

**ALL YOU EVER
WANTED TO KNOW
ABOUT LEARNING
AND TEACHING**

**BUT WERE TOO
COOL TO ASK**



Frank Coffield



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About the author

Frank Coffield is Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sunderland. He retired at the end of 2007 after 42 years in education, having worked in the universities of Keele, Durham and Newcastle in England; and at a comprehensive school, an Approved School and Jordanhill College of Education in Scotland.

He has written books on, for example, juvenile delinquency, the so-called cycle of disadvantage, youth unemployment, vandalism and graffiti, young people and drugs, youth enterprise, a critical review of learning styles and the impact of policy on post-compulsory education. In 2008 he wrote *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority ...*, which was also published by the Learning and Skills Network.

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Dedication

This pamphlet is dedicated firstly to the 24 students whose views form the central chapters. Their names appear in alphabetical order:

Abby, Alex, Charlie, Charlotte, Cookie, Corporal, Cruz, Davina, Ellie, 'G', Ind, Judge, Joey Smith, Lowe, Loz, Mimi, Nayman, Pano, Phil, Sol, Sprinter, Stephan, Shadow and Youngie.

It is also dedicated to their tutors who gave generously of their time and energy to get this project off the ground and to sustain it in flight.

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Preface

I love stories where the underdog gets the last laugh. For example, some years ago I took a group of students who were training to become teachers to visit a City Technology College. We arrived at the school in time for morning assembly, which was taken by the headteacher in a black academic gown. He arranged us in a semi-circle on the stage behind him and then began to recite a famous passage from the Bible, St Paul's letter to the Corinthians. When he finished the final sentence about 'faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love', he turned to the hundreds of 11–18-year-old pupils in front of him and asked them if they had any questions to ask about St Paul's letter. Eyes were lowered as all the youngsters tried to evade being picked on. The head repeated his request as he marched up and down the aisles and finally he settled on one 13- or 14-year-old girl whom he asked to stand up. 'You've always got something to say for yourself, Elizabeth', he commented, 'Do you have a question to ask of St Paul?' Elizabeth's neck and cheeks turned the colour of poppies, but from somewhere she found the courage to ask: 'Sir, did the Corinthians ever write back to St Paul?'



Introduction

I've written this booklet not only for students but with students because I want them to become better at learning



I've written this booklet not only for students but with students because I want them to become better at learning. The overall aim is to offer students in the post-compulsory sector a jargon-free introduction to learning and teaching that could be used in, say, general tutorials in further education (FE) colleges.

The tone of such a publication is all-important. To help me avoid the twin dangers of either talking down to students or being too obscure, I approached two large, general FE colleges, one in the north and one in London. In both institutions, with the help of accommodating tutors, I interviewed small groups of students (each consisting of two males and two females), following academic courses (AS or A2), vocational courses (Travel and Tourism) and, from the Foundation Learning Tier (FLT), Level 1 (Care or Catering). All 24 students were volunteers, each of them chose a nickname, which is used throughout this publication, and they completed:

- a form giving basic information
- a questionnaire on learning
- a form giving their views on a 'good student', a 'good tutor' and a 'good lesson'
- a learning log with entries made daily for a minimum of three weeks
- their views on early drafts of these chapters
- and any other comments they had on learning and teaching.

I involved them in free-ranging discussions about their courses on two separate occasions in November 2008 and March 2009, which enabled me to go back over comments they had made in writing. They also attended a conference on learning and teaching in March 2009, where they discussed these topics with principals, tutors and researchers from across the country.

Where their views are incorporated into the text their nickname is followed by their course area or level in brackets, eg Youngie (FLT). Their views, however, deserve to be treated as more than the source of lively examples of my arguments; their experiences as learners deserve chapters of their own. I have included a few topics that kept appearing and re-appearing in the data. Our discussions also prompted me to return to such topics as the misuse of learning styles, which I'd hoped I'd dealt with elsewhere (eg Coffield, 2008), but bad practice seems to spread faster than good.

I've included references to the research literature, although I've tried to keep these to a minimum in the first four chapters, to enable students to read for themselves, if they wish, the research on which my arguments are based. On the other hand, there is a growing body of knowledge on learning

and teaching and this project needs to be placed appropriately within it. I want the text to be easy for students to read but also easy for them to challenge.

I want to make clear that I have not written a good study guide, where I provide tips for students on, for example, how to revise for exams. There are already plenty of such books in existence (eg Race, 1992; Northedge, 1990). Instead I want to offer students some of the latest thinking about learning so that they can become better learners.

This booklet is also a companion text to *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority...* (Coffield, 2008), which I wrote for tutors. My intention this time was to write a text primarily for and with students, but I quickly realised that their views contained some important messages for their tutors about, for instance, how they thought their lessons could be improved. So this booklet, like all football matches, now consists of two halves. In the first part, I talk directly to students about **learning and teaching**. In the second part, I change the style, the audience and the emphasis by speaking to tutors about what I think I learned from this project on the theme of **teaching and learning**. I've learned, for example, that it's impossible to discuss learning in colleges without simultaneously talking about teaching and vice-versa. Learning and teaching are best treated as one, single process; so from now on, I'll refer to learning and teaching as L&T or T&L, but always as one singular noun. If some tutors want to dip into the first set of four chapters and some students into the second set, that would be a pleasing outcome for me at least. Tutors in both colleges where I conducted the research also commented on an early version of this publication, which was significantly improved by their suggestions and constructive criticisms.

In our discussions, I asked the 24 students to put themselves in the place of young school leavers who were planning to come to an FE college. What advice would they offer them? What would they have liked to have been told about before coming to college? What would they like their tutors to know about how it feels like to study at their college?

Before presenting their views, I offer in Part One what I think would be most useful for students to know about L&T; for example, that they are not stuck with the intelligence they were born with, but that they can learn to become more intelligent (Chapter 1). In Chapter 2 I argue from research evidence that a positive, workmanlike partnership with tutors is the key to success, but that mutual respect between student and tutor is not sufficient. The third chapter criticises some unhelpful notions about L&T such as that learning should always be fun or that learning is all about passing exams. In the fourth chapter I describe three ways in which students can improve their own learning.

The first two chapters in Part Two present the views of students. In Chapter 5 they describe their ideal conditions for learning by explaining what for them constitutes a good student, a good tutor and a good lesson. The descriptions are then compared in Chapter 6 with their everyday experiences of L&T in college, as presented in the learning logs they filled in for three weeks. In Chapter 7 I draw out three topics which kept cropping up in the data and which I did not set out to study but which nevertheless were significant for the L&T of these students: learning styles, new technologies and part-time jobs. Chapter 8 looks back over all the messages these students are sending about their L&T and draws out some general points that I hope will be widely discussed, debated and improved.

PART ONE
LEARNING AND
TEACHING



1 Are you bright or thick? You can become more intelligent

The essential point is that all children should have an equal opportunity of acquiring intelligence...

Sir Edward Boyle (1963:iv)

Do you think you are a bright student or a slow learner? Do you believe you were born with a fixed amount of intelligence that remains the same for the rest of your life? Do you think that some people are just more intelligent than others and so don't need to study? And do you believe it's their inborn, superior intelligence that makes them so successful at learning? Have you noticed that your class is usually divided into three groups: those the tutors think are the more able, the average and the less able? Which group are you in? Have you ever been called 'dull' or 'thick' at school or college or treated as if you were? Or did the low level of the work you were given to do in class make you realise that your tutor thought you were not as bright as you know you are? Did you ever respond by mucking about and losing interest in learning? Or are you a 'bright' student whose achievements have been dismissed as the result of natural ability rather than of hard work?

**You can learn
to become more
intelligent**



If so, I've good news for you. One of the main findings of educational research is that **all** young people can learn to high levels (eg Hart *et al.*, 2004). Everyone can improve, and even the brightest of the bright can be shown how to become better at learning. In other words, you can learn to become more intelligent; your abilities are not fixed or set in stone at birth, or at the age of 7 or 14 or 21. Whatever age you are, you can transform your own future and prospects by changing how you think about your abilities. And if damage has been done to you in the past by insensitive or overworked teachers, believe me, it can be undone. All the factors that influence whether you learn or not, whether you learn quickly or slowly, can be **changed** for the better.

Experts have known for over 40 years that everyone can get better at learning, but the belief that people are given at birth fixed amounts of intelligence that they can do nothing about has remained very popular in British society. The evidence is, however, heavily stacked against such a pessimistic view. As long ago as 1963, Sir Edward Boyle, a Conservative Secretary of State for Education, wrote: 'The essential point is that all children should have an equal opportunity of acquiring intelligence and of developing their talents and abilities to the full' (1963: iv). Notice: you can acquire intelligence, you can become more intelligent.

Sir Edward came to this conclusion after examining evidence that revealed a huge national wastage of talent: some of the very brightest people in the country who were working class failed to achieve qualifications at school. And this connection between coming from a working-class background and doing poorly at school has continued up to the present. Moreover, the differences between the achievements of young people increase as they move through primary and secondary school. Children come into schools at the age of five with different abilities and by the time they are 16 the difference between those who learn quickly and those who learn slowly has become much greater. Indeed, able children from poor backgrounds are quickly overtaken in exams by less able children from more affluent homes. If a Tory Minister was persuaded by this evidence to abandon the belief that all our intelligences are fixed at birth, then perhaps you should be too.

Let me prove to you quickly that you are brighter than you think. From a very early age you will have worked out in school whom the teacher thinks are the bright kids, the average kids and the slow to learn. You will also have learned pretty fast which group you were, and are, in. You will probably have thought up a large number of ways of avoiding questions you didn't want to answer, of avoiding being shown up in class, and of joining forces with your mates to fight back against the negative attitudes of certain teachers towards you. Looking back on your school days did you get the younger teachers or the supply teachers or the weakest teachers? Did any of your teachers allow you to get away with doing very little? Did their low expectations for you have an impact on your commitment or hopes for the future? Is it possible you've come to believe you're not very bright because you've been told so often?

Your lack of success so far may have nothing to do with your level of ability, but more to do with your lack of opportunities to learn. Did you notice how those whom the teachers think are the brightest students are treated differently from you? You probably have also thought that this division of students into 'clever' or 'thick' is too simple. You may also be one of those students who has consistently performed well at school and have therefore not spent any time reflecting on your own learning or that of your classmates; and they may 'possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform and understand in different ways' (Gardner, 1993: 11). Some students are more practical (eg good with machines) or skilful with a guitar or a computer, or have a real talent for getting on with other people, or for sport or painting or dancing or singing or cooking. And sometimes you and your friends may have been perfectly capable of doing the work but were not prepared to do it because of the way you were being treated.

I'd like you to think back to your school days and answer three questions to see how well you have been prepared for college. First, do you think of yourself as someone who is able to learn new things successfully and easily? Second, do you know how to learn and do you know your strengths and weaknesses as a learner? Third, did you leave school keen to go on learning throughout your life? If your answer to any of these questions is 'no', then you have been poorly prepared by the schooling you have received so far. But don't worry. I've written this booklet with other students and with the main purpose of helping people like yourself; and, together with the help of your tutors, you can and will succeed.

My aim in this booklet is to help you to understand how you, other students and your tutors learn; and what you need to do to improve your learning. For example, I want to encourage you after a day's hard work at college to consider: what makes it easy for you to learn? What makes it difficult? How could the teaching be improved? If you get learning support, does it deal with your real learning needs? If you want to complain about the teaching, do you know how to go about it so that you get your complaint dealt with? If you've never been shown how to monitor and improve your learning, then please read on.

Let me repeat the main message of this first chapter. You have the power to improve your learning. All students have. You can become better and better at learning and you can become more intelligent than you are now. Being intelligent is not like having blue eyes or being six foot tall, characteristics over which you have no control. Through sheer hard work you can become more intelligent than you are now. You can become successful, no matter what's happened to you in the past. Are you prepared to take the risk (which comes with all learning) of making a few mistakes and learning from them? Are you prepared to challenge yourself to improve? You may surprise yourself and your tutors by how well you do.

Your lack of success so far may have nothing to do with your level of ability, but more to do with your lack of opportunities to learn





2 Students and tutors: mutual respect is not enough

Teachers are 'keepers of gates to better worlds'.

Janice Galloway (2008: 169)

1 L&T as a partnership between you and your tutor

At a conference in February 2008, a student from an FE college said to the tutors present: 'If you want respect, show us respect first.' Absolutely right. The first condition for you to succeed is that you feel comfortable, secure and confident at college. As you know, you need an atmosphere in class which is relaxed, friendly and business-like, where students are not subjected to 'put downs', if their answers are wrong or their suggestions considered ridiculous by the teacher. As Loz (AS) put it: 'I like it when you can debate something with a tutor rather than them shouting you down.' And some students like Pano (T&T) have already at the age of 16 learned to react differently to the range of teachers they meet: 'I've learned to keep quiet. I don't answer her back. Some teachers always have to be right. They hate it when the student is right and they've made a mistake. Some teachers can't admit they're wrong.'

You may be already experiencing a delightful difference from school in that you are at last being treated like an adult rather than as a child, and at the same time being expected to behave like an adult. Perhaps for the first time you are also being treated as a respected and valued member of the college, and as a result, you have begun to respond, by treating your tutors with respect. You have probably 'sussed out' pretty quickly that they are genuinely interested in you and are prepared to work hard to help you pass exams and get on. Remember that tutors have a professional duty to work in the interests of each and every one of their students; your job is to come to meet them half-way, to be prepared to be taught by them.

So a trusting, humane and workmanlike partnership between you and your tutor is the basis of your success; and just as with your relationships with your friends, you need to put time and effort into it for it to flourish. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I look at learning and teaching NOT as two separate activities but as one joint enterprise: what I call L&T, where students and tutors work together as members of one team. You are far more likely to succeed if, instead of trying to learn everything on your own, you build a partnership with your tutor, a partnership that will only take off if you are prepared to work **with** your tutors rather than **against** them. If, for instance, you spend acres of time in class texting your boyfriend or girlfriend or finding out who Arsenal or, heaven forbid, Manchester City are about to sign today,

So a trusting, humane and workmanlike partnership between you and your tutor is the basis of your success



then you're not giving your tutor a chance to teach you. I'm suggesting instead that, as well as receiving respect from and giving it to your tutors, you make with them a joint commitment to learning. So it is not just up to the staff to get you through exams; it's a joint responsibility.

As a model or mental image of L&T, think of a **tandem bike** with the tutor sitting in front and you behind. For the bike to move as fast as it can, it needs both cyclists to pedal in time with each other and both to coordinate their efforts to propel it forward. They have to be in 'synch' with each other; and your tutor's aim is that as soon as possible you should become the lead cyclist at the front.

For you to become a trusted partner, you'll need to spend some of your own time studying and producing coursework to meet deadlines, over and above the basic hours that your course insists that you spend in college. To give yourself a chance of completing your course successfully, I'd also recommend that you work for no more than 10–12 hours a week at any part-time job, although I'm aware that many students work for longer than this out of sheer financial hardship and necessity. That's what the research suggests (see Buscha *et al.*, 2008). No one learns well if exhausted or made irritable by long hours at work.

This approach to L&T presents you with a challenge: the responsibility for learning is yours. You, after all, are the person who stands to gain most. You're the one who'll end up with the BTEC qualification, or the Diploma, or the A-level. It means giving up hours to studying that you have previously spent watching TV, listening to music, or chatting to your friends on-line. See Box 2.1 for an example of how one student consolidated her learning in college by first checking her understanding of what she had just been taught and then extending and enriching it through a virtual network she set up of students following the same syllabus.

