

Building Learning Power in Action

Sarah Gornall, Maryl Chambers and Guy Claxton

Preface

The Building Learning Power approach seems to be hitting the spot. As of October 2005, we have been asked to introduce BLP to teachers and headteachers from over three thousand schools across the UK, as well as in Brazil, Australia and New Zealand. In the UK, nine Local Authorities have committed themselves to encouraging the development of BLP across their schools, and appreciate its central role in realising the ambitions of *Every Child Matters*.

One of the main reasons for the success of the approach, so we are told, is that it marries principle and practice so well. On the one hand, thousands of teachers are fired up by the possibility of making all their students – not just those who are going to do well in their exams – into confident, capable, creative lifelong learners. They know that that, more than anything else, is what their students are going to need. And they know that this is possible for all students, so that 'inclusion' and 'personalisation' become realities.

On the other hand, they find that BLP is eminently practical. It offers a user-friendly language for talking about learning-to-learn that teachers, parents and even quite young children can easily make their own. And it offers a range of (as we put it) '*low-cost, low-risk, high-impact climate shifters*' – concrete, do-able things that quite quickly have tangible impact on young people's attitudes towards learning (and, incidentally, improve their achievement).

Now we are in a position to put even more warm, living flesh on the bones of the BLP framework, by describing for you a range of real live examples where busy teachers have tried out some aspects of BLP, and been (to put it mildly) pleasantly surprised by the results – and encouraged to take another step ... and another ... and another. That is what this book provides. But it does more than that. It also unpicks some of these stories, and gives you a host of additional ideas about how you might achieve similar results.

If it works, do write or e-mail and let us know. Actually, do let us know even if you meet unanticipated snags! BLP is itself a living, learning enterprise, which relies to a huge extent on the willingness of teachers to experiment with small changes to the way they teach – and then to adjust what they do in the light of experience. We hope you will be willing to share the fruits of your experiments with us, as they ripen.

Professor Guy Claxton

Programme Consultant, and chief inspiration,
to TLO Limited for Building Learning Power

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Authors

Sarah Gornall has wide-ranging experience in education, leadership and training. She has taught teenagers and adults, been a secondary school Deputy Head and Chair of a primary school governing body. As Director of Bristol Education Action Zone, she drew together partners from schools, businesses, arts and regeneration initiatives to enrich learning for young people and raise attainment in an ethnically diverse and socially challenging area. Since May 2005 Sarah has been working as a freelance coach, trainer and facilitator with a particular interest in leadership, change management and new approaches to learning. *Building Learning Power in Action* is her first book.

Maryl Chambers has spearheaded the development of TLO Limited's Building Learning Power programme, helping to bring Guy Claxton's ground-breaking work to schools and teachers. Maryl is one of

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Guy Claxton is an internationally acclaimed writer, consultant, lecturer and academic, specialising in creativity, education and the mind. He is Visiting Professor of Learning Science at the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education, and a Fellow of the British Psychological Society. He has written extensively on subjects from creative thinking to Buddhism, by way of the uses and value of uncertainty in learning, and what it is that makes people effective lifelong learners.

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Building Learning Power

Everyone's talking about it

It seems that everyone is talking about learning – lifelong learning, learning to learn, Primary learning networks, Networked Learning Communities, learning conversations, to name just a few. Learning has become a central strand of DfES initiatives, Ofsted inspections, and NCSL strategies. Learning in the world of education has, at last, become a common enthusiasm.

Moving on in learning to learn

An enthusiasm for better learning has motivated teachers for a long time. In attempting to help students learn more or learn better, we tried to understand learning styles, multiple intelligences, learning modalities, and the like. In attempting to help students improve their organisation of knowledge or the effectiveness of their memory we used practical tools like spider diagrams, mnemonics, and other study skills. These approaches have laid the ground for a deeper, more permanent set of approaches, whose aim is to get beyond learning more, or learning better, to helping students to help themselves become better learners.

What is learning power?

