

Learning about Learning

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what do we mean?

Learning about Learning (sometimes meta-learning) builds on the key human capacity to think about our thinking (metacognition).

Learning about learning is not some distant or academic enterprise: it means to learn about one's lived experiences of learning, and in the process to develop a richer conception of learning. Meta-learning covers a much wider range of issues than metacognition, including goals, feelings, social relations and context of learning.

what's this to do with learning?

Attempts to teach pupils "how to learn" by particular skills or strategies turn out to be ineffective, since learners may "possess" learning strategies, but not employ them, or employ them ineffectively. Learning is not a recipe, so the process of selection and use is crucial. Learning about learning promotes reflection on learning, as well as enriching the range of possible action. Greater understanding of one's own learning can include seeing how it varies across contexts. This is a crucial element in the transfer of learning. People with metacognitive awareness, are more likely to recognise when a strategy is applicable in a different-looking context. Meta-learning plays a key role in a learner's self-regulation of learning. Meta-learning promotes the versatile learner.

how do we go about it in a classroom?

First element:- noticing learning

This requires that we occasionally *stop the flow* to notice our learning and cumulatively build up a language for doing so. The best way of recounting our experience of learning is through a narrative style, telling the story of what we (increasingly) notice.

Second element: conversations about learning

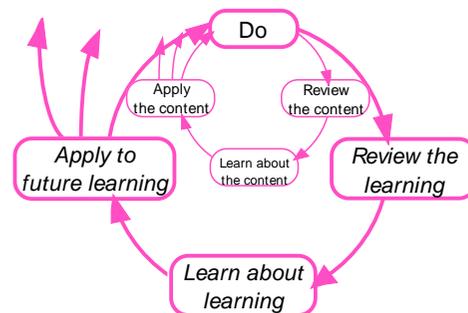
This starts with a range of prompts which help learners examine and discuss their experience (see examples in next column)

Third element:- reflection.

This can be supported through writing in a learning journal, to capture and review aspects of the learning journey. As Lynne, 10 years, puts it: "As I write I notice and understand more too."

Fourth element:- making learning an object of learning

We may think of meta-learning as an additional cycle in the learning process through which metacognitive knowledge about learning is constructed just like any other knowledge, pieced together on the basis of fragmentary data from a range of experiences.



examples

(i) Noticing things about learning,

- What is learning? – what do we mean? what is it not?
- When is it best? Where is it best?
- What helps your learning? (including, but not only, what teachers and others do)
- What steps or actions do you take in your learning?
- How did it feel?
- Does what you do and how it feels change as you go along?
- What surprises have you found?
- What hindered your learning?
- What do you learn for?
- What do you do with your learning?

(ii) Talking about learning,

starting to tell and re-tell stories of learning, with others leading to dialogue.

- Tell me about a really good learning experience
- What made it so good? What did you contribute?
- What does this tell you about you? About learning?
- How do you make sense of that?
- What puzzles you about that?
- What I notice in your story is ...
- What differences do we see between our stories?

(iii) Reflecting on learning

developing some distance from the immediate experience

- What was it like six months ago?
- What connections or patterns do you see?
- What new understandings about your learning have emerged?

(iv) Meta-learning

- How can you plan to go about your learning?
- How can you monitor how your learning is going?
- How can you review how your learning has gone?
- How will you know that it has been as good as you can get it?

what holds us back?

- centuries of classrooms that did NOT talk about learning
- our own experience of school (and not noticing much about our own learning)
- the fact that this sort of practice is slow to start, since pupils do not have the practice
- the idea that there is some special language needed
- forgetting (or not knowing) that research demonstrates that
 - a focus on learning can enhance performance, whereas a focus on performance can depress performance;
 - the developments of meta-learning can enhance performance;
 - learning about learning is a necessary element for being an effective learner in a range of situations.

Watkins C. (2001), Learning about Learning enhances Performance National School Improvement Network (Research Matters series No 13)
<http://chriswatkins.net/download/106/>