

Developing students as intentional learners

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Abstract

Paul Rose graduated from the Herts. MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning in 2007. In this article, he describes how he developed 'learning how to learn' approaches as a way of supporting students as independent learners.

By 2003 I had spent 15 successful years in teaching. However, I was becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to influence student understanding as effectively as I would have liked. My reading of Mike Hughes' 'Closing the learning gap' (Hughes, 1999) was a turning point for me. His discussion of the gap between what we know about effective learning and our classroom practice was very interesting, as was his view of the extent to which successful learning depends on the way students engage with the learning process. It became obvious that I needed a better understanding of what matters for learning to take place and that I needed to develop a way of sharing this understanding with my students. I hoped that this would help them move from being passive learners to active agents in their own learning.

Focusing on intentional learning

I started to think about what effective learning might look like. Over the past few years, both government and schools have attempted to develop a more active approach to learning in which students are more involved. I wondered what I could do to develop the active engagement of learners in my school. A plethora of approaches from government and elsewhere, under the banner of 'Learning to Learn' (*LtL*) have attempted to address this concern but I wanted to develop and evaluate my own *LtL* approach focusing on *intentional learning* which has been characterised as 'the situation where pupils are trying to learn and teachers are helping them to do this' (Black, McCormick, James and Pedder, 2006:123). In order to develop our

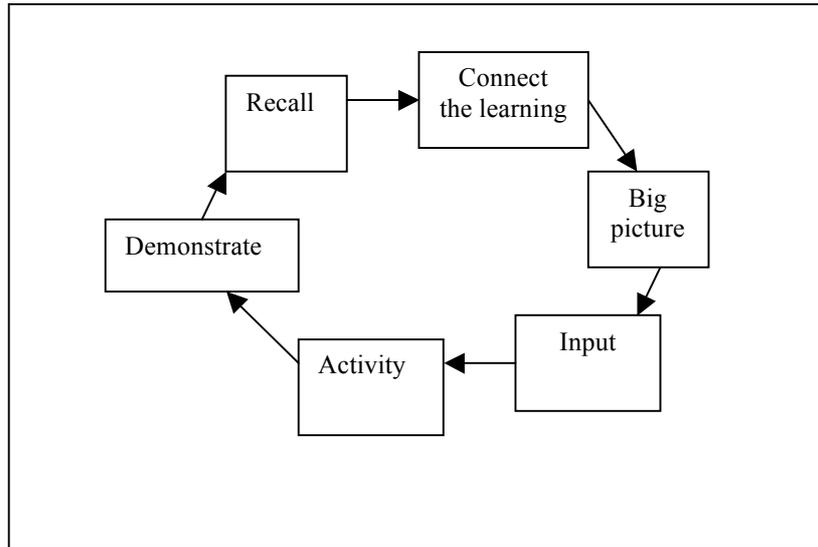
support for *intentional learning* I would need to explore students' understanding of learning to learn, what this entails and their view of how this could help them to learn more effectively. In addition, I needed to consider the vital related questions about my own role in promoting student learning.

I originally came across the term *intentional learning* in the work of Black *et al.* (2006), who describe it as the highly desirable situation where a student, aided by the teacher, focuses primarily on trying to learn rather than to do. It implies that both parties share an understanding of what is important in learning and that they have found a way of encouraging learning so that it is deliberate and desired. My review of the *LtL* literature indicated that students' adaptability needs to be encouraged by giving them more control over the learning process (Riding and Rayner, 1998; Adey, Fairbrother and Wiliam, 1999). However, there was little agreement over the most effective way to do this.

I chose to work with my low-ability Year 8 English group for several reasons. This group was characterised by an over-reliance on the teacher. They seemed to expect me to organise them, motivate them and tell them what was important. This had not been productive. I felt that they would benefit from an investigation into the factors that influence *intentional learning* and the possible impact of *LtL* strategies. It was at this stage that my reading led me to Alistair Smith's 'Accelerated Learning' programme which is similarly underpinned by the desire to move beyond traditional classroom practice (Smith, 2003). I found reflection on this programme both sobering and enlightening as it helped to explain my limited effectiveness, despite the excellent relationships in my classrooms. My view of the suitability of the Accelerated Learning Cycle to support my intended project was bolstered by a study at Cramlington High School where significant improvements were made when the cycle was employed as the school-wide model for planning (Wise and Lovatt, 2001).

