list: changing as a person. This refers to a process that is usually gradual. In this sense, changing as a person can refer to cognitive, social or emotional states. A young refugee becomes competent in English and this enables the young person to take an active part in the classroom and social activities alongside their peers. Receiving a small piece of feedback, such as a comment that in a conflict situation they always make a joke, enables the joker to consider whether this is always appropriate and to choose to change their reaction. Another young person considers with awe some aspect of the natural world and is enthused to explore the phenomenon further. Some aspects of their studies have changed the way each of these people look at the world and are changed by it.

These conceptions of learning all relate to what the learner is doing. We can also consider different purposes in learning. A recent United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, *Learning: The Treasure Within* stresses the need for everyone to learn for four different purposes (International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century [ICE], 1996):

- learning to know;
- learning to do;
- learning to live together;
- learning to be.

The report describes these as the four pillars of education. It argues that people need to learn how to know because in the twenty-first century the volume of evolving knowledge and know-how will continue growing. Watkins et al. (1996) describe the implications of this growth:

- The knowledge base in society is increasing rapidly, and now doubles every four years.
- In a society increasingly organized around the processing of information, more effective learners are required.
- In a learning society, employment prospects relate more to the ability to enhance and transfer learning than to the accumulation of qualifications.
- People need to learn in an increasing range of contexts, not just the compulsory ones (Watkins et al., 1996).

Learning to know

Learning that takes place in school has traditionally been mainly concerned with learning content, but the UNESCO report argues that 'it is not enough to supply each child early in life with a store of knowledge to be drawn on from then on' (ICE, 1996: 85). The volume of information available to everyone continues to grow and its nature is changing. Everyone will need to know how to deal with this unprecedented situation in the future. Acquiring information is not the same as learning how to know. 'Learning to know presupposes learning to learn' (ibid.: 87). Young people need to learn how to find, evaluate, sort, interpret and connect the information available to them.

Learning to do

Learning to do has often been given second-best status and considered more suitable for those thought of as less able, as the history of vocational education in this country demonstrates. It has become less easy to predict what young people will need to learn to do. Learners will find that it is not adequate to respond to changes that have already occurred but that they need to anticipate future needs. This means learning to manage change and diversity and to develop the skills for self-directed learning (Hayes et al., 1995). In vocational as well as other spheres it is no longer a matter of simply acquiring specific skills, rather it is the ability to be flexible and to learn and work with others that is increasingly being required. This has implications for how young people learn in schools, which we consider in Chapter 2.

Learning to live together

Some schools explicitly plan to help young people learn to live together and to equip them to live in an increasingly complex world. The UNESCO report suggests this is 'probably one of the major issues in education today' (ICE, 1996: 91). The impact of technological change upon our social world already means that people need to know how to relate to many more people, in many more roles and using many different media. It can be hard to promote this kind of learning when schools are dominated by the importance of demonstrating that knowledge has been acquired.