Box 2.1

Rebecca, a 17-year-old AS-level student from London, explained how, as soon as she gets home from college, she goes over her notes on what had been taught that day. At the beginning of the academic year, through Facebook, she had helped to set up a voluntary group of students up and down the country, who were studying the same subject with the same examination board. They swapped notes, discussed the different approaches taken by their teachers to the same topics, and played with the new ideas being presented to them on the course to make sure they understood them. Anything she still failed to understand she took up with her tutor at the next session. She had also learned to discuss her course with students who had taken it the year before, asking them for suggestions about what books, articles and websites to consult and how best to pass the exams. Is it any wonder she got an A?

Let me put the same point in different words. I'm suggesting that, instead of going through the motions of studying without any real commitment to your subject or your tutor, you take **control** of the learning opportunities available at college and/or at your place of work; and make them work for you. For example, before you enrol in any class you could ask: what course is most likely to meet my needs and aspirations? What's the drop-out rate on this course? Do all apprentices in this firm have a contract with their employer?

Consider yourself a learning apprentice



I'm suggesting that, whether your course is academic or vocational, you consider yourself a **learning apprentice**, someone who already has relevant experience and knowledge about learning, but whose aspirations and attitudes to learning and future careers are likely to change for all sorts of reasons – social (your partner falls seriously ill), financial (you need a part-time job to make ends meet), or educational (you want to switch to another course).

In the middle of the twentieth century when I was a student at university and faced with a choice of options, I chose the tutors I thought I was most likely to learn from rather than the topics I was most interested in. And it worked every time. You are unlikely to have a choice of tutor at college, but you may be able to choose if you go on to university. Since leaving university I have listened with profit to experts who are enthusiastic about their subject, irrespective of what that subject happened to be. All my career I have heard students praise to the skies inspiring, committed and knowledgeable teachers and I've also heard them describe the pain caused by insensitive teachers. The role of teachers in all our lives is vital. Have you ever heard of anyone putting their success down to a particular software package or an interactive whiteboard? I haven't.

My arguments so far can be summarised by the phrase 'mutual respect', and it's essential for your success. But on its own it's not enough. In addition you need to learn to work effectively as a member of a team, to act on the feedback you get on your assignments and to evaluate your own learning. I shall deal with the first two of these three tasks in this chapter and the third in the following chapter.

2 Learning from your classmates

The role of teachers in all our lives is vital



Apart from your tutor, there are other forms of help available to you in class because there's more than one potential tutor present. You may find it easier to learn, for example, from classmates who know more about spreadsheets or emailing, just as they can learn from you if you know more about statistics or English grammar. People of your own age are likely to understand your difficulty and perhaps are better placed than tutors to help you get over it. If you learn to respect each other's contributions, if you help each other to fill the gaps everyone has in their knowledge and skills, then you'll be well on the way to creating a 'learning community', where all the members of your class help each other to become better learners, where the tutors are also learners and learners are also tutors.

But learning to work with other people requires us all to develop social and emotional as well as intellectual skills. For instance, we all need to learn that most people respond better to being praised than criticised; that most people tend to be particularly sensitive about what they don't understand; and that some fellow students, when working in groups, may act as passengers rather than fully committed players. The value of group work, however, is that you realise that your classmates often tackle the same problems in interestingly different ways from you; that your own ideas are challenged or confirmed, and that your own thinking is improved through dialogue and debate in ways you couldn't manage on your own. Moreover, as Davina (AS) pointed out, group work helps 'you to get to know other students and feel less isolated'; and Cookie (FLT) added that working in

teams was exactly what would be needed in jobs. Group work at its best can also provide ideas that neither the tutor nor the students would have thought of if they had just worked on their own.

3 Acting on feedback

I mentioned earlier that you need to be an active partner, working in harmony with your tutor to improve your grades. Let me give you an example of what I mean. If you get an assignment back months after you've written it, you will probably have lost all interest in it. What you need, while you still remember the effort you put into your assignment, are encouraging comments, which explain clearly what you have done well or badly; and, most important of all, how in detail you could improve your work. Ideally, your tutor will include in his or her comments a target for you to aim for at the start of your next assignment.

Let me spell out in a little more detail the important role you need to play in all of this. You need to act on the feedback or comments you get from your tutor, who will then respond to your revised assignment and set you further work to do and so on. The image I like to use is of an **upward spiral** to capture the notion that you submit an assignment; your tutor then sends you detailed feedback on it, you act on that feedback; your tutor responds to what you produce and, through batting your work backwards and forwards between you, the quality of your learning is steadily improved.

This is why I earlier called L&T one joint activity of student and tutor together. It takes two of you. Your tutor cannot do it on her own. Neither can you.

Why did I choose the example of feedback? Because research has shown that providing students with 'dollops of feedback' (Hattie, 1999: 9) is one of the most effective ways that tutors have of improving your level of achievement. Feedback helps you because it makes clear what the goals of your learning are, how much progress you are making towards those goals and what you need to do next. Feedback lets you know quickly what you have (or haven't) understood and why your answers are correct (or incorrect). It can also help you by suggesting different and/or better ways of tackling the problem. Feedback can also increase your confidence, motivation and ability to evaluate your own performance; it can strengthen your belief in yourself as a competent student, who is not just coping with the work but making steady progress. Above all, the best compliment you can be paid is when a tutor takes your work seriously, thinks carefully about it and then shows you in detail how to improve it. You return the compliment by acting on the good advice, your tutor is pleased that you have responded to her suggestions and so spends more time considering what further advice to offer you. And so the working relationship between you and your tutor blossoms.

Finally, I want to explore further the idea of upward and downward spirals to help explain two types of experience in education, which I present in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, and which, like spiral staircases, can lift you up or bring you down. These are obviously simplifications, which are not meant to represent the pathways taken by any particular student, but are rather attempts to capture the typical experience of large groups of students.

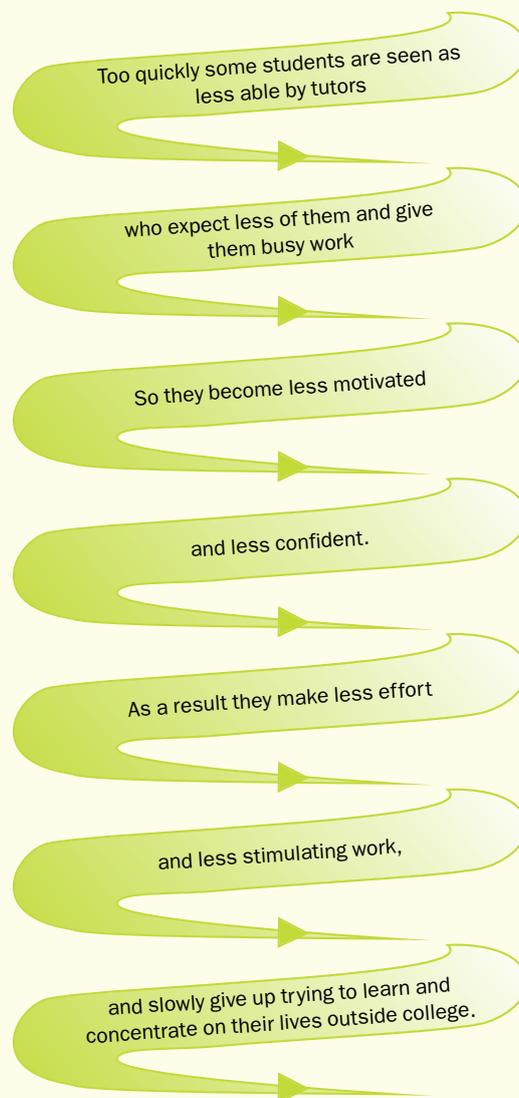
In the downward spiral in figure 2.1, I'm suggesting that at times some tutors are too quick to attach labels of 'clever' or 'thick' to some students; they therefore expect less of the latter group and set them what I call 'busy work'.

Some tutors are too quick to attach labels of 'clever' or 'thick' to some students



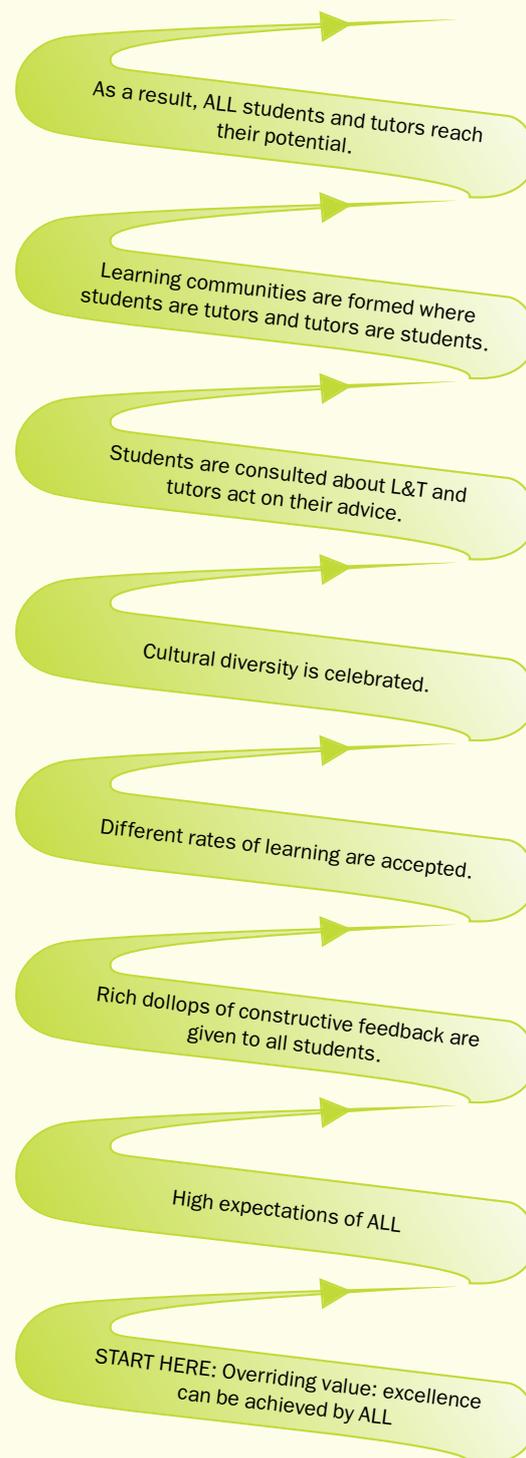
For example, cutting out pictures from magazines and sticking them into folders. The example Charlie (AS) gave was of a general studies tutor who at the end of the class binned all the worksheets the students had spent an hour working on. The students realise that when they are set such trivial tasks either they are thought by their tutors to be stupid; or the tutors have little interest in what they teach; or low-level work is being used to punish them for unruly behaviour or to prevent trouble breaking out. Whatever the explanation, students may become less motivated and less confident in their abilities. As a result they make less effort, carry out even the 'busy work' poorly (if they do it at all) and so confirm their tutors' views that they are not very bright. So the tutors pay them even less attention, set them even more boring work to help control the unruly behaviour that has begun to break out and so on downwards in the spiral. The upshot? The students slowly give up any pretence of learning and concentrate on other aspects of their life where they are successful.

Figure 2.1 Downward spiral



It does not, however, need to be like that; and if the above paragraph in any way describes the relationship you have with your tutors, I suggest you raise your concerns with your tutor first and, if that doesn't work, use the student support services in the college such as mentors, student representatives and the formal complaints procedure. If all that fails, I think you need to consider changing your tutor, your course or your college, although I accept that this recommendation is easier to make than to carry out. I also discuss in more detail how to make a complaint effectively towards the end of the next chapter.

Figure 2.2 Upward spiral



Let us imagine a college where, as in figure 2.2 and reading from the bottom of the diagram upwards, the over-riding value held by the staff is that excellence can be achieved by ALL students, and where excellence is defined as the highest possible level of achievement for the highest possible number of students. In such a college staff have high expectations of all the students who regularly receive rich dollops of constructive feedback on their assignments. (This is part of a movement in education that your tutors know by the term, Assessment **for** Learning, ie not just assessment **of** your learning, but assessment that helps you to learn better.) In classes, the fact that students learn at different rates is understood and accepted; the culture of different students from ethnic minorities and majorities is not seen as a problem but as a matter for celebration; and students are as a matter of routine consulted about what helps and what prevents them learning, with their tutors acting on the constructive advice offered by the students.

In these ways the tutors are intent on creating 'learning communities', where students act as tutors to help other students learn and where tutors show by their behaviour that they too are still learning. Tutors who demonstrate that they can learn from their students can have positive and powerful effects on the motivation of those students. As a result of such positive learning partnerships, all students realise their potential and achieve grades that some had earlier thought were beyond them, for example, when they first entered college. But more than just being successful at exams, they have become lifelong learners. Now that's the kind of college you want to be studying at and, believe me, such places do exist.

The two figures of downward and upward spirals are most unlikely to capture your particular path through primary and secondary schools. So, as a first **activity**, I suggest you produce a diagram that plots the main events in your educational history so far. This is solely for your own use so be as honest and open as you dare.

Tutors who demonstrate that they can learn from their students can have positive and powerful effects on the motivation of those students.



Activity 1

For each of the stages in your education so far, please answer these questions. What did you learn? Did you have any problems? What teachers do you remember? Why?

Nursery school

Primary school

Secondary school

FE college

What would you like your tutor to know about you now?

Is this a topic you could raise in a tutorial or something you would prefer to let him or her know about privately?

3 Five false ideas about learning

Box 3.1

An inspector was sitting at the back of a class of AS students, who were preparing for an exam in Chemistry. When the tutor finished talking, the inspector leaned over to the lad sitting closest to him and asked ‘Well, what was all that about?’

‘No idea,’ replied the student. ‘I wasn’t listening either.’

You do not come to the topic of learning with an empty mind. You are very unlikely to start reading this chapter without some ideas about learning. On the contrary, you already have a long history of learning, during which you will have picked up a number of useful and not so useful ideas and practices. I want to criticise a number of claims you may have heard from others about learning before I turn to saying something more positive about it in the next chapter. I’m trying to clear the field of obstacles, balloons and banana skins so that the game can get started. I’ve called these unhelpful notions the five fallacies of learning; that is, arguments based on false or misleading reasoning.

First fallacy: ‘Learning is fun and always should be.’

This is a claim usually made by the dullest of teachers. My own experience (and perhaps yours too) is that learning is often difficult and sometimes even disturbing. For example, I’m currently trying to learn Spanish. I’ve got beyond the stage of being able to order two large beers or two small mineral waters (usually it’s two beers), but I’ve now discovered that Spanish verbs are often irregular. There’s even a 674-page book called *501 Spanish verbs* (Kendris, 1996), which I’m advised to read from cover to cover. There’s no escaping the conclusion that holding down a conversation in Spanish will require hard, regular graft from me.

I also remember how confused I felt when I began to study psychology for the first time. The language of the social sciences – the stress on tendencies rather than certainties, for example, ‘some students in certain situations tend to react badly when...’ rather than ‘all students react badly when...’ – was something I was unused to and I had to learn a new way of thinking. This did not come easily or quickly to me and I remember being frustrated by the unwillingness of my tutors to provide clear and simple

Learning is often difficult and sometimes even disturbing



answers to my clear and simple questions. Learning often means taking risks and exposing yourself to uncertainty and failure, but you can grow from the mistakes you make. It's one of the standard ways of learning.

I'm not suggesting that all learning needs to be hard. There's a place for having a laugh with your tutors or, as Joey Smith (AS) put it 'having a little crack on'. You may find part(s) of your course that you are genuinely interested in and enjoy; and being challenged to tackle something new or just beyond your current ability brings its own reward, namely, that you get on top of something difficult. What I'm reacting against is the notion that everything should be fun all the time. And, of course, definitions of fun vary, with some students being well pleased, for example, when they supply correct answers to tutors' questions.