One of these approaches, known as Building Learning Power, was created by Guy Claxton. This maps the territory of learning and shows the different elements of all-round learning fitness. Professor Claxton suggests that there are four major learning dispositions: *Resilience*, the disposition to attend to learning and persist under difficulties; *Resourcefulness*, the disposition to deploy a variety of learning strategies; *Reflectiveness*, the disposition to think about learning and about oneself as a developing learner; and *Reciprocity*, the disposition to learn with and from others. These dispositions are inherent in us all. They are not fixed at birth, or when we leave school; they can be developed by everyone regardless of 'ability', social background or age. There are no limits to extending our learning power.

We might think of the dispositions as being like groups of 'learning muscles'. Just as we can build our physical muscles with the right kinds of exercise, so we can exercise our learning muscles to develop their strength and stamina. Each of the dispositions – the four R's – is made up of a number of learning behaviours, which we call capacities. These are summarised on the page opposite. Because the learning capacities are quite specific in nature, they can be individually trained, nurtured and exercised. On the other

hand, when these learning muscles are not exercised, through lack of opportunity or encouragement, they can so easily wither and fall into disuse.

Self-awareness as learners

A central concern of Building Learning Power is with enabling students to become more self-aware as learners, to develop the habits of a successful learner, and to appreciate that they can continually improve those habits. In this approach, teachers and students together generate knowledge about their learning, and produce a stream of ever more fertile ideas about their own ability to be independent learners. The ultimate goal is what has been called *portable learning power* – the ability to learn what we need to in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves.

No flat-packs

The approach, as pioneered by Guy Claxton and TLO, does not aim to provide teachers with neat boxes of resources that can be assembled into set lessons by following sheets of step-by-step instructions. Teachers, classroom assistants, learning mentors, behaviour management consultants, governors, and many others have joined together in TLO courses to understand the principles of the approach, to develop learning enquiries, to reflect on their learning, and to relish the opportunity to put creativity back into teaching. A small proportion of the schools which have started building learning power in their classrooms have agreed to take a risk and share their learning in progress through this book. We hope their adventurous spirit will encourage others to take up the approach.

A great start

Building Learning Power is still near the beginning of a long journey. Its common-sense principles belie a sophistication in teaching behaviours that may take years to perfect. Teachers, though, are excited by, and enjoying, the journey. They are already reporting changes in student behaviour – increased motivation, fewer behaviour problems, and a far greater enthusiasm for learning. They are also reporting leaps in students' attainment, and an eagerness in themselves to remain in the profession.

Learning-power muscles

The Learning-Power Dispositions

Resilience

The emotional aspects of learning

Feeling

Resourcefulness

The cognitive aspects of learning

Thinking

Reflectiveness

The strategic aspects of learning

Managing

Reciprocity

The social aspects of learning

Relating

The Learning-Power Capacities

Absorption

Being able to lose yourself in learning – becoming absorbed in what you are doing; rapt and attentive, in a state of 'flow'.

Managing Distractions

Recognising and reducing distractions; knowing when to walk away and refresh yourself. Creating your own best environment for learning.

Noticing

Perceiving subtle nuances, patterns and details in experience.

Perseverance

Keeping going on in the face of difficulties, channelling the energy of frustration productively. Knowing what a slow and uncertain process learning often is.

Questioning

Asking questions of yourself and others. Being curious and playful with ideas – delving beneath the surface of things.

Making Links

Seeing connections between disparate events and experiences – building patterns – weaving a web of understanding.

Imagining

Using your imagination and intuition to put yourself through new experiences or to explore possibilities. Wondering *What if...?*

Reasoning

Calling up your logical and rational skills to work things out methodically and rigorously; constructing good arguments, and spotting the flaws in others'.

Capitalising

Drawing on the full range of resources from the wider world – other people, books, the Internet, past experience, future opportunities ...

Planning

Thinking about where you are going, the action you are going to take, the time and resources you will need, and the obstacles you may encounter.

Revising

Being flexible, changing your plans in the light of different circumstances, monitoring and reviewing how things are going and seeing new opportunities.

Distilling

Looking at what is being learned – pulling out the essential features – carrying them forward to aid further learning; being your own learning coach.

Meta-learning

Knowing yourself as a learner – how you learn best; how to talk about the learning process.

Interdependence

Knowing when it's appropriate to learn on your own or with others, and being able to stand your ground in debate.