The 'Accelerated Learning Cycle' proved to be a helpful model for planning lessons. More important perhaps was my decision to share this with my students as a framework for helping them to reflect on the nature of the lesson as an effective support for their learning.

Figure 1: The Accelerated Learning Cycle



The model gave me a reference point for discussion with the students about the different stages of the lesson (Rose, 2007).

Discovering the students' views

I wanted to find out more about students' views of learning. I used a questionnaire as a tool to enable them to raise issues and express their views. My students' responses to this initial questionnaire were disappointing. Many appeared to be trying to please me by endorsing the status quo (Bell, 2005) and there was a disappointing level of engagement with the more open-ended questions about their views of learning and their experience in my classroom. I decided to follow up with some student interviews, using the questionnaire responses as a basis for a discussion. As with the opening questionnaire, I saw this first interview as a way of developing my understanding of students' attitudes and raising their awareness. I chose three boys and two girls from across the ability range who I hoped would give me interesting insights.

The students struggled to describe their perceptions with any degree of accuracy. Never having had this type of conversation before, they were without an adequate mental framework or vocabulary. However the interview did indicate that nearly all the students saw their own learning as controlled by external factors. They perceived

learning as in the gift of the teacher and solely as a classroom-based activity.

I reflected on this and decided that I needed to develop a series of *LtL* activities to challenge students' views of learning. In order to explore which aspects of the Accelerated Learning programme would be most effective for my students I chose a unit focused on Shelley's 'Frankenstein'. By making group script-writing the students' central task, I hoped to focus on both specific learning practices and dispositional challenges. The task allowed sufficient opportunity for extended individual and collaborative work, and, crucially, placed considerable responsibility in the students' hands.

I introduced the work with a unit summary which introduced key vocabulary and allowed for target-setting. Information about curricular intentions was interwoven with those about *LtL*. This was a deliberate departure from my normal practice, and the first of several conscious attempts to structure the experience as part of a holistic model where learning and *LtL* are perceived as one (Black *et al.*, 2006).

The students' response

I devised a learning log to help students record what they thought about at different points in their learning (Siegler, 2002). I followed this up with further student interviews. Analysis of the data encouraged me in that the students felt the *LtL* focus was making a positive impact on their understanding of, and willingness to engage with, the process of learning, i.e. more *intentional learning*. In support of the students' views, I had noticed a remarkable improvement in their approach to learning. This was also noted by my Learning Support Assistant and by a maths teacher who was visiting bottom sets as part of his professional development. He was struck by the marked difference in approach of this group, wanted to know more about the project and immediately took on a helpful role as 'critical friend'.

In an interview with my Learning Support Assistant, students reflected carefully on the notable changes in the ways in which I had encouraged them to learn.

Well, he writes more stuff on the board, like he's asking us like personal questions, like not just answers like 'When did Macbeth die?' or something like that.... He's asking questions like 'What do you

think?’ personally, like.... ‘How do you learn the best?’ or ‘What do you think should be the best R [dispositional strategy] to use when?’

(Interview Series 3: Student R)

This is evidence of the change in focus from performance goals, attached to specific knowledge about the curriculum, to mastery goals. It also indicates the resultant change in discourse between teacher and student which has profound implications for the classroom. The implied benefits for students regarding an increased sense of self-worth led me to question Brophy’s view on what the limits of a teacher’s ambitions should be. In his conceptualisation of ‘motivation to learn’, Brophy (2004) argues that we should be focusing the student on understanding content and engaging with learning objectives. Based on my project, I think he underestimates the potential of a *LtL* focus to impact more broadly.

Giving more regard to the students’ views means that the learning experience is perceived as more purposeful. When asked, ‘In which area do you think you have made most progress over the weeks of the project?’ one student responded as follows.