Second fallacy: 'Learning is all about passing exams and getting qualifications.'

Davina (AS) said, for example, that 'general tutorials are not taken seriously because you don't get a qualification out of them'. You may have picked up this notion on your way through school where, because of intense government pressure on teachers and schools, the concentration is on tests and even more tests. The basic idea here is that your mind is like a box that can be filled with facts, formulae and knowledge just as your room at home can be stuffed with CDs, clothes and photos. According to this approach, as you grow up, you either passively receive new bits of knowledge or you actively seek out such knowledge for yourself and make sense of the world in your own terms. In short, learning is seen as acquiring facts and skills in just the same way as shopping is about gaining possession of shoes, sandwiches or season tickets: learning is seen as **acquisition**. As you know, you need to acquire qualifications to apply for most jobs, so acquisition is important and may become more so as the competition for good jobs becomes ever fiercer. This approach to learning is the dominant one in the formal education system, but recently there has been a fresh look at learning as **participation** because learning is about much more than passing tests.

In this new view, learning to become a nursery nurse or a plumber is seen as a process of learning to act and talk like an experienced nursery nurse or a plumber. And you do that by learning from people who have worked successfully for years as nursery nurses or plumbers. This approach is not so much interested in what is happening inside your head as in how you, as a novice or newcomer, slowly change your identity to become a nursery nurse or plumber by watching and copying those who know what it means to hold down these jobs successfully.

The value of this newish approach is that it suggests there is much more to learning than cramming facts and spewing them out in an assignment or exam. If you have become disenchanted with memorising facts that are irrelevant to your life outside school and to the job you want to do, then, instead, consider learning as an apprenticeship, where you slowly gain know-how or competence from an expert. Instead of receiving worksheets from a teacher, you learn by watching the skilled actions of a carpenter or hairdresser and then you begin to imitate them. The motivation comes from your desire to become a skilled and respected professional hairdresser or

carpenter. Notice, not woodwork as in school, but carpentry as in the world of work. You not only gain technical skills (learning as acquisition), but you slowly become immersed in the culture of your chosen trade or profession (learning as participation). So you become a chef or a beautician or a travel agent by using both main forms of learning, and this is equally true of academic students who become historians or chemists or engineers. David Hargreaves has neatly summarised the importance of your vocational learning to you as an individual and to society:

to learn a job through apprenticeship is not just to learn a skill or to earn a living. It is to join a community, to acquire a culture, to demonstrate a competence and to forge an identity. It is, in short, to achieve significance, dignity and self-esteem as a person.

(1997: 5)

That's worth working hard for as it is one of the main ways in which young people can become respected, skilled workers on a skilled wage.

Third fallacy: 'You only learn in classrooms.'

Box 3.2

Lily, the 14-year-old American heroine of the novel *The secret life of bees*, claims at one point: 'I learned more from my grandmother than I did the whole eighth grade.'

Kidd (2002: 77)

Consider learning as an apprenticeship, where you slowly gain know-how or competence from an expert



In fact, I learned most of what I've really needed in life not in classrooms but from my best mates. I mean all the important issues like: what are the facts of life? How much can I drink without getting drunk? How should I treat a girl when we're out on a first date? What's the minimum I need to do to pass this course?

From whom did you learn the facts of life? Who told you about that part-time job? Who introduced you to your favourite type of music? I'll bet that for most of you all these valuable types of learning took place outside classrooms and without the help of teachers.

This type of learning is called 'informal learning', the kind of learning you do on your own or with your friends and family, quite apart from the 'formal learning' you do in classrooms. Experts have estimated that if all the learning you do were to be represented by an iceberg, the section above the surface of the water would cover your 'formal learning' in college but the two-thirds of the iceberg under the surface would represent the much greater volume of your 'informal learning'. (See here Coffield, 2000, for more information, if you want it.)

The experts go further. It is not just the amount of informal learning that makes it important, it's the quality. The informal learning that students do in clubs, societies and in cafes/pubs is not a minor, additional aspect of life at college, it's a central feature of that experience. Listen to Krishan Kumar, a professor of sociology, talking about informal learning in universities that provide students with:

the space and opportunity to flourish, often in areas remote from the formal academic curriculum. It is in this, rather than in the provision of formal learning, that the universities are distinctive. It has often struck many of us who work in universities that the students learn more from each other in a variety of ways, than they do from us.

(1997: 28)

If there is anything in this argument, it suggests that there are benefits to engaging in the social, sporting and cultural life of your college rather than just attending classes.

Your college probably offers a wide range of enrichment activities in addition to the formal curriculum such as film clubs, dancing classes, college band, creative writing workshops, cooking for beauticians and professional grooming for travel and tourist students. University admissions officers and employers look for evidence of involvement in these types of activity because they want students and employees who are intellectually curious and interested in more than the subject they are studying.

I don't want to be misunderstood here. I'm not trying to belittle the formal work you do with and for your tutor in college, which I said in the previous chapter was essential for your success; but I am trying to get it into proportion with the other, perhaps more personal, types of learning you do.

Fourth fallacy: 'Learners are at the heart of the educational system.'

Box 3.3

'Learners are at the heart of the system.' Government statement

'We aim to listen to all our learners and respond to their needs.' FE college mission statement

The politicians and the policy-makers, who are in charge of the education system, like to claim that they have made you and your classmates the most important people in college. But from your experiences so far at school and college, do you feel that your convenience and your well-being come before that of the staff? Learning is also about power and control, as you will probably be well aware; for example, admission tutors have more say than you about which course you will get on to. Shadow and Judge (both T&T) asked for changes to their timetables to avoid a two-and-a-half-hour session on a Friday afternoon. The issue was raised at a learners' forum and the staff offered to move the session to Tuesday, the day set aside for private study, but the students declined the offer.

There's a skill in learning how to complain in a way that will get your complaint answered.



There's a skill in learning how to complain in a way that will get your complaint answered. If you have a problem, I suggest you approach your tutor, in the first instance, to see if the difference between you can be resolved quickly. If not, the college will have a number of mechanisms for dealing with complaints: you could, for example, talk to your student representative and ask for the matter to be discussed at a learners' forum, or whatever the term used in your college. There will also be a formal complaints procedure that is open to you if the problem cannot be solved with your tutor or at the learners' forum. No matter what avenue you choose, the way you present your complaint is all-important. As you will probably have discovered already, you need to be reasonable and flexible, presenting your case accurately and without exaggeration. It's also a good idea to check how many of your classmates share your dissatisfaction and are prepared to support you. If, in addition, you come prepared to discuss constructively a number of options, then you are more likely to get the change you want.

In other words, you need to know how to engage sensitively and productively with your tutors and with college systems. You also need to know your rights and be prepared to argue for them. If your college claims in its prospectus that the needs of students come first, then keep them to their word. For instance, don't be fobbed off with offers of on-line learning in place of individual attention from tutors. The difference between challenging interactions with a tutor and on-line learning can be compared to the difference between all the excitement of a live gig and listening to a CD passively at home.

You also need to experience a variety of methods of teaching with plenty of dialogue with the tutors, discussion with your classmates and activities (games, role-playing, problem-solving) rather than just listening to your tutor talk. Your work will improve if you are taught at least part of the time in a small group, where you and your peers are known personally by a tutor who challenges and extends your learning. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, you are also entitled to individual feedback on your coursework, which is tailored to your needs. Just being given a mark or even an encouraging comment like 'Good work' is not sufficient: you need to know in detail how to improve.

Your college should also be offering you opportunities to practise citizenship by, for example, representing your class or year group. Our schools, colleges and universities need to become much more democratic by involving students much more in the procedures by which such institutions are run (eg what are the rules? who has drawn them up? and who decides how they are applied to students?). There are, however, in my opinion, limits to how far such democracy can be pushed: if you come to college to learn from experts, then their knowledge, vocational experience and skills need to be respected. They are in charge.

Fifth fallacy: 'Learning pays.'

You will probably have seen a poster with this slogan (or something similar) on the walls of your college, but it's a wild exaggeration. Some learning does indeed pay, but some doesn't. You need independent, up-to-date and research-informed advice so that you make the right choice of course and institution (see Box 3.4). For example, your choice of institution will greatly influence what subjects you will be able to study, as small institutions typically offer around 18 A-levels, with large providers offering

over 40 different A-levels. And did you know that small sixth forms are less effective than larger schools or colleges? Students tend to get better A-levels as the size of the sixth form increases. The reasons appear to be less challenge, less choice of subject and poorer resources in small sixth forms (see Fletcher and Perry, 2008, for further information).

Box 3.4

Geoff Stanton has argued that most of the advice offered to young people 'is currently structured so as to help government to monitor and manage the system', rather than provided in the interests of young people. He contrasts below the official advice offered by government with the advice that should be given to young people to protect their interests.

Official statement	The advice young people should hear
After GCSE you have a choice of attending a school sixth form, attending a general FE college, a sixth form college, or taking an apprenticeship.	In theory you have this choice, but in practice both school sixth forms and sixth form colleges (SFCs) will have entry criteria that may keep you out. Most SFCs make these criteria clear in their prospectuses. Many school sixth forms do not. If by 'apprenticeship' you mean being taken on by an employer, this cannot be guaranteed, but will depend on whether there's a firm in your area offering places. If you attend a school with a sixth form, and want to study A-levels, watch that they don't discourage you from considering other options.
With regard to apprenticeships, the Learning and Skills Council has agreements in place with employers and training providers that ensure a high level of quality in their training.	Some apprenticeships are excellent, with well-structured work-place activities and substantial off-the-job training. In others, you will work in much the same way as you would if you were not an apprentice, and get very little time to learn away from work. Some apprenticeships also have low completion levels.
Employers say how much they value vocational qualifications.	This may be true when you already work for them, but when recruiting they tend to favour those with academic qualifications and pay them more.
National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are built around standards defined by employers.	But employers tend to pay more for conventional qualifications such as City and Guilds, unless your NVQ is acquired while doing an apprenticeship.
The new 14–19 Diplomas are supported by employers.	But this does not ensure that they will give priority to applicants with Diplomas, and on their past record most are unlikely to.
18 'high-level' employers have become Diploma Champions.	But some of these confess to recruiting graduates primarily and there are thousands of employers who have not yet signed up to Diplomas.

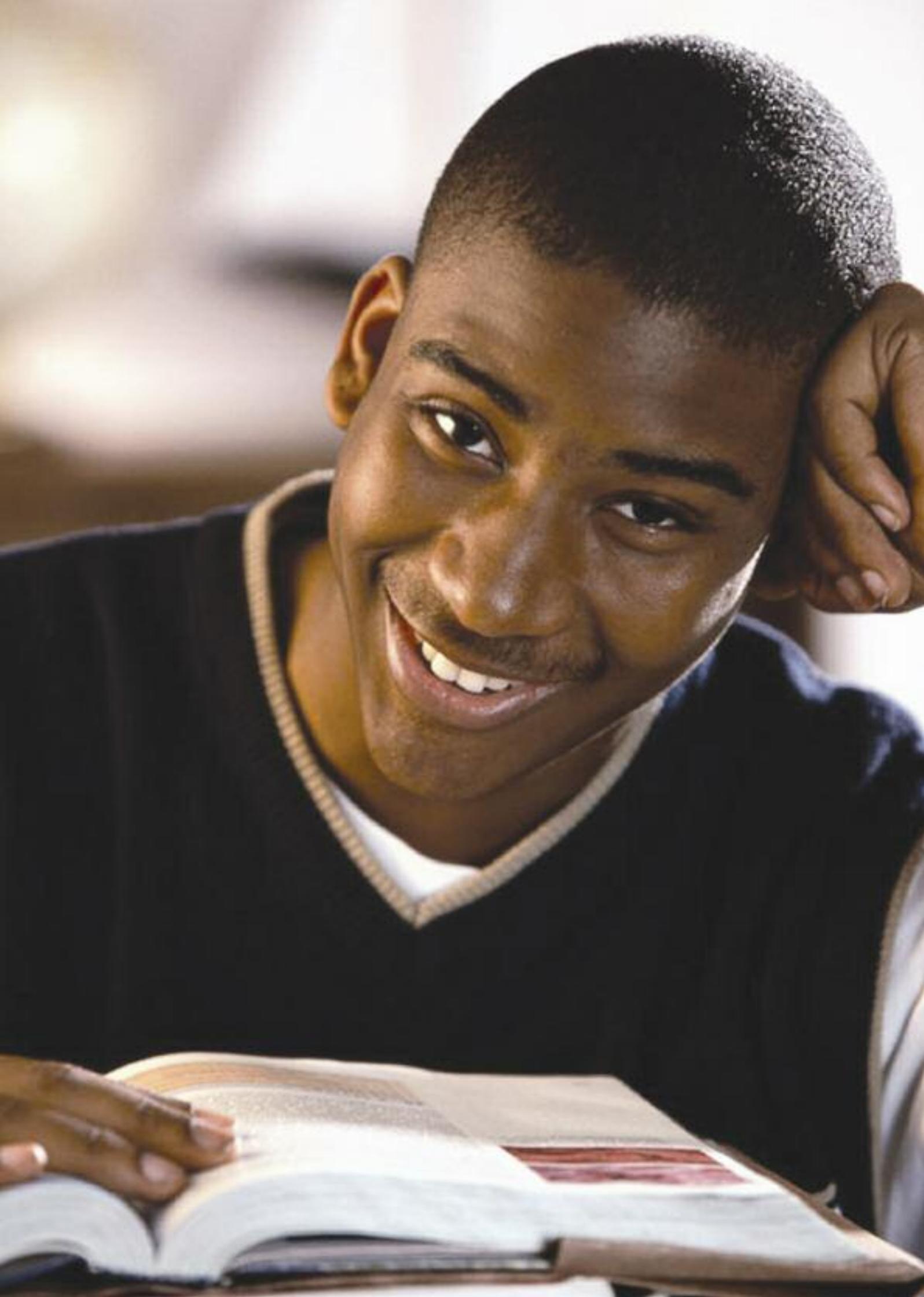
Different subjects have different 'economic returns'; that is, you are likely to earn more in a job if you have a particular qualification from a well-regarded institution. For example, '... at all levels of education, individuals with good numeracy and mathematics skills are more highly paid' (Vignoles, 2008: 5). In more detail, Anna Vignoles' research shows that the four best-paid degree subjects for men are accountancy, electrical engineering, maths and mechanical engineering; and for women, accountancy, medicine, law and education. So in financial terms it matters a lot which subject you decide to study and which college or university you go to. It's both practical and rational to focus on the 'economic return'. To help you to make your decision, here are some of the questions you could be asking, (although be careful you don't appear to be 'grilling' the staff, especially with the final question, which may be more appropriate for your parents to ask):

- How many other students will be taking this course this term? How big is the class going to be?
- What percentage of last year's class completed the course and got the qualification?
- What do students with this qualification tend to earn?
- Do the teaching staff have recent and relevant experience of working in the vocational area that they are teaching?

Don't you think that if you really are the heart of the system and your needs come first, your college will be able and willing to answer these questions for you?

In financial terms it matters a lot which subject you decide to study and which college or university you go to





4 How to improve your learning

Box 4.1

A former colleague of mine, Michael Paffard, went into a comprehensive school in Stoke-on-Trent to observe a student teacher take a class of 16 year olds for English. The student turned to the class and asked them to take out their poetry books. As Michael made his way to the back of the class, he heard one student turn to his mate and whisper:

'English poetry! Hey nonny no and ****ing daffodils!'