Collaboration

Knowing how to manage yourself in the give and take of a collaborative venture, respecting and recognising other viewpoints; adding to and drawing from the strength of teams.

Empathy and Listening

Contributing to others' experiences by listening to them to understand what they are really saying, and putting yourself in their shoes.

Imitation

Constructively adopting methods, habits or values from other people whom you observe.



Key features for success

From the schools described in the following pages, and from other schools we have visited in our work with Building Learning Power, we have noticed and distilled some key features which they all display and which contribute to their success in building learning power.

Ethos

The whole school ethos is one of encouraging success and building aspirations. All staff have high expectations of students, whatever their backgrounds, believing that everyone has something to offer and the capability of rising to a challenge. They reinforce this by encouraging students to reflect on how and why a success, however large or small, has been achieved.

Learning focus in the classroom

Staff specifically plan for learning in the classroom. They frequently talk about the learning process, and seize on real-life situations as prompts to discuss learning-power capacities. They 'go with' the learning, following students' absorption rather than artificially stopping the learning to follow a lesson plan. They take time to explore with students, and encourage imagination and experimentation. They recognise that if students are excited and involved they will learn more.

Teachers as learners

Teachers are excited by, and have fun with, learning power, and this enthusiasm communicates itself to students. Staffroom talk centres on learning, and in parallel with their students, staff reflect on their own learning processes and support each other in them. Within this supportive climate, staff are willing to take risks, experiment with new approaches and technology, and learn from their practice.

A common language for learning

There is a common language for learning across the school. The language is used in all classrooms, with all ages of students, and also with parents. This helps everyone to talk about and understand learning to learn. The understanding spills over into life outside school, where parents are able to reinforce the ideas by using the same language with their children.

The language also helps in managing behaviour – e.g. a teacher may enquire what a student is reflecting on when gazing out of a window. Quarrels between students may be dispelled by a teacher commenting on how, a few minutes

ago, they were collaborating well: sharing ideas, listening to each other, etc. This often leads to collaboration being resumed.

Positive role models

Staff model learning themselves. They share their own difficulties, frustrations and triumphs in learning. They admit they don't know the answers to some of the students' questions, and pursue new knowledge alongside them. They display being a vulnerable learner and, despite fears to the contrary, do not lose control of the learning or behaviour in the classroom. They model how to respond to others doing things well and how to use mistakes as a springboard for new learning.

Teachers as coaches

Teachers have shifted the emphasis of their style from teaching to coaching. They use questions skilfully to draw solutions out from students. They encourage students to ask questions of themselves and each other. They use open-ended language and activities, encouraging hypotheses. They ask *What could be?* questions and give students time to reflect and develop a deeper level of understanding. Many use the **GROW** model of coaching to structure learning conversations with students:

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| • What do you want to achieve? | Goal |
| • What is it like now? | Reality |
| • What possible routes could you take? | Options |
| • What will you do, what help might you need? | What next? |

Student ownership of learning

Students engage in activities through discussion of possible strategies and joint ownership (with the teacher) of planning. Activities are structured so that students are given – or create for themselves – learning intentions, criteria for success, choice about the action to take, freedom to interpret information, encouragement to revise what they are doing, and time to draw out key learning (about both content and process).

Finding your way around the book

The following pages are devoted to illustrating how the learning capacities (muscles) can be developed in practice. Each double page features several ways of understanding and working with the capacity.

- **Case studies** from schools illustrate the capacity in action, how it is being recognised, nurtured and sustained. The stories featured vary in scale, from one type of activity in a subject-specific area of a secondary school, through whole-school approaches, to cross-phase learning conferences in a Networked Learning Community.

Although the case studies centre on one capacity each, they also illustrate how the development of one capacity moves swiftly and naturally to the development of others. This theme is taken up on pages 50–51 to show how capacities blend and weave together to form a tapestry of learning.

- **Activities** to nurture the capacity are included to extend the scope of examples of what teachers are doing. The lists of activities are far from complete. The creativity of teachers runs far beyond what we could fit on the page.

The activities should not be seen as a BLP curriculum: there is no such thing.

These are things that teachers have tried which highlighted the learning muscle and help to exercise it. In using any such activities students need to be aware of their purpose, to know which muscles they are giving a work-out.