I thought that you could learn just by coming into class and copying what the teacher wants. But now I know that you really have to try and take part in the lesson (answering questions, for example)

(Terminal questionnaire: Year 8 Student)

This response is symptomatic of a general increase in ‘self-efficacy’ generated by a change in classroom relationships. The data also points to a wide recognition of the gradual transition of responsibility that the *LtL* focus engendered. The following extract is one of many which showed that, by mid-way through the project, there was a fuller understanding of the balance implied in *intentional learning*.

Interviewer: *When you think you’ve had a really good learning session and you’ve really got something out of it, that it’s really gone in, who do think is normally in control of the learning?*

Student: *Both.*

Interviewer: *When you say both do you mean, you and...*

Student: *and Mr. Rose.*

(Interview Series 3: Student D)

My Year 8 students seemed to be saying that the teacher can be encouragingly influential in supporting *intentional learning*. They indicated that the group had developed a much more enthusiastic and thoughtful approach to their classroom learning, and that they felt that this had influenced their attitudes elsewhere. A large majority of the students had a much clearer understanding of the complexities of learning and now perceived themselves in a learning partnership with me where we co-owned all aspects of learning. However, though the students' views were heartening, I was aware that the progress made was superficial. Due to the brevity of the intervention, new ideas and ways of working had been introduced only. They would require reinforcement and development if they were to make a sustained difference to those involved.

Towards a deeper understanding of 'learning to learn'

Students were very keen to talk about the significance of *LtL*'s impact on classroom roles. This led me to question whether it is what the teacher imparts that is at the heart of progress towards *intentional learning* or the roles that classroom protagonists play. I then read 'Intentional Learning as a Goal of Instruction', Bereiter and Scardamalia's original chapter (1989) from which Black *et al.* (2006) had taken the phrase *intentional learning*. The chapter forced me to re-evaluate my previous interpretation of 'where pupils are trying to learn and teachers are helping them to do this' (Black *et al.*, 2006:123). It gave me insight into why my version of *LtL* was having such impact. The chapter makes it clear that students are likely to see learning through a lens of 'doing school' – a series of activities to be completed. The strategies suggested by the authors, where *intentional learning* as the 'pursuit of cognitive goals, over and above the requirements of the task' (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1989:385) becomes the norm, were similar to the approach I had taken.

There is a strong recognition in Bereiter and Scardamalia (1989) of the overarching importance of metacognition in its strongest form – the main element that distinguished my *LtL* approach from the 'narrow' approaches of the DfES and others. McGuinness (1999), in her review of thinking skills research, concluded that a metacognitive perspective should be key to any *LtL* programme. The DfES (2004) defines metacognition as a pupil's evaluation of whether the learning objectives of the lesson have been achieved. However, my project

points to the importance of creating conditions where a stronger interpretation applies. I believe the shift in focus away from the curriculum itself and towards awareness of what is required to make sense of it led to the alterations in expectations and relationships noted by the students. My prioritising of metacognition reflected Watkins' 'meta-learning' model (2005). He advises making learning the object of attention, of conversation, of reflection and of learning. I feel that it was my decision to make a rigorous distinction between 'doing' and learning to learn that underpinned the success of my attempt to encourage *intentional learning*. By encouraging a focus on the quality of the learning process rather than the outcome itself, the intervention encouraged self-esteem, 'a way of experiencing yourself when you are using your resources well' (Dweck, 2000:128) so that students found a new level of determination to master challenges, learn and assist others in learning. This is perhaps best conveyed by the attitude of Student C when he eschews the chance to take easy praise. Instead, he demonstrates improved critical perception and a focus on learning, rather than performance goals. The interviewer had asked him about one of his pieces of work that had been judged to be very good.

*I thought like cos we I well I needed more time to like make the play...
Cos it didn't really make sense really ... Like, it was okay but....*

(Interview Series 3: Student C)

Dweck's (2000) warning to teachers against trying to hide students' deficiencies and eliminate obstacles in an attempt to boost self-esteem struck a chord. However, the *LtL* focus allowed me to escape this expectation. Instead of attempting to fill gaps I encouraged the students to explore the gaps for themselves and this fundamentally changed the climate of the classroom.