Learning can be seen as a means of acquiring knowledge, skills and qualifications. It can also be viewed as a means of becoming a skilled and respected practitioner



I'd like to begin by going back briefly over some of the main points made in the previous chapter. First, there are at least two main ways of looking at learning. It can be seen as a means of acquiring knowledge, skills and qualifications (learning as acquisition). It can also be viewed as a means of becoming a skilled and respected practitioner (learning as participation). The first is about having, possessing and succeeding; the second is about taking part, experiencing and interacting with others. The first approach is the dominant one, but you need both models to understand all that learning can do for you. (See Sfard, 1998 for more details.)

Second, I compared the 'formal' learning you do in classrooms with the 'informal' learning you carry out in all the other parts of your life with your friends and family. Informal learning is not an optional extra but one of the main factors that shapes what kind of a human being you become; and so I suggested that you should make the most of the social, sporting and cultural life at college because you will pick up important skills and knowledge that are not part of the formal curriculum.

Third, I argued that you need to develop a critical intelligence, or what I prefer to call the ability to detect bullshit, to help you challenge the absurd hype of advertisers, the pretentious promises of politicians, the latest buzzword in education and the sweeping claims of researchers like me.

Fourth, vocational education is a confusing, ever-changing jungle of qualifications, courses and different pathways, all of which differ markedly in status and economic outcome. So you need the help of impartial career guidance and you also need to know which questions to ask.

I now want to include something more positive in this chapter about learning by discussing:

- surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning
- going 'meta'
- and what separates the best from the rest.

1. Surface, deep and strategic approaches to learning

First and foremost, I don't want to suggest there are three different types of learners – surface, deep and strategic – but three different **approaches** to learning, all of which you can adopt depending on the problem you face. So these three adjectives do not describe the fixed characteristics of different types of student or of different learning styles, but the choices you as a student can make in tackling a task or problem. On the other hand, it's obvious from these value-laden terms, which is considered the best. I am simply trying to help you make the most appropriate choice by explaining the differences between the three approaches.

Surface learning, as the name suggests, refers to identifying those elements within a course that are most likely to be assessed and studying only these; that is, doing the absolute minimum to pass. Students using this approach don't reflect on the meaning or the relevance of their subject, but produce lists of facts rather than building a coherent argument; or they add references to their bibliography, which they haven't read, to make it look impressive. They also learn material by heart '*instead of understanding it, to give the impression of understanding*' (Biggs, 1999:14 original emphasis). There is, however, an honourable place in education for rote learning; for example, remembering rules or formulae or devices to help your memory such as Richard Of York Gives Battle In Vain to remember the colours of the rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). The way your course is assessed may drive you to use **surface learning** even if you would prefer not to.

Students on the other hand can adopt a **deep approach** to learning when they are determined to reach their own understanding of the material and to connect it to what they know already. Instead of cutting corners, students using this approach are keen to find out for themselves the organising principles, central ideas or key practices within a subject and are not content to deal with unconnected facts or details. They don't just make mistakes, they take the trouble to learn from them because they have become interested in the subject for its own sake and are not just anxious to gain a qualification. A deep approach will provide you with 'a greater ability to analyse what has been studied, to organize it as a whole, to see its inner relations and to adapt it to new problems' (Engeström, 1994: 18).

There is a third option where students combine both surface and deep approaches in a **strategic approach** to learning. The pressure of assessment, especially final exams and assignments (which must be handed in to meet a deadline), has encouraged students to become 'mark hungry' and to respond accurately to the criteria by which their work will be assessed. So students 'become adept at organising their study time and methods, attending carefully to cues given by teachers as to what type of work gains good grades or what questions will come up in examinations' (Coffield *et al.*, 2004: 94). Strategic learning is a rational response from students to exam and deadline pressure.

To decide which approach to choose, you need to reflect on the type of task you have to complete, on your aims and objectives, and the time at your disposal. It may be appropriate, for example, to use surface learning to get you through a part of your course you find uninteresting and unappealing. You may also choose to be versatile and move from one approach to another at different times for different purposes and to suit different tasks. At least, if you know about the three different types, you can make an informed decision; but please don't label yourself a 'surface', 'strategic' or 'deep' learner. You can and probably do use all three approaches in the course of a day's studying.

2. Going 'meta'

The phrase comes from the word 'metacognition', which means being as aware of how you learn as you are about the subject(s) you are studying. So, for instance, as well as studying English, Maths and Science (or whatever your subjects are), you can also study how you go about learning English, Maths and Science. 'Going meta' means learning about your own learning, thinking about your own thinking and understanding how you can improve both. It means that there is something over and above understanding your subject, namely, that you can learn to manage your own learning by, for example, evaluating your own work through reflection and questioning. Research studies have demonstrated that even very young children of five or six years of age can be taught to monitor, manage and improve their own learning (eg Merrett and Merrett, 1992).

But at a practical level, how does one go 'meta'? I have three suggestions to make, each one of which you could try as an **activity**. The first one is about target-setting. It makes sense to me to begin using the technique with short-term targets, but once you've incorporated the technique into your methods of studying, you can also, of course, choose targets for the mid and long term.

Activity 2

Set yourself a challenging goal. Don't choose a target that's too easy or you will be bored. Nor a target that's too difficult or you may give up. Choose one just beyond your current grasp:

- identify in some detail how you are going to reach that goal
- monitor your progress towards it
- evaluate your overall performance and then
- restart the whole process by choosing another sensible goal.

The point is not to try this technique once and then abandon it, but to build it into your repertoire as a standard practice. In short, make a habit of it and you'll find you don't have to write the targets down.

**Going meta'
means learning
about your own
learning**



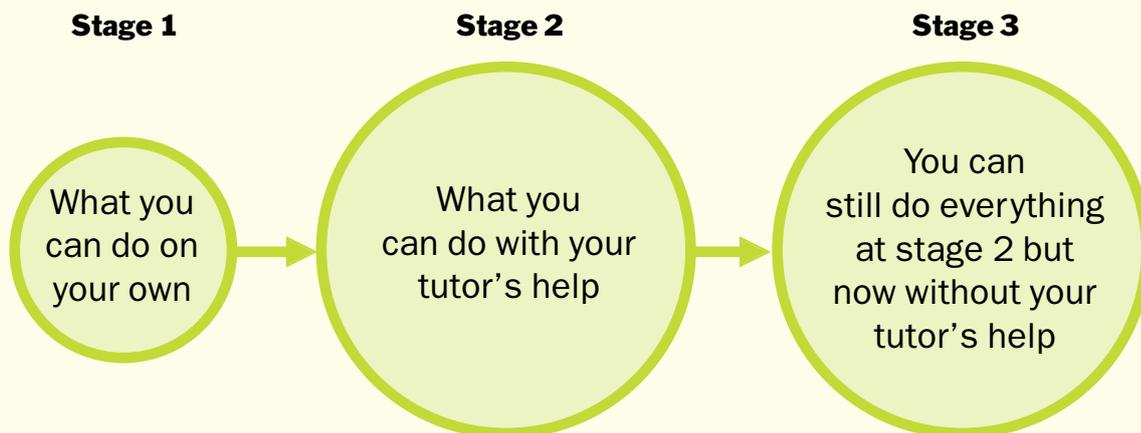
The usual advice is to choose SMART targets where SMART stands for:

- S** specific
- M** measurable, ie not vague claims about your intentions to improve but a detailed improvement you can measure eg 'I will learn five spellings I have difficulty with each day'
- A** achievable
- R** relevant
- T** time limited; eg, to be achieved by, say, the end of the month.

You may already be used to choosing targets online and perhaps have learned that you can make your targets smarter by negotiating them with your tutor; make sure you remain in control of choosing, modifying and monitoring your targets. You will, however, be able to do much more with the help of your tutor than you are likely to do working on your own. Lowe (FLT) quickly became used to choosing targets to monitor his progress; as he said: 'This is a good way to keep on top of your work so that the tutor can also see your progress.'

Figure 4.1 below tries to explain in a diagram how your knowledge and skills can develop through negotiation and dialogue with your tutor. The size of the circles is meant to represent your total knowledge or skill base. At stage 2 the size of the circle has increased because you can now do much more with your tutor's help. The circle stays the same size at stage 3, but now you can demonstrate your new knowledge or skill without help from your tutor.

Figure 4.1



In my experience many students find it difficult to talk about their learning because they have never been invited to reflect on it and don't have a vocabulary with which to discuss it. You certainly don't need fancy terms like 'metacognition' to think about how you learn. What you do need are some good questions to prod your thinking and Activity 3 is designed to provide you with some. What I'm suggesting, in Chris Watkins' words, is that occasionally you '*stop the flow* to notice' your learning and adopt a number of techniques for improving it. (2005: 99, original emphasis).

Here, for example, are two powerful questions that you could ask yourself once you have completed a task. They will help you to extract some general principles from the detailed facts you have just learned.

- How did you do that? This question draws your attention to the process you used to complete the task: what skills, strategies and principles did you need? What worked best and why?
- Where else could you use this process? Could you use those skills to solve other problems? How could you apply these skills in other contexts?

If you want to know more, I suggest you read Geoff Petty (2009: 298).

Activity 3

Please spend 5–10 minutes producing a list of about 1–10 questions to ask yourself about your own learning and learning in general. To show you the type of question I have in mind, I have offered two suggestions and in Appendix 1 I provide many more. You may be interested to compare your list with mine.

- Q1. What was your best experience of learning? What made it so good? What general lesson can you take from that experience?
- Q2. What do you enjoy learning? What do you not enjoy learning? Why?
- Q3.
- Q4.
- A5.
- Q6.
- Q7.
- Q8.
- Q9.
- Q10.

The third technique to help you go 'meta' is to start a learning journal or a learning log. Try it for three weeks, and decide on a specific time for making entries, eg every evening as soon as you come home from college. See it as an opportunity to explore and make sense of your experiences of learning and being taught at college.

Activity 4

In your learning log you could jot down, for example:

- the successes you are having, the difficulties you have run into and where you need help
- a list of references and web page addresses you will need to follow up
- the questions you need to ask your tutor
- the risks you are prepared to take with your learning
- if you have a work placement, its strengths and weaknesses
- the plans you have for your future learning
- notes and comments on the texts you are reading or ideas about how to tackle your next assignment
- what you consider important and want to remember
- what you find challenging and how you are going to respond to the challenge
- your ideas about how L&T could be improved.

Make it a document that's useful to you rather than treating it like another exercise to be completed. So use it in any way you see fit. There's no need, however, to disclose all your innermost secrets. Think of your learning log as a set of comments you would be happy to share with a close friend you trust. After the three-week experiment, compare your first and final entries and see if you can detect a development over time. The novelist EM Forster remarked once: 'How do I know what I think until I see what I have written?'

A good friend of mine, Bob Graham, summed up the point of writing a 'journal' in order to improve one's learning as follows: 'being a real learner is primarily to do with coming to feel responsible and in command of what happens to you, and being as conscious as possible about the whole process' (1998: 29).

Using blogs as electronic learning journals has proved very popular with students 'who spoke enthusiastically of the chance to track their learning progress through time. They liked the way they could watch their knowledge grow and looked forward to reviewing their learning record at the end of the year' (Armstrong *et al.*, 2003). So there's no need to restrict yourself to three weeks.

If you are interested in how other students have made use of learning diaries, have a look at chapter 7 where I summarise what the 24 students involved in this project wrote in their learning logs.

3. What separates the best from the rest?

What makes Lewis Hamilton, Kelly Holmes, Andy Murray, Steven Gerrard or Rebecca Adlington so special? What makes them break through from the ranks of the highly competent to become world-beaters in their chosen field? Apart from sports personalities, what makes the best musicians, chefs, painters, engineers, architects, doctors, teachers and students stand out from the rest? I'm now going to write in a more academic manner in order to discuss the complexities involved, but I shall confine that style of writing to this section of Part One. If you find that approach off-putting, please move on to Activity 5 and Box 4.2 at the end of this chapter.

What makes the best musicians, chefs, teachers and students stand out from the rest



A group of researchers, led by a Swedish psychologist, K. Anders Ericsson (1996), has been studying these intriguing questions for years and their findings are highly optimistic because those studying expert performance claim that:

people become unusually able not because of the occasional dramatic instances on which a biographer may be tempted to dwell but as a result of repeated and regular activities that provide the numerous hours of training and practice that are indispensable for excellence in virtually all areas of competence.

Howe, 1996: 259

Ericsson himself claims that the best musicians, sportsmen and scientists have spent over 10,000 hours on what he calls 'deliberate practice'. By that phrase he means that the most efficient learning takes place when:

- the task has been well defined by tutor and learner working together
- an appropriate level of difficulty has been set, ie just beyond the individual's current level of performance
- informative feedback, both positive and negative, is received and acted upon
- and there are sufficient opportunities for repetition and correcting errors.

The aim of these psychologists is to discover the necessary conditions that would enable far more people to become competent to higher levels than ever before. The essence of their approach is showing students how to take more control of their own learning by being aware of the three stages which, they claim, they go through as performance improves. First, in the development of skills and abilities, learners need **external support** from parents, teachers and coaches. Then they go through a **transition phase** when they become less dependent on tutors and start assessing their own performance against the criteria for high levels of performance. The third stage of **self-regulation** is when they interrogate, monitor and adjust their own performance as they become responsible for the fine tuning of their skill (see Glaser, 1996, for more information). The key principle in acquiring competence in any field is, according to these psychologists, the change from external, social support to the growing ability to manage one's own learning.

For me, this theory was at first superficially attractive, but the more I have reflected on it, the more my doubts have grown. Are these researchers, for instance, claiming that anyone can become an international expert in sport, maths or science by sheer persistence and hard work? At times I felt the importance of 'deliberate practice' was being overplayed and I began to worry about Ericsson's claim to be measuring by 'absolute standards that are independent of the social and historical context of the studied expert performance' (1996: 3). It's simply impossible, however, to disentangle the effects of practice from those of talent and motivation, never mind historical and social opportunities; and, given the interaction of so many factors, there can be no such entity as 'absolute standards'. As Robert Sternberg pointed out, we cannot account for the creative achievements of Mozart just by studying 'graphs of how many hours he practised composing' (1996: 351), without reference to the long years of apprenticeship with his father, Leopold.

A second criticism I would level at this approach is the progressive marginalisation of the teacher's role in the second and third stages of the development of competence. When all students have become tutors and all tutors learners, when the tutor's role has been reduced to that of coach, guide or mentor, then who is in charge of the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment? The main issue remains as always: when can the steering wheel be handed safely over to students? (See Müller, 2008.) Self-regulation may be an appropriate goal for elite performers who are trying to break out from national into international recognition, but it may be an inappropriate and premature goal for students at Levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 for whom the tutor will remain essential. Besides, some of the world's leading sportsmen and women are not so self-reliant. Andy Murray, for example, moves from tennis tournament to tennis tournament with an entourage he calls 'Team Murray', which consists of a tennis coach, a strength and conditioning coach, a physiotherapist, a physical conditioner, a technical consultant and a manager. So much for self-regulation.

We shall not, then, all of us become Beethovens or Bob Dylans or Beyoncé's by devoting thousands of hours to 'deliberate practice', although we can all improve steadily at whatever we do. What may be more useful is the research that shows the positive effects of changing students' belief from thinking of intelligence as an unchangeable, fixed entity to thinking of it as a malleable quality that can be developed. Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck (2007) demonstrated how changing the core beliefs of adolescents about the nature of intelligence made a difference to both their performance in maths and their motivation in, admittedly, only one American junior high school. The focus of this intriguing research was on the potential of all students to develop their intellectual capacity by changing their core belief about intelligence. This work is related to that optimistic strain in Russian psychology which views the weaker student as having far greater potential than the brighter student because the room for improvement is so much larger; and which prefers to treat the learning difficulties of students as the teaching difficulties of tutors (see Daniels, 2001). Instead, however, of blaming teachers or treating learning difficulties as being locked into individual students, it would be preferable to study how both parties can come together to solve the problems they both face.