- **Language** to encourage the capacity. Here we offer a variety of questions and statements which teachers and parents might use to highlight, explore and strengthen the learning muscles.
- Finally we have included **quotes** from students and teachers as they told us about what they were doing. Some of the statements are self-evident and profound, others are intriguing, their meaning not immediately obvious. We leave you to interpret them to your own satisfaction.

Case-study school (points to the photo of the teacher and child in the Planning section)

How the school is nurturing the capacity and building students' learning power (points to the text in the Planning section)

Characteristics of a learner who uses this learning muscle successfully (points to the cartoon character in the Reflection section)

Language that will encourage others to develop the learning muscle (points to the 'Language to encourage planning' list in the Reflection section)

Activities that might give the learning muscle a work-out (points to the 'Now I've got to test it...' section in the Reflection section)

Some of these features were in place in the schools before teachers experimented with learning power; some have developed as a result of that experimentation. Whatever their origin, they characterise and sustain a culture of continuous learning for both teachers and students.



Building Resilience

being ready, willing and able to lock on to learning

Absorption

flow; the pleasure of being rapt in learning

Managing Distractions

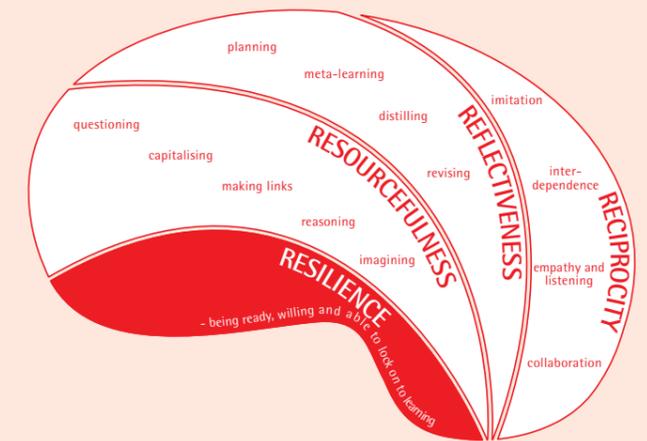
recognising and reducing interruptions

Noticing

really sensing what's out there

Perseverance

stickability; tolerating the feelings of learning



Absorption

Burrington C of E Primary School, North Somerset



Photograph courtesy of Burrington Primary School

Other ways to nurture the capacity of being absorbed

- **Class Direction.** Use students' questions to direct the exploration of a topic. Ask what they know already and what more they would like to find out. Engage them in planning how to find out information, review their progress, refocus their enquiry, and share the knowledge they gain. This will engage their creativity, stimulate the spirit of enquiry and create a sense of ownership – all of which encourage absorption.
- **Big Questions.** Pursue questions which are difficult to answer, encourage speculation, or call for finding new information. Seize opportunities to learn alongside the class, where you as teacher do not know everything about the subject yet either, using *could be* and *I wonder if* language, sharing your own learning process, and encouraging pupils to take the lead when possible. *"If humans didn't exist, what would happen to the earth?"*
- **Conundrums.** Give pupils puzzling situations and problems to work out for fun, developing their ability to question and think laterally. Vary the levels from the short and jokey *"How many ... does it take to change a light bulb?"* through riddles and puzzles which require thinking outside the box *"A man is born in 1939 and dies in 1904, aged 35. How can this be?"* to longer and more complex ones. Encourage pupils to make up conundrums themselves. Discuss how they feel when they tackle problems which do not seem to have a logical or immediate answer, and why jokes and puzzles engage their interest.
- **Mine Identity.** Shape projects to allow pupils to explore themselves, their interests, their learning styles, their roots. Discuss whether the way you learn, culture, or gender affects absorption. Ask pupils to generate ideas on how to increase engagement when topics do not seem immediately appealing.
- **Raptometer.** Make a scale on the classroom wall to indicate degrees of absorption. Pupils or adult observers (e.g. Teacher Training student, Teaching Assistant) observe groups and/or individuals as they are working and move a label with a pupil's name or picture up and down the scale according to how absorbed they perceive individuals are. Use as a prompt for discussion about how pupils have become absorbed at different stages of lesson, what the characteristics of absorption are, how to be more absorbed in the flow and how to avoid distractions. (CAB)

When you use this learning muscle, you ...