The impact of *LtL* on the teacher

I believe that so far, there has been insufficient attention to the implications of the *LtL* approach for the teacher. I have come to appreciate that the phrase 'learning to learn' cuts both ways. The literature concentrates on the importance of the teacher's role rather than on the impact of the implementation of a comprehensive *LtL* approach on the teacher's role.

My sense of the fundamental importance of the teacher's practice was given a timely organisational framework in a lecture at the Cambridge Faculty of Education on 'Creativity' by Nicholls and

McLellan (2007). In it they explored the concept of teacher as ‘gatekeeper’, applying Csiksentmilhalyi’s systems approach to creativity to education (1999). On further inspection, Csiksentmilhalyi does make an excellent case for focusing on the ‘field’ [teacher] rather than the ‘individual’ [student]. As standard setters, teachers make the decisions about what should be included in the ‘domain’ and to whom the individual looks. If the aim of *LtL* is learner autonomy then, paradoxically, the best way of achieving this is not to focus primarily on the learners themselves, but on the teachers who have the capacity to engender it. My experience of the intervention and the data springing from it resonates with this. The teacher validates what is worth knowing, as all the work on the importance of learning practices recognises.

Implications for my own practice

My development work gave me insight into the extent of the teacher’s influence in encouraging *intentional learning* and pointed to ways of maximising this impact. Instead of seeing myself as the expedition leader across the landscape of learning, armed with a metacognitive machete to clear a path for those following, I came to see myself as a Park Ranger – someone who opens the gate to admit the adventurers; briefs them on the upcoming challenges; provides a range of appropriate tools for the journey; advises in an emergency and celebrates their experience on completion.

The transformation from teacher as the provider of tasks, to ‘learning consultant’ was liberating, empowering and noted by my students. The interviewer asked the students about their perceptions of changes in my practice.

Yeah. He seems to be a lot quieter like just ... looking at us and seeing what we are doing and sometimes walks around and like gives us pointers and everything ... (this is) more helpful.

(Interview Series 3: Student B)

Towards a fuller understanding of *LtL*

My first aim was to find out more about the conditions that encourage effective learning. The evidence seemed to provide relatively unambiguous signs as to how an efficacious climate can be created by the teacher. Pupils’ performance, both individually and as a group, improved significantly. However, students did not identify any particular part of the lesson as being more helpful. Instead, they continually commented on the usefulness of any moments that made

learning the object of learning, expressing this in terms of its ability to increase their levels of reflection and its impact on classroom roles and relationships.

Becoming more aware of what encourages effective learning helped to realise my second aim – to distinguish between the different *LtL* approaches. Through the combination of reading and experience I have come to an informed point of view about how learning can be promoted, though one that challenges my school's current approach. The fact that I now feel better equipped to contribute to the school's improvement agenda indicates that my project has been extremely useful in helping me to achieve my third overarching aim – to become more effective in the professional development of others.

By reflecting on the responses of the students to my new way of working I have learned much about the characteristics of my version of *LtL* and the sources of its impact. This has led me to reflect on my previous understanding of the concept. In my experience, *LtL* should not be considered a family of practices that can be presented to the students in order to improve their learning. This widely held view is unhelpful in that it suggests a looseness of structure and the maintenance of a 'delivery' model of teaching. Neither should it be seen as a precursor to *intentional learning* as it was in my own original framework. Instead, I think *LtL* and *intentional learning* should be seen as contiguous – a unitary attitude rather than skill where the teacher is helping the students to learn in a transformative way. It should not be described in terms of a programme as, if it is going to be sufficiently responsive, it will never take the same shape twice. Rather, it should be recognised as a metacognitive lens through which first teachers and then their students judge the best way of facing any learning challenge. Of course, such an exacting mental framework, in the current context, provides a challenge to what is considered best practice in our classrooms, one for which I was unprepared at the outset of the project.

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