In order to help you make better sense of your learning experiences, I've included a fifth **activity**, which invites you to explore two incidents: one where you succeeded in learning and one where you didn't.

Activity 5

Choose two incidents that have happened to you in college, one where you learned something successfully and one where you didn't. Briefly describe what happened. I'd now like you to answer these questions so that you move beyond description to analysis of what happened in more detail.

- How did you feel at the time? And now?
- What did you learn? What did you fail to learn? Try to be specific about exactly what you found difficult or troubling and why.
- Are there any other possible explanations of what happened? How did your friends view the incidents? Your tutor? Did your views change after discussing them with others?
- What are you happy about learning now?
- What are you still concerned about?
- Looking back, what have you learned about how you learn and fail to learn?
- Looking forward, what do you think you could do differently in order to become better at learning?

I also attempt in Box 4.2 to summarise the main messages I'm trying to get across to you. I've confined myself to six points and, at the end of Chapter 8, I offer similar advice to government, senior management teams and tutors.

Box 4.2

What could you do to improve your learning?

1. Become a learning apprentice by:
 - a. reflecting critically on how you and others learn
 - b. learning from other students as well as from your tutors
 - c. teaching other students as well as learning from them
 - d. going 'meta', that is, choose a target just beyond your current grasp, develop a plan to meet the target, evaluate your performance and then choose another target
 - e. keeping a learning diary; for example, make one entry a day for three or four weeks
 - f. learning to think, act and talk like your tutor so that you too know what it is to be a chemist, nursery nurse, painter and decorator or travel agent
 - g. taking charge of your own learning.

2. Appreciate what you can achieve with the help of your tutors. Develop a strong working partnership with your tutor and share the responsibility for learning.
3. View assessment positively as a means of improving your learning. Act on your tutor's suggestions for improving your work.
4. Use the social, cultural and sporting facilities and enrichment activities at college to widen your repertoire of knowledge, abilities and skills by means of informal learning.
5. If it is possible for you financially, confine your part-time job to around 10–12 hours per week to prevent adverse effects on your course or your health.
6. The aim of education is not just for you to pass exams and achieve necessary qualifications, but to make you a critical, independent lifelong learner who can think for yourself.

PART TWO
TEACHING AND
LEARNING



5 What do these students want?

Box 5.1

*...pupils hardly ever – **never** in our experience – take advantage of the opportunity of being consulted to make unpleasant remarks about the personality, appearance or foibles of their teachers in ways that are unrelated to their learning. In our experience they show great seriousness and self-discipline in talking about their teachers' teaching...*

Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007: 75. Original emphasis

1. Consulting students about L&T

Jean Rudduck and Donald McIntyre consulted pupils (and teachers) in 48 primary and secondary schools about how their learning and their lessons could be improved. As the quotation in Box 5.1 makes clear, they found the responses of the pupils 'insightful, reasonable and constructive – but sharp and sure in their identification of weaknesses' (ibid: 104). My experience of consulting 24 students in two FE colleges is very similar; students were sensitive, practical and positive in the suggestions they made. They were also considerate in their comments, showing an awareness of not only their own learning needs but also those of their classmates; and a few had even noted the considerable pressures their tutors were under. Their views of the teaching they received were both highly complimentary and, in places, sharply critical, without being personal.

Before saying anything further about my findings, I want to remind the reader of the very small evidential basis on which they are based. I'm not claiming that my sample is representative; how could I when I have consulted only 24 students aged between 16 and 18 and there are 70,000 such students in FE colleges in London alone? Moreover, the 24 students come from only two FE colleges and there are currently around 365 such colleges in England. So I shall draw no firm conclusions about students or FE colleges in general. What I would claim, however, is that this small-scale and exploratory project, which was run on a miniscule budget compared, say, with the £300k spent each year on the National Learner Panel, has still come up with some interesting and at times uncomfortable findings that underline the value of consulting students about their experiences of L&T. It is also worth pointing out that the findings are very much in line with similar studies carried out on much larger samples of secondary school pupils by researchers such as Ward and Edwards (2002), Thomson and Gunter (2006) and Rudduck and McIntyre (2007); indeed the surprise is that the three sets of findings are so close.

Students were sensitive, practical and positive in the suggestions they made



I started this project by tapping into the ideas, experiences and concerns of the 24 students with regard to their learning. I asked them, for example, to email me their descriptions of a good student, a good tutor and a good lesson. I began my analysis by comparing the responses of the students from the north with those of the London students, and the responses of students from academic courses with those from vocational or foundation level courses. What emerged was a striking consensus across regions, curriculum areas and levels. So in what follows I have pooled their replies and quoted from them extensively so that the arguments are presented as much as possible in their words.

2. Describe a good student

What is their image of a good student? She is punctual, attends more than 90% of classes, brings the right equipment, meets all her deadlines, revises for exams, is well organised, works hard, is self-disciplined, and asks for help when she needs it. These students have clearly internalised the rules and regulations of their institution; they know in detail how students are expected to behave. A second, generally-agreed characteristic of a good student is well captured by Nayman (FLT), who wrote: 'a good student is someone who is well mannered, polite and respects the learning of others'. Loz (AS) put it this way, 'A good student ... does not interrupt the education of fellow peers by being rude or disrupting the flow of the lesson'. Mimi (T&T) pictured a good student as 'someone who respects the feelings of other students and does not make fun of them when they ask questions, even if they are silly questions. A good student never talks back to the tutor even if she knows she is right and the tutor is wrong. This is a sign of respect.'

These 16–17 year olds are not only bright and mature, they are also able to control their emotions and know how to build productive relationships. Alternatively, these students could simply be saying what they thought I wanted to hear. So at our second meeting I raised this possibility with each student. They all replied firmly that they had offered their own opinions and Judge (T&T) commented: 'I wouldn't say something just to please you. That wouldn't help you, would it?'

They also wrote about a good student as a learner who takes pride in his work, comes to college ready to learn, and is prepared, in the words of Charlotte (A2), 'to go the extra mile by doing his own research and is not solely dependent on the materials/information given to them by their tutors'. For Sprinter (AS) good students are 'independent and adaptable so they can learn by themselves and revise when a tutor is not around'.

Pano (T&T) brings to life what most of his fellow students considered to be a fourth characteristic: 'A top student will be more than happy to help their peers to improve. He will be described as being a pleasure to have in the class. A top student will brighten up the class as he will be fully aware when it is the right time to have a little bit of fun.'

3. Describe a good tutor

These students also have a clear image of the professional qualities they want to see in all their tutors. For them the good tutor is: punctual, prepared and organised; reliable and trustworthy; helpful and encouraging; checks that all students have understood before moving on; provides clear explanations and uses a variety of methods; marks work appropriately and on time; and cares for all students and respects their views.

The second characteristic of a good tutor could be summarised from the students' responses as someone who recognises and responds to the humanity of her students; someone who 'helps you and others who have problems at home as well as at college' (Youngie, FLT); someone who 'has the interests of their students as their top priority in their job' (Judge, T&T); someone 'who notices when something is wrong with their students' (Mimi, T&T); someone who 'will give up their free time for any student who has any questions' (Charlotte, A2).

**The good tutor
is punctual,
prepared and
organised**



So they want tutors to be approachable and friendly, but they want more than this. In addition, they want their tutors to be 'kind but also strict, respected and respectful' (Stephan, T&T). As Ellie (T&T) phrased it: 'A tutor needs to have two sides to them, the having fun and sharing stories side and the serious side. A tutor needs to be realistic and strict, if a student has all the ability to succeed but isn't doing so.' In the words of Alex (FLT): the good tutor is 'friendly but not too friendly because they need to know when to be serious and tell people off when need be'. Shadow (T&T) summed up this point well: good teachers 'have control over the class but are also friendly and fair'.

The third most mentioned quality of a good tutor was well explained by Charlie (AS): 'the most important thing is making the subject interesting and when a teacher is visibly passionate about their subject, it rubs off on students'.

Two students provided a flavour of the atmosphere within which all L&T was being conducted. For Corporal (AS) 'the reality is that we're being taught for an exam. So I think that while knowledge is fun and helps with understanding, the main objective has to be passing the exam'. Another student, 'G' (FLT), considered the main role of a tutor is 'to help students to get the highest possible grade for their career'. I shall return to this instrumental view of the tutor's role at the start of Chapter 8.

4. Describe a good lesson

When it comes to describing a good lesson, a number of the topics mentioned above were repeated, but some new themes also emerged. Students know all too well the basic conditions needed for a good lesson: the tutor and students are on time; attendance is consistently high; the tutor is organised, in control and knows what she's doing; the lesson is structured, varied, lively and engaging; everyone is treated equally and contributes; there's mutual respect and a friendly, workman-like atmosphere; and 'students don't leave feeling confused or secretly in need of help, too afraid to ask' (Loz, AS).

As well as a well-conducted lesson where there's 'a balance between friendliness and discipline' (Charlie, AS), the students have one consistent request: they want to be more active and involved. They want 'practical work rather than just copying and writing down notes' (Abby, T&T). Corporal (AS) argued: 'It's hard to concentrate on something for an hour without any kind of interaction other than copying down notes [which] can be incredibly boring.'

They have plenty of suggestions to make. They want 'hands-on learning' (Nayman, FLT), and they suggest a wide variety of activities: for example, role-play, learning games and quizzes, films, video clips, computers, discussions (especially on controversial subjects), opportunities to move round the classroom, and group work. They know both the advantages and dangers of group work: it provides 'space to talk to others who might not be in your group of friends' and requires you 'to work in teams towards a goal' (both comments from Corporal, AS), but 'the noise level should be kept at an average level as this would help the students and teacher hear and understand each other's ideas' (Ellie, T&T). Above all, what the students want to avoid is 'just the teacher talking for two and a half hours while the students are just listening' (Mimi, T&T).

Another constantly repeated theme in the messages from students concerned the amount of disruption they claimed happened routinely in their classes. I shall explore this topic at greater length when discussing the learning logs that the students wrote for me, but for the present I'll quote the description of Sol (AS) of a good lesson as a place where 'there's no disruptive behaviour by any other students as that tends to distract me from my learning and it annoys me because it wastes time'. Similarly, Loz (AS) said her idea of a good lesson is one where there are 'minimal interruptions of late comers, bad behaviour and other rudeness from students'.

To summarise, students know what behaviour is expected of them, and they have specific and reasonable expectations of their tutors, whom they want to be strict as well as kind. They want to participate far more than at present, they want to be more active and involved in lessons, which they don't want to be disrupted. Their hopes are eminently sensible; they want to learn in an orderly but friendly environment. Shadow (T&T) summed up their stance neatly: students should 'leave the lesson feeling that they have learnt something and are not worried about any coursework'.

Asking students to describe a good student, tutor or lesson encouraged them to depict their ideal conditions for learning. I also wanted to know, however, how this compared with their day-to-day experiences in college. So I invited them to complete a learning log for three weeks with an entry for each of the 15 days in college. The results are presented in the following chapter.

6 The students' experiences of learning and teaching

Box 6.1

The most revolutionary thing one can do always is to proclaim loudly what is happening.

Rosa Luxemburg. Quoted by Hind (2008: 147).

1. LEARNING LOGS

I suggested to my sample of 24 students that they took a bird's eye view of themselves as learners and tried looking down as if from on high on how they learned. What did they find easy to learn? What hard? How could these processes be improved? The aim of the exercise was for them to become as conscious as possible of their own learning so that they could take more command of it.

I'll also draw in this chapter on their responses to a questionnaire on learning that they all completed, as well as on our open-ended discussions, because in all three forms of data-gathering the same themes recurred. This time, however, a difference emerged in one area between the three main groups – academic, vocational and Foundation Learning Tier students – and between individuals within any one group. I'll mention the most significant of these as we progress.

The diary entries share a number of appealing characteristics. They are invariably honest and self-critical: listen, for instance, to Corporal (AS): 'One of the hardest things about college is being prepared to actually go to lessons and not stay out with your friends at lunch. Everyone else said it would be the waking up or the travelling that would be difficult, but I found that it was the choosing to work that proved the real struggle.' They are also *written in an engaging style*: Ellie (T&T) began one entry as follows: 'I'm so late. This was the first think I thought as I opened my eyes.' They are, in addition, *thoughtful and detailed*, with the longest diary running to over six pages and the average length being between three and four pages. They are *open to new ideas and cultures*; for example, Charlie (AS) described a new learning experience where he 'was grouped with an Iranian, an Arabian and a Chinese man. It was fun to learn that people from all cultures and languages can be brought together so well through chemistry. If only the chemistry was as simple!'. They do not try to hide the *interactions between their personal lives and their learning*, as Joey Smith (A2) showed: 'Had quite a miserable day after breaking up with my girlfriend of two years this weekend.'

The diary entries are invariably honest and self-critical



I also found their diaries *humbling* in places when I realised what some young people have to contend with while studying, with, for instance, one 17 year old being re-housed by the local authority.

Taken together, these learning logs, discussions and questionnaire responses provided a rich source of data on a very wide range of topics, some of which are beyond the remit of this project. In what follows I've concentrated on L&T, which is the central theme of this publication, and, within L&T, on the issues most often mentioned by the students. As before, I shall quote often and at length from the students so that they lead the argument.

The rest of this chapter is organised as follows. After a couple of general comments from students, I shall give examples of what, according to my informants, is going well in L&T generally and in vocational education in particular. This is followed by suggestions about how L&T could be improved and deals with such matters as: disruptions, timetabling and discipline.

Let's begin with two representative quotes making the important point that overall these 24 students are having an overwhelmingly positive experience in their two FE colleges. They appreciate the tuition, help and advice they are receiving but they do not refrain from criticism when they feel it is justified. In none of the 24 diaries, however, were any teachers (or students) mentioned by name, either in praise or in blame. The students completed their diaries towards the end of term leading up to Christmas 2008 and Phil (FLT) looked back: 'Teaching staff are great to get along with. Really helpful on problems. They're great and good at their job.' Pano (T&T) went further by complimenting both staff and his new friends: 'It feels like a family to me now, the college. I enjoy every moment I spend at my break and lunch times, socialising with people you meet from around different cultures.'

2. What's going well in L&T

All the diary entries are studded with references to 'well-delivered presentations' or to 'one of the best lessons I've had' (both comments from Sol, AS). Joey Smith (AS) summed up his three weeks of keeping a learning diary as follows: 'Throughout the period covered by this log I've not really had to ask my tutors many questions as most of the work set has been well presented and explained and I've usually understood pretty much all of the work set.' These comments have been chosen as typical of the experiences of all 24 learners in this project.

In more detail, what the students liked were detailed explanations of the marking criteria, namely, what they need to do to get a pass, a credit or distinction. Shadow (T&T), for instance, found this very useful 'as I was aiming for a distinction so it taught me exactly what I needed to put into my assignment to achieve this'. All categories of students also appreciated the specific help offered in 1:1 sessions, both the A-level students, who need practice with French and German conversation and accent, and the FLT students whose basic skills are improved by learning support teachers. Loz (AS) wrote of how 'these one-to-ones really boost my understanding of how to tackle essays and I feel because of them I can reach the better levels'. Charlie (AS) provided a good example of how a close, productive relationship with an approachable tutor can create an upward spiral of the

kind I described at the end of chapter 2: 'his one-on-one help is great and shows he cares about individuals, which in turn makes me want to do better in his lessons'.