- become engrossed in what you are doing
- may not be aware of the passing of time
- find being absorbed satisfying and rewarding
- like the feeling of being stretched in your learning



Treating learning as a reward in itself

Burrington Primary nestles against the Mendip Hills and attracts pupils from outlying farms and villages. It is a small school, where learning is treated as a reward in itself.

- Teachers across the school use BLP language and objectives, have high expectations, and communicate both enjoyment and excitement as they get locked onto learning alongside the children. They frequently refer to displays of the learning capacities.
- Both teachers and pupils notice learning behaviour and comment on it. So when a child is deeply involved in learning, the teacher may point it out to the rest of the class. Pupils then develop a more vivid awareness of what absorption looks like and can use that awareness to develop their own absorption muscle.

Learning has a high profile throughout the school and there is a very wide range of enrichment activities so that children can follow up their interests and satisfy their curiosity.

- Pupils have opportunities to talk about what they have learnt and how they have learnt it in class, in assemblies and in learning conferences.
- They discuss their experiences of learning and the feelings associated with being a learner.
- Talking about absorption, pupils may comment on why they get involved (fun and enjoyment) and the way that being deeply absorbed makes them lose track of other things, such as the time.
- They use explicit strategies that they have developed together to manage distractions and to deepen their absorption when necessary.
- Teachers involve children in planning, both in terms of focus and how to find out what they need to know.
- Unusual projects, such as the Burrington Woodlice Hospital, engage interest and commitment because they originate with the pupils.

Key actions: Staff ...

- go with the learning and follow absorption. Where possible, they don't stop a lesson arbitrarily because of the time or a projected move to the next topic. They take time to explore and to allow the children to develop their interest fully
- enjoy learning themselves; they try out new approaches and new technology, and communicate a sense of awe, wonder and excitement from what they are doing themselves; they recognise that if children are excited, they will learn more
- engage the children in activities through discussion of possible strategies and joint ownership of planning
- make 'what good learners do' explicit to children and treat learning as a reward in itself; they value ideas
- find new ways to re-interpret their knowledge of Building Learning Power to pupils, parents and governors, deepening their own understanding as they do so.

Outcomes

- Pupils enjoy coming to school and learning. The Ofsted report in summer 2005 stated *"Pupils have outstanding attitudes to learning"*. Inspectors commented on the close causal link between the quality of teaching and the learning outcomes for the children, *"Very effective teaching results in pupils' excellent attitudes to learning."*
- Pupils achieve highly and make excellent progress against their targets. *"Each pupil assessed either met or surpassed targets expected of them."* *"Pupils with SEN and those who are higher attainers make good progress and achieve well."* (Ofsted report 2005)
- Teachers relax into the flow and get absorbed in the learning with the children. Their role changes from instructor to facilitator as pupils share what they have learnt and teach each other. They keep fresh, looking at things from new perspectives. They are enthused themselves.

Language to encourage absorption

- You look as though you're really enjoying puzzling over that ...
- I wonder if you do anything differently when you're really engaged in what you're doing?
- What do you really like doing? What makes you able to get so absorbed in it?
- What did it feel like last time you got really into something?
- What do you think might have made you feel like that?
- What do you think might help you feel like that again?
- What do you like about ... ? What would make you like ... in the same sort of way?
- What can you find out about ... that would help you enjoy it?
- It feels good when you get right into an activity.



“It gave me licence to think, They're learning — I can continue ...”
Sam Clark, Teacher

Managing Distractions

Neston Primary School,
Wiltshire



Photograph courtesy of Neston Primary School

Learning conversations about managing distractions

Neston Primary set off on their BLP journey by using TLO's interactive questionnaire *TrackingLearning:On-Line*, from which pupils drew up their own profiles as learners.

Teachers saw managing distractions as a key capacity in the process of building absorption in learning, and then developed learning conversations with this focus.

Class groups used the feedback from the Resilience quiz in *TrackingLearning:On-line* as the stimulus for thinking about how to manage distractions. Pupils set targets for themselves, and then reviewed their progress in discussion and by repeating the quiz.