Other characteristics of good tutors were noted by these students: Alex (FLT) remarked how 'we all got the same amount of help from the teacher'; Sprinter (AS) found his tutor 'very engaging' because he made jokes relevant to the subject matter and also 'used modern-day examples to help explain what we were learning.' Loz (AS) noticed how one of her tutors changed her teaching methods in the late afternoon to accommodate tired students who had been in class all morning. These are perceptive as well as appreciative students.

Virtually all the students referred to one particular feature of L&T, namely their desire to be more active and engaged in class. Davina (AS), for instance, described in detail her learning games (eg Blind Man's Buff) and group work which enlivened her History and English lessons: 'I've enjoyed this active lesson. I've learned as well as had fun.' Joey Smith (A2) mentioned the various techniques used by his tutors to keep students engaged: computer games, discussions of controversial topics, on-line questionnaires, worksheets and short videos. Corporal (AS) explained how he enjoyed lessons 'as long as I'm taking part. It's easier to get through a lesson if you actually work rather than counting the minutes on the clock as that can make them last forever'. Sol (AS) argued that students don't want to be active for the sake of it but as a means of understanding the material being taught. Reflecting on a lesson she hadn't fully understood, she wrote: 'We could have done a group activity or watched a section of a video or used the interactive whiteboard and it probably would have made things clearer for me.'

Students don't want to be active for the sake of it but as a means of understanding the material being taught



The entries of the students following vocational courses showed time and again how they are enjoying learning the discipline, and coming to terms with the hierarchies, within the workplace. Ind (FLT), for example, described how, as a trainee chef, she was told to stay behind for an extra hour and a half to prepare for Christmas lunches on the following day: 'I didn't mind because I love cooking and I'm committed to it so it's not a problem.' She also explained how stressful it was to work in a team when one member let everyone else down and the anger of the chef descended upon them all. She then had to learn how to pull the team together afterwards, by sharing the responsibility for the mistake. For Nayman (FLT), following the same course, the stress was different: 'Not a good day as I received a second-degree burn on my arm.'

The students also revealed a quiet determination to succeed. Ellie (T&T), for example, commented: 'I decided going out with my friends would not get me anywhere in life. I needed to sit down and make all the changes [to my assignments] which the teachers have suggested instead.' Similarly, Charlie (AS) admitted struggling with A-level Chemistry, an outcome which he hadn't expected as he had coped at GCSE level: 'Chemistry is by far the most complicated subject I have ever comprehended! This just makes me want to do better though.' He worked hard and showed resilience in overcoming his difficulties, partly by working with a partner, partly by devising a revision guide for himself, partly by listing questions for his tutor on topics he didn't understand, and partly by buying a standard revision textbook.

3. What could be improved in L&T

Students made the distinction between the weak teacher (who is happily the exception rather than the rule) and the unhelpful practices of a broader group of teachers. They wanted their tutors to reconsider these unhelpful practices.

Students are clear about what they mean by poor teaching: they object to having their time wasted and to unreasonable delays in receiving feedback. Here is a comment from Shadow (T&T), which was typical of the remarks made by her classmates:

Totally pointless. Mainly talked about topics which had nothing to do with customer service. Wish I hadn't bothered coming in and had done some work at home. Still haven't got our assignments back after waiting six weeks. We were promised the week before that we could get them today. External examiner was watching the lesson. Lesson was totally fake. As soon as examiner left the lesson, she went back to the usual unstructured lesson.

Or listen to Stephan (T&T) discussing the performance of another tutor: 'No one likes her teaching and most say she can't teach so more than half the class don't even turn up.' The students were able to state not just what they found unacceptable, but also why they found it so, as well as the damaging impact weak teaching was having on their learning. This is clearly an important issue but it is thankfully uncommon; the larger problem is the weaknesses that students identify in the methods of teachers who they realise are working hard in their interests.

The students objected to lessons that mainly consisted of copying notes down, as they know it is no longer necessary to transmit information in this inefficient way. It's likely that some tutors are making heavy use of note-taking by students as a means of control and imposing order. Here are comments from Charlie (AS) about the same subject tutor taken from a number of entries:

This style of just relaying info is very boring ... boring! Copy, copy, copy! Same old tutor, boring and predictable. I don't feel that I learn much because there's no enthusiasm. Tutor let us go an hour early too, which makes no sense... I feel I'm wasting my time in [this class], and even tho' I've asked if I can drop it to focus on more challenging subjects, the answer is a firm no. This only lessens my regard for the subject and my enthusiasm is almost zero towards learning it.

Corporal (AS) was not alone in disliking one particular method being used in class after class, even if it was reasonably effective:

These lessons are pretty boring as they consist of going through prepared Powerpoint presentations, which have obviously had a lot of effort gone into them and are good for revising from. But going through them in class is mind-numbing ... another bombardment of slideshows ... during the Powerpoint presentation it was hard not to fall asleep.

Students wanted to be treated as adults and talked to accordingly. So Nayman (FLT) objected to 'the way my teacher talks to us like we were primary school children'. Sol (AS) referred to a tutor who 'tends to talk down to us sometimes and he does not explain himself very well'. Stephan (T&T) described the following incident:

...my colleague said to the teacher: 'You didn't tell us we were going to have a test.' And the teacher replied: 'I'm the teacher. I don't need to tell you if you have a test or not.' In a really rude tone of voice, almost shouting. I found this disrespectful and rude because if we treat the teacher with respect we expect it back.

Other students pointed out examples of poor organisation, when, for example, a whole day was given over to hearing each member of the class make a 20–30 minute presentation on the same topic: 'I had to sit through everybody's presentation, which got pretty tedious as it was all the same information' (Cruz, T&T). Similarly, Sol (AS) resented a lesson given over to 1:1 sessions about coursework: 'I found it annoying that the rest of the group were not left with any proper work to do and I found the rest of the class time was wasted as I did not know what work to do.'

Other weaknesses were identified by Abby (FLT), who didn't like tutors who were 'moody' or who 'just pick on people'. Alex (FLT) reported that 'my teacher wasn't really telling anyone off for messing around which is bad'. And Loz (AS) had spotted that some students were not being encouraged to participate: 'I felt that the same people were contributing ideas to the class – this made it unfair because those who were quiet never had a chance to voice their opinions. I'm not sure if it's out of shyness or confusion but they should be asked more by the teacher to join the discussion.' Students like Loz are not just critical but constructively critical.

The diaries contain a rich seam of critical incidents and implicit theories about L&T, which staff, if they collected similar data, could mine for lively, authentic material to discuss in tutorials. Other consultations would raise other topics because L&T is always highly situated and context specific. I've chosen three matters that were of particular concern to these students – disruptions, timetabling and discipline. There are obviously different types of disruption, some brought about by students, some by teachers, some avoidable and some unavoidable. So students reported disruptions to their learning caused by themselves or their tutors falling ill, or having hospital or dental appointments, or attending funerals. Some teachers were promoted and stopped teaching; others left for posts elsewhere; and some turned out to be supply or trainee teachers. So far, so normal, as students were here reporting the considerable turnover in FE staff, especially agency staff.

Students, however, also reported lessons being cancelled because their tutor was 'on an outing with other students', or because 'they had staff training in our last two lessons' (Cookie, FLT) or 'double French lesson cancelled due to teacher training' (Charlotte, A2). But if the main purpose of professional development is to improve students' learning, why upset students by cancelling their lessons? And upset they became, as Corporal (AS) pointed out: 'Today the teacher informed us at 15 minutes past 9 that there would be no lesson ... meaning that we had come in for nothing. Also that day my Politics lesson had been cancelled so there was no point me waking up.' Many of these students (some with young children and

Students wanted to be treated as adults and talked to accordingly



part-time jobs) are travelling long distances to college, some with journeys each way of 90 minutes and longer so they cannot afford to waste either their time or their money. Students understand tutors falling ill at the last moment, which prevents a warning being issued, but when teachers fail to turn up and no explanation or apology is offered, then their motivation dips.

The students were just as critical of classmates who disrupted lessons and this form of low-level but persistent disruption appeared to be widespread across courses within the two colleges. Phil (T&T) reported that his friends 'were a bit more hyper than usual', and Alex (FLT) put it this way: 'When our learning support teacher told the students off for making loads of noise, and she did tell them more than once to be quiet, they didn't listen and were even louder. Which I think is really unfair to the people who want to learn like me and other people in the class.' The students were also well aware of the effects of this type of disruption: '...our tutor had to keep dealing with them so that I did not feel like I learned that much' (Sol, AS); 'the class was very restless. We were very talkative. This affected the tutor's way of teaching. It made him stop and start a lot ... not all of the work got done in the lesson. This frustrated the tutor and made it hard to teach the students who were paying attention' (Sprinter, AS). Those classes, which in November 2008 were being disrupted four, five or six times an hour, were still being disrupted just as often by the same handful of students in March 2009. An issue that should have been dealt with firmly in the first few weeks of term had turned into a running sore. In the meantime, the students made explicit connections between poor discipline, weak teaching and disruptions to their learning.

A second concern for most of these students was timetabling which occasionally made inefficient use of their time. A typical comment came from Sprinter (AS): 'I had to come in for only one lesson at the end of the day which I feel affected the way I approached the lesson. I didn't really want to come in.' Others simply did not turn up if they only had one lesson on a particular day and cited the cost of travel; for some, the journey to college took up to two hours in overcrowded trains. Corporal (AS), for example, was invited in for a 10-minute interview with his form tutor to discuss general issues on a day when he had no other formal commitments and so he wondered why such meetings could not be scheduled at times when he was in college. Accommodating the personal convenience of thousands of students in a large FE college is nigh-on impossible, and this needs to be explained to students rather than leaving them feeling like minor cogs in a large, impersonal system.

The third matter mentioned repeatedly in the learning logs was discipline. All institutions need rules and regulations but what if the way they are enforced becomes self-defeating? Two examples will have to suffice, one from each college. Stephan (T&T) reported how he and two friends were suspended from college for three days because a local resident complained about them dropping litter and making too much noise in the street. His reaction deserves to be quoted in full: 'In my past 12 years of education I have never been on report never mind suspended and now I got suspended over something so stupid. I am disappointed with the college and I feel I have been treated unfairly.' Charlie (AS) begins his account similarly but ends rather differently: 'Today I was 13 minutes late so I was not allowed to enter the lesson, even though I have never been late once or handed in a late homework! ... I find this rule fair enough from a tutor's point of view but when you are genuinely late, it's an annoyance.'

Instead of going any further into the 'ins' and 'outs' of these two incidents, I want to use them as examples of burning issues in the students' learning diaries which staff can use to hang a general discussion of, in this case, rules and sanctions. From the students' point of view, for instance, rules, to be obeyed and respected, need to be acceptable to those who are subject to them and to be applied flexibly and sensitively. They also wanted to ask what is the point of punishments that prevent students (and particularly conscientious students with a good record of attendance and behaviour) from attending college or classes?

In response, tutors are likely to argue that they are well aware that students lead complex lives and that public transport cannot always be relied on, but on the other hand persistent lateness disrupts the learning of others. Moreover, students at college are also being introduced to the disciplines of the workplace, where employers place a high value on punctuality and will not hesitate to penalise latecomers. In this way, discussions based on the significant issues raised by students in their learning logs can help prevent misunderstandings, resentments or disengagement.

**Rules, to be
obeyed and
respected, need
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to those who are
subject to them
and to be applied
flexibly and
sensitively**





7 Recurrent themes in the data

Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions.

Joseph Conrad (1904:58)

A number of topics cropped up repeatedly both in the discussions and in the written work the students emailed to me and I've chosen to discuss the three most prominent here: learning styles, new technologies and part-time jobs.

1. Learning styles

Considering how much I've written about learning styles in recent years, I'd hoped to complete this booklet without mentioning them. So I decided in advance not to ask students what they knew about learning styles, but the topic kept cropping up. Tutors in secondary schools and FE colleges continue to use unreliable and invalid questionnaires and students continue to label themselves 'visual', 'auditory' or kinaesthetic', despite all the strong evidence against such practices, which can result in students restricting themselves to only one style of learning. This time, instead of repeating arguments I've used elsewhere against learning styles (see Coffield *et al.*, 2004; Coffield, 2005), I shall relate the experiences of the 24 students in this project.

First, when students fill in a learning style questionnaire and are then told that they are 'kinaesthetic' learners, they reasonably expect like Charlotte (A2) to be taught, say, German in a kinaesthetic manner. But nothing of the kind happens. Instead the questionnaires are administered, analysed, stored electronically and then quietly forgotten about. Tutors are, however, able to inform Ofsted inspectors that one of the ways in which they have 'differentiated' their classes is by having their students complete a learning styles instrument. Even if tutors attempted to fulfil the expectations they have raised in students like Charlotte and taught her German in a kinaesthetic way, how would that be done? And if there is no intention of ever teaching German or Maths or Travel and Tourism in a kinaesthetic way, then why waste students' time by having them fill in questionnaires that are not going to influence the way they will be taught? These questionnaires may still, however, adversely influence the way students view themselves as learners.

The questionnaires are administered, analysed, stored electronically and then quietly forgotten about



Second, students like Charlie (AS) objected to being constrained by the pre-determined format of the learning style questions or statements. For example, the Dunn and Dunn Inventory asks students to agree or disagree with the statement: 'I think best when I feel cool.' But does this refer to the temperature or to 'being with it'? Charlie commented: 'I couldn't give a simple 'yes' or 'no' to most of the questions but I was being forced to do so.'

Perhaps more serious still is the conclusion reached by those students who had been informed that their responses indicated a slight preference for 'visual learning', and who had come away with the notion that they had only one learning style, which could not be changed or added to. So, for instance, they thought as 'visual learners' that there was little point in listening to tutors because they could not learn in an 'auditory' manner. In such cases, learning styles are positively damaging to students who are labelling themselves inappropriately. Instead of developing a flexible repertoire of approaches to learning too many students are settling for just one.

A more typical reaction from students, however, was to have a dim recollection of having filled in a form at the beginning of term about learning styles, but having no memory of what their learning preference was. A few found the notion of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners interesting, but the introduction to learning styles was never followed up. The completion of the form had been a self-contained exercise never referred to again by tutors and so the students had understandably begun to forget all about it. I'd like to suggest that when senior management teams are asked by the Inspectorate if they administer a learning style instrument, they should politely ask what particular one the inspector recommends and what is its reliability and validity. Perhaps inspectors ought to be asking colleges why they continue to use learning styles questionnaires that are neither reliable nor valid.

As a result of such testimony, I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that the alleged use of learning styles in post-compulsory education is either wasting the time of staff and students or is doing more harm than good and should therefore be restricted to attempts to engage students in dialogue about their learning. I have been told however by some tutors at conferences that, despite hearing the critical evidence against learning styles, they will continue to use them. Why? 'Well, I've run off 300 copies of Honey and Mumford so it would be a shame to waste them.'

2. New technologies

I collected data from 24 students by means of discussions, questionnaire, forms and learning logs; and all the data were replete with references to Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, iPods and podcasts, Bebo, Blackboard, Wikipedia, Fanpop, MSN, Google, wikis, blogs and virtual worlds such as Second Life. These young people have been called 'digital natives who have grown up in a world of computers, mobile telephones and the internet, and now lead lives that are reliant upon digital media' (Selwyn, 2008a: 10), while people of my generation will always remain 'digital immigrants'. As Sprinter (AS) remarked with relation to Facebook: 'I'm a self-confessed geek for that stuff'; and Loz (AS) added 'I'm always logged in'. For her that meant two hours every night at home, for others like Pano (T&T) it could

mean six hours a day or more, before turning to his coursework. Ellie regularly checked her emails in order to have a short break from hours of socialising with her friends online. A report from ChildWise, a market research agency, shows that such long hours online every day are now typical for 13–16 year olds (ChildWise, 2009).