Teachers used analogies from pupils' daily worlds to help them realise that managing distractions had value, and could move them from the 'bottom of the league of learning' to be champions. They worked with pupils to identify distractions in the classroom and to come up with strategies for reducing them. They discussed:

- Issues which were not clear cut, such as friends who were both a distraction and a source of inspiration, and whether fiddling was a distraction or an aid to concentration

- Different learning environments that might be appropriate for different types of learning, both in school and at home
- Internal distractions, such as hunger, tiredness, emotions, failure.

Pupils discussed and ranked significant distractions – people, objects, the weather, the environment. They suggested ideas for managing these distractions and reviewed their experience of what worked. Many of the strategies they came up with addressed the emotional content of internal distractions. These included:

- Using their imagination to take themselves to a different place, a happy place, where they could block out the distraction
- Discussing how to deal with the situation with a friend so that the worry did not go round and round in their minds
- Thinking about how much worse a situation could have been
- Giving themselves time to laugh or cry about a situation if necessary before settling to a task.

Key actions: Staff ...

- started from the pupils' own perceptions and made managing distractions a desirable skill
- asked coaching questions to draw solutions out from pupils and tackled ambiguous and sometimes difficult emotional issues
- gave pupils some control over the way they handled distractions in the classroom and outside
- included the ability to manage distractions in the range of achievements for which they gave rewards.

Outcomes

- Pupils manage their distractions better. They are more independent, autonomous and aware of themselves and other people. They try to sort out issues with their friends, recognise when they are not making progress and need a break, and are generally more resilient and more emotionally literate.
- Teachers spend less time on dealing with distractions. They have more time, and emotional energy, to facilitate learning and support individuals in making progress.

Other ways to nurture the capacity to manage distractions

- **Distraction Scale.** Work with pupils to describe different degrees of the ability to manage distractions. A 3-star manager might "always keep focused on what s/he is learning" and "Support other learners by helping them to manage their distractions". Use language appropriate for the age of the pupils. Comment on behaviour to recognise and value the management of distractions. Ask pupils to help each other with ideas about how to earn more stars as distraction managers.
- **Background Music.** Play music with a tempo of 60 beats a minute at a very low volume while pupils are working. This can help to create a calm environment. Use music to set the atmosphere at the beginning of a lesson and to settle the class. Make this into an experiment. Discuss with pupils what sort of music helps them to concentrate or to think of new ideas, and what sort amounts to a distraction.
- **Visual Anchor.** In pairs or in groups, ask the pupils to identify the detail of their behaviour and feelings when they manage distractions well. Then ask them to draw a picture of themselves using this learning muscle and stick it on their desks to help them to remember to use this muscle. (NST)
- **Role Play.** Brainstorm ways of managing distractions with pupils. Ask them to create role-plays, in pairs or groups, about different ways to manage distractions. The whole class then watch each other's role plays and the effectiveness of different strategies. Extend by writing reminders in thought bubbles for display. (BRM)
- **Break States.** Change the mental and physical state of the class by using music, quick games (Fizz-Buzz, Simon Says), guided relaxation, Brain Gym (Dennison, 1992), change of partner/desk/lighting, breathing exercises, or a refreshment break. Such activities refresh and relax pupils, enabling a greater degree of focus afterwards. Discuss their impact on concentration and how pupils could use them in other contexts to keep themselves on track with their learning.

When you use this learning muscle, you ...

- are aware of possible sources of distraction
- purposefully try to minimise distractions
- know what conditions help you learn
- settle back into learning quickly after an interruption



Language to encourage managing distractions

- What do you find gets in the way of your learning?
- What would help you to avoid these distractions?
- Do you need a break?
- How are you feeling? ... Is that getting in the way of your learning?
- What can we do to help you focus on what you want to do?
- What can you do to help focus yourself?
- How could you remind yourself to use your anti-distraction tactics?
- How could you let us know if we're distracting you?
- Great! I noticed you went back to your learning quickly after that interruption.
- Who could you copy in the way they stay focused?
- Let your mind relax a little, take a deep breath and refresh yourself before going on.
- Imagine you are in a good place for learning. What is it like?



“Sometimes when I get stuck with homework, I have a drink and a biscuit, then I come back to it” Leo, Y6