Almost all of the students had at home a mobile phone, a TV, a DVD player and a personal computer with internet access or a laptop shared with a sibling or parent, and most had games consoles, play stations, iPods and MP3 players in addition. Technology's biggest impact on their lives, however, is not so much 'in terms of the number of gadgets they own. It has affected where and how they study, helped them collaborate with each other and broken down barriers between students and teachers, social life and study' (Hoare, 2008). New forms of social software have greatly increased the opportunities these students have to interact with other learners (as shown by Rebecca in Box 2.1) and with a much wider range of learning resources. What is already clear is that modern students 'invest time and energy in building relationships around shared interests and knowledge communities' (Maloney, quoted by Selwyn, 2008b: 8). It remains to be seen if these new web 2.0 technologies help to produce students who are also capable of independent, critical thought, but there is nothing inherent in these technologies to prevent them.

Technology's biggest impact on their lives, however, is not so much 'in terms of the number of gadgets they own. It has affected where and how they study'



In all the exciting and enabling new developments in what is being called education 2.0, some central issues in L&T remain the same as they have always been. For example, the need remains for all students to be able to proof read their own productions because the spell checker may not spot homophones like 'role' and 'roll', 'break' and 'brake', 'taught' and 'tort', 'principal' and 'principle', 'pictures' and 'pitchers', and 'manners' and 'manors'. Nor will it correct all mistakes in grammar and syntax. Moreover, employers now require ICT skills beyond familiarity with email and spreadsheets, such as the ability to judge the status of texts on the web and the need to acknowledge copyright material, where appropriate; and staff in education are making similar demands on students to prevent plagiarism and to protect intellectual property rights. Moreover, it remains as difficult as ever to teach students the ability to read texts critically, whether those texts are online or in hard copy.

I'm defending in the paragraph above some of the traditional requirements of literacy such as correct spelling, grammar and syntax, as well as a concern for copyright and critical-reading skills. I make no apology for that stance, but Victoria Carrington has convinced me that the emergence of new textual activities such as blogging challenges such practices. Young people, she argues, are no longer just receivers of information but have become active players in its production and dissemination. They not only find new technology highly motivating partly because it allows them to work at their own pace, but they also enjoy the feeling of being in control of it. In her words, literacy in schools and colleges should now be 'celebrating the ability, or more importantly the right [of students], to produce, disseminate and comment on information' (2008:162). Moreover, Roz Ivanic and Richard Edwards have pointed out that 'correctness of language use should not be the sole object of attention' (2008:1). Their research paid due attention to the rich and varied reading and writing that FE students carry out in their lives outside college which could be mobilised within college to enhance their learning. Their work also contradicted the 'common view that

the literacy requirements of more vocational courses are of a lower and less complex order than those needed for more academically-oriented study' (ibid: 3).

The main task for colleges in using ICT as a tool for improving L&T is no longer just buying the most up-to-date equipment. It is more about keeping all staff up to speed with the latest developments such as the Mobile Learning Network (MoLeNET); using technologies to maximise the amount of time tutors can spend face to face with students by putting, for instance, all lessons on-line and using the time in class to discuss them; and harnessing in the classroom the students' ease and familiarity with ICT at home. As Nayman (FLT) pointed out, however, 'young people keep up with new technology more than adults'. I'm not suggesting that all students can demonstrate ease and familiarity with new technology, just because they are young; mastery requires access and opportunities for practice, experiment and improvement.

The most radical effect of ICT on L&T may be that students will from now on become the main source of learning in this area for staff, just as parents have been dependent for some time on their children to keep them up to the mark. The power relationship between tutors and students is shifting slowly but surely in favour of the latter, but research into the use of computers to enhance learning concluded that 'the teacher remains key to the successful use of ICT for learning' (Sutherland and Robertson, 2006) in order to prevent the construction of idiosyncratic misconceptions and misunderstandings rather than formal knowledge.

3. Part-time jobs

Most of the 24 students had part-time jobs or were looking for one. They mainly worked in the retail sector or in the catering industry for the minimum wage and for between 8 and 12 hours a week. Three out of the 24 had decided against getting a part-time job in order to prioritise their college work, even though they realised that such a job would look good on their CV and would probably make it easier for them to get a full-time job if they'd had relevant experience.

Those who worked at weekends and/or evenings were pleased like Loz (AS) 'to get into the real world of work' and she found her 10 hours a week 'manageable'; 'if it gets in the way of my courses, I take a holiday from my job'. For others like Judge (T&T) their part-time job was a positive benefit to their course work because 'when we get new staff members joining, I sometimes get the job of monitoring them'. Similarly, Ellie's (T&T) part-time job as a sales assistant in a major clothing retailer helped her 'a lot as I get to communicate with people of different ages, races and those with special needs, which all helps me with my customer service skills.' Others like Sol (AS) found balancing their college work with a part-time job difficult as deadlines for coursework loomed, but she was adamant that in any clash of interests her assignments came first: 'I don't want my college work to suffer because of my lack of time.'

**Sometimes I feel
my head is going to
explode with all the
pressures**



A few students, however, through sheer necessity and financial difficulties were working regularly over 30 hours per week and the impact on their studies and their health was evident in their learning logs. Box 7.1 presents one week's entries from Mimi, a 19-year-old Travel and Tourism student, who worked five (and sometimes six) days a week as a waitress in a busy city restaurant. Is it any wonder that in discussions about the pressures of completing eight assignments in the first three months of her course, she replied, quietly: 'Sometimes I feel my head is going to explode with all the pressures.'

Box 7.1

Extract from Mimi's learning log

Monday 10/11/08

I have been given an assignment to finish which is due in tomorrow so I am going to stay up all night in order to finish it.

Tuesday 11/11/08

I did my presentation and am glad that I finished it because I got a pass. I am very tired and I need time to relax. I feel sick because I did not sleep and I had to go to work after college from 5:30 to 10:30.

Wednesday 12/11/08

I started college at 12pm till 4:30. I had a computer class from 5:30 till 9 pm but I could not attend it because I had to go to work from 5 to 10:30.

Thursday 13/11/08

Today is usually my day off from college. I started work at 8 am till 4 pm. Am very tired. I just need to sleep, but I have to do research on holiday reps.

Friday 14/11/08

Started college at 10am till 3:30. I have 3 assignments, one is due Monday, another one is due on Tuesday and the other one on the 24th. I had to go to work after college, as I start work from 4 till 10 pm.

Saturday 15/11/08

I went to work at 8 and I finished at 4 pm. I came home, cleaned my house, washed my uniforms and went to bed around 7 pm. I woke up at 12 pm and I had to do one of my assignments.

Sunday 16/11/08

I went to work from 10 till 5:30. When I got home I had to finish the assignment I had already started. I did not even have time to eat because I was so tired, I went to bed around 12 o'clock.... It is very hard working and going to college and having to do assignments. I feel so tired sometimes I regret going to this course. I can't stop working coz I have to pay bills and I can't leave college coz I want to have a good job in future. I have been sleeping the whole afternoon and I even missed going to work.

A recent, extensive review of the literature on the effect of employment on educational attainment summed up the findings of most existing studies: 'working particularly long hours during [school or college] has a detrimental impact on educational attainment. However, there is also evidence from the literature that working a small amount of hours may be beneficial to studying' (Buscha et al, 2008: 3). The findings of my small-scale, qualitative study fit perfectly with the large quantitative studies carried out into the connection. Unfortunately, some students do not have the financial security that would enable them to examine such evidence and choose appropriately.

8 Reflections

It is a feature of institutions that the permanent staff resent those for whose benefit the institution exists.

Alan Bennett (1998: 131)

1. Introduction

I've mulled over all the information which students generously and trustingly sent to me (or discussed with me) and now I want to add a few reflections, some of which are directed at my informants, but most of which is meant to be of help to their tutors.

Is it too much to claim that students are as good, if not better, at evaluating their tutors' teaching as tutors are at assessing students' learning? Students are seasoned observers of teachers and have become adept at spotting the differences between them as well as the strengths and weaknesses of individuals. As such, they could become valued, perceptive, knowledgeable and constructive allies in the quest for continuous improvement.

The students also proved to be perceptive critics of the earlier drafts of this text. They not only spotted 'typos', factual inaccuracies and long-winded sentences, they also pointed out weaknesses, omissions and lack of balance in my arguments. For example, Joey Smith (AS) commented: 'It's important for students not to judge their teachers too quickly, not just the other way round.' What did they like? The humour, the activities, the diagrams and the sub-headings – which all served 'to break up the text' (Sprinter, AS). Stephan (T&T) also appreciated those questions that made him think 'you were talking to me individually'.

As to the effect of the booklet's content on them, content which was 'mostly new to me' (Sol, AS), Stephan (T&T) thought that in future he 'will believe more in myself'; and Judge (T&T), referring to the relationship with tutors as a partnership, remarked: 'I've never thought about it like this before, and thinking about it, it's a great way to put it'. Loz (AS) reported that, as a result of reading about different ways of L&T, she was now 'prepared to talk to my tutor and ask for other methods like debates rather than just listening to him'. They all liked being quoted and seeing their nickname in a publication, but the tribute I enjoyed the most was from Shadow (T&T): 'I even logged out of Facebook so that I could give the chapters my full attention.' Cruz (T&T) best summarised their general stance: 'hopefully, changes will be made as a result of this' but as a group they were sceptical. At the LSN conference in March 2009 Loz (AS) made a statement that they all agreed with either then or in subsequent discussions with me: 'Teachers claim they listen to students but they don't really.' That is the perception that we as tutors need to change.

Students are as good, if not better, at evaluating their tutors' teaching as tutors are at assessing students' learning



So, as colleges are already aware, there's a rich mine of information, ideas and goodwill held by students, waiting for staff to tap into it. One of the main routes to self-improvement and self-evaluation is to listen systematically and sensitively to what students have to say and respond appropriately. My experience in this project is that an interactive combination of discussion groups and learning logs is a far more powerful technique for accessing the 'voice of learners' than the questionnaires I used. I attempted to get to know the students first before they completed their diaries and I held discussions with them after they had read the first draft of my report. This allowed me to check on the accuracy and fairness of my interpretations, the representativeness of certain views and the persistence of problems they had identified. The outcome of such regular consultation is likely to be a change in the power relationship between tutors and students as learning comes to be seen as a shared responsibility. The potential gains are, moreover, considerable, as Rudduck and McIntyre found: when students 'find themselves treated as partners in the educational enterprise, not merely as its objects, they can come to see themselves as members with a stake in the enterprise' (2007: 142).

It is not part of my argument that little is currently being done by colleges to involve students in the design, delivery and review of T&L. Indeed, Brooke House Sixth Form College in Hackney has a sophisticated strategy of student participation. Students, for instance, not only sit on the relevant college committees, and systematically gather information from fellow students, but also act as 'learning advocates' who are trained alongside tutors to observe lessons and write joint reports.

2. High skills testing

The feature of the diaries that first caught my attention was the high frequency of references to exams/tests and assignments/coursework. This was one of the few occasions where the entries of the A-level and vocational students were markedly different from those of the FLT students. The latter certainly discussed deadlines for assignments, marking criteria and re-submissions, but their entries were not quite so saturated with endless references to testing such as: improving revision techniques; setting aside large periods of time for memorising facts; practising typical exam questions; studying past papers; improving exam techniques; practising under exam conditions; learning not to panic while taking 'mock' as well as 'real' exams; having to re-sit exams; finding out how to improve one's grades; worrying about the results of 'surprise' tests; marking one's own and colleagues' test papers; predicting exam questions; finding out the minimum marks needed to pass; ignoring interesting material because it will not be in the exam; comparing one's answers with the teacher's marking scheme; attending revision classes; and learning the new language which has sprung up around testing with phrases such as 'picking up tips from the tutor on grade boundary security'.

What I found most telling was that not one of these able and committed students made a connection between assessment and learning. Assessment was viewed as a necessary evil and the route to gaining qualifications, but it was not treated as constructive guidance about how to improve as a learner.

Not one of these able and committed students made a connection between assessment and learning



Feedback tended to concentrate on identifying and satisfying the criteria needed to pass assignments or exams. I much prefer Dylan William's depiction of assessment as 'the bridge between teaching and learning', as the means whereby tutors can check to see if their teaching has been understood by their students (2009). He added that assessment becomes formative when decisions about the next steps in T&L are founded in evidence from students' work. So assessment also works as a bridge back from learning to (further) teaching.

Box 8.1, which I have adapted and simplified from Black and William's (2009) work, attempts to capture in one diagram the five main features of formative assessment. Each of the five strategies is already well known to tutors, particularly the second one, that is, the need to make the criteria for success explicit and public; and students have become adept at chasing the criteria. The practical problem of implementing formative assessment has been that some practitioners have superficially adopted the principle about clarifying the criteria without welding all the five strategies into one coherent whole. The value of Box 8.1 is, I trust, that it summarises a complex argument in one diagram which is easy to recall.

Box 8.1 Five strategies for formative assessment

Where student is now

- 1a. Teacher elicits evidence of student's understanding
- 1b. Student provides evidence
- 1c. Peers provide evidence

Where student is going

- 2a. Teacher clarifies the criteria for success
- 2b. Student understands the criteria
- 2c. Peers share the criteria

How to get there

3. Teacher's feedback moves the student forward
4. Student in charge of own learning
5. Peers act as a resource for each other's learning

Source: adapted from Black and William (2009)

Similarly, staff may wish to review the range and quality of their feedback by remembering the acronym STEPF which stands for:

- Self-regulation: how can my comments move the student to take greater charge of his or her learning?
- Task: has the task been fully understood and carried out satisfactorily?
- Evaluation: how do I offer not just unthinking praise, but sensitive and supportive comments to encourage deeper learning?
- Process: have appropriate methods been used? Could other, perhaps more elegant, methods have been used?
- Future: what should be learned next? What's the next target?

These questions will help to ensure that feedback is both diagnostic (what's been done well and not so well) and prognostic (what future learning is needed). No one learns much from comments such as 'Well done' or 'Could do better', but the time needed to craft encouraging and stretching feedback for each student must be borne in mind.

These students have become worried, nervous and mark hungry. A few of them appear to be obsessed with testing and its significance for their future: one A-level student, for instance, mentioned exams or coursework 24 times in her entries for 15 days in college. The average number of references among the A-level and vocational students was between 10 and 15 and for the FLT students it was between 0 and 5. This is what the high stakes testing regime has done to so many of our young people, and the damage begins early in their careers. Witness the views of 12–15 year olds in a comprehensive school in the north of England: 'The students told us they feel over-tested. They accepted the need for testing and its importance for credentials that open doors for them when they leave school (higher education, employment), but they said firmly that there were just too many tests' (Thomson and Gunter, 2006: 846). The difference would appear to be that these younger students were still objecting to this punitive testing regime, while the students I interviewed accepted it as part of their taken-for-granted world. The prevailing ethos in primary and secondary schools and in colleges is one where testing has taken over the curriculum. For example, the head of the secondary school which made the biggest improvement of any school in England in its GCSE results in 2008 commented: 'We are an exam factory. I have no issue with that.' (Curtis, 2009). Schools, faced with closure if fewer than 30% of their pupils achieve at least five good GCSEs, have responded to intense government pressure by stressing exam results at the expense of any other educational value.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the only model of learning which these students mentioned in their writing was the official one of acquisition, where learning is seen as gaining possession of knowledge, skills and qualifications, just as people acquire cars, watches and iPods. For these 24 students, learning has come to mean absorbing mountains of facts and formulae, retaining them for exam purposes and then forgetting them. In short, learning had come to mean remembering what they had been taught. In this instrumental approach education is reduced to

an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and ‘makes deposits’ which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits... But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity...

Paolo Freire, 1972: 45–46, as in original

Students change their identity as they slowly learn to become professional chefs, beauticians or travel agents



Staff and students have, of course, no choice but to work with this model of learning because it is the driving force behind all government policies in education and the basis on which colleges are judged by Ofsted.

As I've already discussed in Chapter 3, students need to know that, besides this implicit theory of learning, there is another way of viewing it which celebrates their progression through college as newcomers who slowly become experts in a field of knowledge through coming to think, talk and act like those experts. This is a particularly useful model of learning for vocational education where students change their identity as they slowly learn to become professional chefs, beauticians or travel agents by modelling themselves on their tutors who have long commercial experience of these jobs. It is also one of the main ways in which young people become respected citizens in a democracy, with a skilled wage to support a family.

3. From diaries to dialogue

Purposeful dialogue between tutors and students on L&T could usefully discuss these different metaphors of learning, about which I've written more elsewhere (Coffield, 2008). Such open-ended discussions could also analyse situations where students' lack of confidence or misinterpretations of tutor behaviour are restricting their learning, or where they feel the tutor has not pitched the work at the right level. Let me give an example of each from the learning logs. Loz (AS) related how she was usually very quiet in some lessons where she hadn't fully understood the points being made by her tutor. She found the courage to ask questions by thinking 'that if I am stuck on something then there is most likely someone else in the class in the same predicament'. Getting the quieter students to voice their doubts and lack of understanding could be liberating for all students.

The second example concerns Charlie (AS), who in my view, misinterpreted the actions of his tutor in a way which could be damaging to their working relationship: 'I can now see that the tutor finds it hard when people don't understand things the way he explains it. So he asks someone from the class to explain instead. I think this is incompetent...' Rather, the tutor appears to me to be using the well-established technique of inviting a student of the same age who understands the leap in understanding that is necessary because he or she has just made it; and who, moreover, can explain the point using language and concepts familiar to his or her classmates. The tutor may be consciously using the technique of role-play to get those students who have understood a difficult point to teach it to those who haven't. What comes out of this particular incident for me is the need for tutors to be explicit about their teaching methods and for students to consider alternative interpretations of their tutors' actions.

There is also an art in teaching which concerns setting work at the appropriate level. When the level is too high students feel threatened and insecure: they are no longer standing on sure ground and begin to question their ability and knowledge base. Students also need to be told that at times staff are deliberately raising the level to encourage them to move out of their 'comfort zone'. When the level is set too low, however, students may not be sufficiently motivated to respond. For example Davina, an A-level student, was invited in one lesson 'to colour in a pie chart. I felt patronised so I brushed this task off and didn't put in any effort. I then had to sit there bored while the group simply talked to each other'.

That strong reaction serves to introduce another significant feature of the written comments of these students on their learning, which to them is not purely an intellectual matter. They wrote, for instance, about being 'deeply offended' by being called the worst group (Davina, AS); about 'a chance to further my knowledge into a subject which I have a passion for' (Charlie, AS); and Ellie (T&T) described being 'dead nervous about the grade I was going to get'; 'I could feel my heart beating faster than usual' during an exam; and 'I was so nervous that I was shaking' at the start of a presentation. These emotions need to be added to the feelings of boredom, anger, pleasure, excitement, resentment, confidence and anxiety which have suffused the quotations I've included in earlier chapters. As James and Biesta argue, students make a 'practical and emotional engagement with [their] learning' (2007: 31). Learning, therefore, is not only an intellectual activity; it is embodied, emotional and social. Moreover, being publicly evaluated on a regular basis is an emotionally charged process so such assessment needs to be both sensitive and constructive. Perhaps we should also admit to our students that their emotions and our emotions are not irrelevant and messy side-effects of L&T, but vital means whereby we all cope with the risks, threats and challenges associated with learning.

This small-scale and unrepresentative sample has also raised the uncomfortable topic of what appears to be a small but persistent problem of unimaginative, dull teaching. Given the size of the sample, there is no way that the scale of the problem can be estimated; but, for what it's worth, these 24 students in two colleges and on three types of courses are saying that, for all the internal quality control measures carried out regularly and Ofsted inspections conducted every five years, there are still a few teachers in need of considerable help. That help is now readily available in the form of mentoring, regular observations of all staff by both internal and external experts, and action plans formed jointly by SMTs and individual members of staff to address weaknesses. All staff, and not just the senior management team, have a joint responsibility for the quality of provision; and it is a mark of the maturity of an organisation and of a sector that this sensitive issue can be openly discussed and addressed. The vast majority of teachers want to become better teachers and, thanks to increased funds from government, there are now substantial resources and formal opportunities to enable them to do so. SMTs could, for their part, increase the percentage of their budget spent on staff who teach in order to improve their number, quality and professional development.

Students also reported that some of the formal mechanisms for consulting them, such as the system of class representatives, were not working well. As Corporal (AS) expressed it: 'I've no idea who my class representatives are, how the Student Union works or that there are elections for them'. One student who had 'volunteered' for this role felt she needed some help to fulfil it properly. Consulting one's colleagues to determine majority and minority views, representing them accurately at meetings and reporting back are all important democratic skills, for which students could be usefully trained. Easier said than done, however, in a large general FE college that will contain hundreds of class representatives. Mimi (T&T) suggested that each college could establish an open website where students could anonymously make suggestions for improving teaching, provided that no member of staff or student was identifiable.

In general, there remains a serious difference of opinion between some senior staff and students about the efficacy of current efforts to access the learner's voice. When there are no less than six million of the latter in the post-compulsory sector, then there are obvious difficulties in obtaining a representative view. At the LSN conference in March 2009, however, the divergence of opinion came out into the open, with twice as many students disagreeing (or disagreeing strongly) as agreeing with the proposition that the student voice is heard. One tutor present at the conference explained the gap between the rhetoric of some principals and the lived experience of many students by remarking: 'Listening to students is now at the heart of all our written policies, but it is not yet at the heart of all our practices.'

4. Summary

In order to summarise my main arguments in an accessible form, I set out in Boxes 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 what action I think government, SMTs and tutors could take to make L&T the first priority. If SMTs and tutors treat these boxes as checklists, then they will have served their purpose. I've also drawn upon arguments in *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority...* (Coffield, 2008) in these summaries.

The findings of this project also suggest other practical measures that staff could usefully take. There is little anyone can do about absences of tutors or students caused by illness but other types of disruption are avoidable. I see no point, for instance, in SMTs cancelling lessons to run staff training sessions; the organisation of CPD is an administrative challenge and should not interfere with lessons. The main source of disruption, however, reported by these students was low-level, persistent unruliness caused by a small minority of fellow students. Dealing with this type of disorder was the major way these students thought their lessons could be improved; and, in standing up to the disruptive, tutors will have the support of the vast majority of students who are keen to learn.

One way of judging the quality of our teaching is to ask ourselves whether it requires our students to think for themselves or simply to report other people's thinking. In other words, if we want to educate our students and not just teach them how to pass exams, then they need to be able to exercise critical intelligence. We could, for example, provide them with a model of such behaviour by consulting them about their learning experiences, reflecting on their views and then acting appropriately to respond to their

Listening to students is now at the heart of all our written policies, but it is not yet at the heart of all our practices



constructive criticisms. This is hardly a radical proposal but its implementation could help to improve L&T from its very roots. Consulting students is the essential first stage of a process which could then lead on to not just treating them as consultants but as trusted fellow researchers into L&T, who are not simply in Thomson and Gunter's words: 'the sources of data in projects which others implement' (2006: 844). As they argue, students could also conduct their own studies into L&T, make recommendations for change, and be involved in their implementation. Now that would be radical.

I want to pull the main threads of my argument together by sharing a growing concern. Where is the post-compulsory sector headed? What will it look like in five to ten years time, if, for example, the government's drive for improvement should prove widely successful and all provision has become 'excellent'? Will we be faced with a smaller group of very large and powerful colleges, which have maximised their success rates, inspection grades and income streams by becoming exam factories? A less censorious label would be to call them 'high-performance learning organisations' which sounds much more commendable. Michael Fielding (2007) has warned us, however, that, in such publicly proclaimed 'excellent' colleges, the significance of tutors and students may come to rest 'primarily in their contribution, usually via high-stakes testing, to the public performance of the organisation' (2007: 399). The danger is that our most progressive ideas such as consulting students, formative assessment and metacognition come to be valued only for the instrumental purpose of increasing the measured attainment of students. In high-performance learning organisations, there is an over-emphasis on performance management, on preparing for the next inspection and the collegiate language of education has been replaced by the hierarchical language of business, for example, heads of department are renamed 'line managers'.

We need the challenge of working for a nobler purpose and, thankfully, Michael Fielding has provided one in his advocacy of the 'person-centred learning community', where tutors and students are valued in and for themselves, and where the aim is for both parties to become better learners and better human beings. As well as employability skills and qualifications, we need FE colleges to offer students an education where 'we learn to become persons in and through our relations with each other, in and through community' (Fielding, 2007: 406).

5. Coda

One final thought.¹ Colleges are now being evaluated not only by how sensitively they listen to the voice of their learners, but also by how responsive they are to the needs of employers. Flexible and accommodating as always, FE colleges have introduced sophisticated measures to meet both of these requirements. There is, however, one voice that is missing from the debate, a voice to which successive governments for over 20 years have turned a deaf ear, and yet it belongs to the only group that has the power to enhance the quality of T&L. It is the voice of tutors.

¹ I'd like to thank David Adelman, Principal, Godalming College, for reminding me of this critical point.

Box 8.2

What could government do to make T&L the first priority?

1. Invest more heavily in the sector so that:
 - a. staff in colleges are paid at the same rate as in schools
 - b. staff are entitled to apply for sabbatical leave, say one term in every 15
 - c. research centres in T&L are set up in every region, based on the Centres of Excellence in Teacher Training
 - d. class sizes are reduced to 12:1 in Level 1, 18:1 in Level 2 and 24:1 in Level 3
 - e. libraries become well-resourced centres of knowledge for T&L.
2. Reduce the endless torrent of new policy and reduce the bureaucracy and paperwork associated with accountability to enable staff to spend more time on T&L.
3. Change the core business of the sector from 'employability skills' to preparing students not just for the jobs they will do but for the lives they will lead as parents, citizens and consumers.
4. Make collaboration the basic design element of the sector and reject the market model of competition, as the Welsh FE sector has done (Webb, 2007).
5. Develop in conjunction with the sector an alternative set of indicators of 'excellence' to those in the official framework to include creativity, innovation and risk-taking as well as success rates, retention and progression.
6. Establish feedback loops whereby class tutors evaluate critically government initiatives and are involved in the formation and re-design of policy.
7. The 'high-stakes' regime of testing is producing students who are adept at passing tests but poor at learning. It needs to be replaced with a system which has at its core trust in the teaching profession.
8. The government insists that all colleges should be excellent. Excellence, defined as the highest possible quality for the highest possible number, does not come cheap.

Box 8.3

What could SMTs do to make T&L the first priority?

1. Become first of all educational leaders who are knowledgeable about T&L and, through a reputation for educational excellence, make a success of the college financially. Learning is not another topic for senior management to tackle but the central organising principle of the college.
2. Become more politically engaged to argue publicly for increased investment in post compulsory education. The 'silent sector' needs to find its collective voice.
3. Teach regularly to emphasise the overriding importance of T&L, to close any gap between SMT and the rest of the staff, to see college policies in action, and to be reminded of the time needed for preparation, reflection and assessment.
4. Increase the percentage of the budget spent not on staff generally but on those staff who teach. Staff learning is the key to success so SMTs need to invest heavily in the appointment, induction, development and retention of the best possible tutors.
5. Change the pattern of CPD from 'pick and mix' from a long menu to training staff in their teaching teams, while preserving 50% of CPD time for individual needs. Introduce 'joint practice development' so that tutors learn alongside their counterparts in neighbouring colleges.
6. Make T&L the first item on the agenda of SMT meetings, and raise the issue with governors regularly.
7. Start learning communities/quality circles consisting of: one member of the SMT, one middle manager, one tutor and a group of students, all volunteers, to discuss how to improve T&L in their area. The aim is to evolve not into a high-performing learning organisation but into a person-centred learning community (See Fielding, 2008).
8. Whole college policies on T&L need to go beyond the administration of lesson observation and how to cope with Ofsted inspections to discuss how, say, tutors' implicit theories of how students learn influence their thinking and practice.
9. Institute a review of all administrative procedures with the aim of cutting back bureaucracy as much as possible to release more time for T&L.
10. Consult students regularly about T&L and respond appropriately to their constructive criticisms.

Box 8.4

What could tutors do to make T&L the first priority?

1. Become experts in T&L by private study, higher degree, CPD, etc.
2. Consult students regularly on T&L and respond to their constructive criticism.
3. Establish order in all their classes so that, for example, low-level disruption by some students does not prevent their more motivated classmates from learning.
4. Ensure that students are involved in a variety of activities during lessons rather than spending most of their time copying notes or listening.
5. Discuss their teaching methods openly with students.
6. Begin a dialogue with students about their learning and how it could be improved.
7. Ask for CPD courses that will train together the team they teach in; ask to work with a counterpart in another college on 'joint practice development' (Fielding *et al.*, 2005) rather than try to disseminate some stranger's 'good practice'.
8. Of all the interventions possible, choose one like Assessment for Learning, which has proved to be highly effective and which makes the connection between testing and learning.
9. Volunteer to join a learning community within college, together with a member of the SMT, a middle manager and a group of students to discuss how T&L could be improved.
10. Remain open as a lifelong learner by experimenting and reflecting on one's role as a tutor; and act at all times as if we lived in a democracy.

Appendix 1 Questions about learning

Activity 3 extended

In Chapter 4 I invited you to list a number of questions you could ask yourself about learning. Below please find some more suggestions. If you've come up with a useful question, I'd like you to email it to me (f.coffield@ioe.ac.uk).

1. What is your best experience of learning? What made it so good? What can we learn from that experience? (Similar questions about 'your worst experience'.)
2. What do you enjoy learning? What do you not enjoy learning?
3. What helps you to learn? What prevents you?
4. How do tutors help you learn? How could they be more helpful?
5. What kind of things do you learn from your friends? How important is this 'informal learning' to you?
6. How do you assess how well you are learning?
7. What kind of feedback or comments on your assignments do you learn best from?
8. What steps could you take to improve your learning?
9. Do you challenge yourself to learn something you find difficult? Are you prepared to move out of your 'comfort zone'?
10. Are you willing to try different ways of learning?
11. What gaps in knowledge and skills do you think you have? What are your plans for filling them?
12. What do you want to learn now?

Glossary

- AS** the first year of A-level study
- A2** the second year of A-level study
- CETTS** Centres of Excellence in Teacher Training
- CPD** continuing professional development
- FLT** Foundation Learning Tier
- IAG** information, advice and guidance
- ICT** information and communication technologies
- LSC** Learning and Skills Council
- LSN** Learning and Skills Network
- L&T** learning and teaching
- NVQ** National Vocational Qualifications
- SFC** sixth form college
- SMT** senior management team
- T&L** teaching and learning
- T&T** Travel and Tourism

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What can we learn from our students about teaching and learning? That is the question that Frank Coffield, Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, London University, addresses in this follow-up to his LSN publication *Just suppose teaching and learning were to become the first priority...*

In this booklet he offers students some of the latest thinking on learning to help them become better at learning. The learners also offer some practical and constructive recommendations to improve teaching.

The result is a publication in two parts. The first part talks directly to students about learning and teaching. The second part argues, with examples drawn from learning logs written by students, that students are better at evaluating their tutors' teaching than tutors are at assessing their students' learning.