

more likely to 'screw down' the classroom, being more directive, giving the students less choice, and passing on their pressure to the students. When this happened, students' achievement went down. It did so because the students were learning less resiliently and resourcefully; they were trying to perform rather than to learn. As a result, the authors found that 'the effects of a performance orientation include greater helplessness, reduced help-seeking, less strategy use, more maladaptive strategies, and a greater focus on grade feedback.'¹⁴

A second finding is that helping students learn how to be better learners is one of the most effective ways of raising their achievement (never mind its role in preparing them for life). The more curious, adventurous, resilient and independent they become, the better are their grades. When students are encouraged to help each other learn, for example, there is a substantial effect on their achievement, and the size of the effect increases the more control and responsibility they are allowed to take.¹⁵ When they are encouraged to keep a diary recording their experiences of and reflections on their own learning, secondary science students, for example, show dramatic improvements on a number of indicators. The authors of this study report that 'the learning journals helped students to develop more sophisticated conceptions of learning, showing an understanding of the purpose and processes of learning.'¹⁶ And, as Chris Watkins notes, we have known for more than 25 years that 'students with more elaborated conceptions of learning perform better in public examinations at age 16.'



The languages of learning power

In general our attitude is that any list of learning dispositions—ours, Costa's, Richhart's—serves the very useful purpose of getting teachers into the right territory—we all share a general sense of what 'right' means. Many schools are not used to focusing on the habits and processes of learning itself. Teachers are used to thinking about their lessons in terms of two dimensions: the subject-matter they are trying to get across (the 'syllabus') and the effectiveness with which they have done so ('assessment'). How to teach *Macbeth* or Atomic Weight, for example, and how to check students' understanding, are familiar issues, and teachers think and talk fluently about these aspects of what they do. But there is a third dimension which is at the core of learning power: the learning habits and attitudes which are being exercised *by the way those subjects are being presented, taught and assessed*. You can teach *Macbeth*, and get good exam results, in a way that stretches students' abilities to imagine, collaborate, and question. And you can also teach *Macbeth*, and get good results, in a way that makes students more passive, docile, and dependent. For BLP, it is this difference that is crucial.

The third dimension of teaching

Traditionally, teachers have been less articulate about this dimension. But if students are to be helped to build those 'elaborated conceptions of learning', we need to have, and to make regular use of, a vocabulary that captures this richness. Teachers need to become fluent in a language of learning power. It is surprisingly helpful for both teachers and students to have understood concepts such as 'noticing', 'collaboration', or 'managing distractions', and to have learned to use such words and phrases routinely. It is only when we name such things explicitly that students (and their parents) know what it is we are noticing and valuing.

Noticing what we value

Naming these ideas also enables teachers to notice which habits of mind they *do* routinely require or encourage pupils to use in lessons and other activities—and then to think more carefully about whether there might be other learning muscles they might be calling on instead—and other ways in which to stretch and strengthen them. They begin to think, 'How is learning happening, and what qualities of mind are we cultivating in young people by the way we are designing and delivering the curriculum?' Many schools discover, when they start to think this way, how much they are doing to build their students' learning power already—but they just haven't pulled that aspect of their work together so clearly. And they may also begin to see where some of the 'holes' might be in the 'epistemic apprenticeship' which they are providing for their pupils, and how they might be able to provide a more 'broad and balanced' set of mental workouts for them.

How is learning happening?

A working vocabulary

One way we could go from here, as researchers, is to try to make our list, our vocabulary, ever more comprehensive. We could create a fuller list of learning-related dispositions and capacities by integrating the frameworks of BLP and HoM, for example. But, as people who first and foremost want to support the practical development of a certain kind of education, there are a number of other considerations that hold the quest for the Holy Grail of the definitive list in check.

First, we have found that it is important to get schools to treat these vocabularies as open to questioning. We want them not just to accept and use BLP (or any other terminology), but to be thoughtful, critical, and creative in the development of a language that they can truly understand and own. When staff and students are involved in developing their ideas of the Learning Qualities they want to strengthen, they are much more likely to be meaningful. So we want the BLP model to 'stick' and be good enough to get that process of conversation and customisation going; to help schools to see what talking about the How and Who of learning actually sounds like—and then to continue the discussion for themselves.

Discuss and customise

In practice, developing and using vocabularies requires a delicate balance, one that we find we have not always got right. On the one hand we want

Think critically and creatively about the framework

to be 'directive' enough to encourage schools to really understand what can be an unfamiliar perspective. At the beginning, we encourage them to understand and use the vocabulary of BLP quite explicitly. But we aim always to remind them of the spirit that underlies the letter of BLP, so they can think critically and creatively about the framework as soon as they are able. The research we have done with schools shows that sometimes BLP can come across as too prescriptive—we have not been good enough at balancing the direction with the discussion. And sometimes it is almost as if schools want only to be given the Definitive List, and so don't take us as seriously as we would like when we say: 'Now go away and make it your own'.

A usable vocabulary

Second, the vocabulary of learning power has to be usable, and that means not making it either too long or too short. If you merely give teachers two or three categories (like Visual, Auditory or Kinaesthetic, or Bright, Average or Below-Average levels of intelligence), there is not enough detail to help them think about how they might develop their own practice. The repercussions tend to be rather superficial. We have found this, to some extent, with our language of the Four R's. Schools that just latch on to the broad organising concepts of Resilience, Resourcefulness, Reflection and Reciprocity, and don't burrow down into the detail, tend to find that initial enthusiasm can dry up as people don't know what to do next, once they have used the high level lingo. On the other hand, if you allow lists to expand to include 16 (Habits of Mind) or 17 (BLP learning capacities) elements, it can be daunting for a newcomer—whether teacher, child or parent—to get to grips with.

4 domains of learning 17 learning capacities

Our solution has been to structure the BLP learning language at two levels, across four domains of learning. At the first level, Learning Power breaks down into the Four R's; and then, at the second level, each of those are subdivided into four or five finer-grain learning capacities. Each of the R dispositions covers a broad domain of learning,

Building emotional engagement

Resilience covers aspects of the learner's **emotional** and experiential engagement with the subject matter of learning. It includes concentration and the ability to resist distractions; close attention and fascination; and tolerating the emotional ups and downs of learning, and bouncing back from frustration or failure.

Building a wide range of cognitive approaches

Resourcefulness embraces the main **cognitive** skills and dispositions of learning: scepticism and curious questioning; making links and connections within your mind; balancing reason and imagination; and the ability to create a good 'learning niche' for oneself by collecting and capitalising on tools and resources.

The Supple Learning Mind

Reflectiveness

- **Planning:** working learning out in advance
- **Revising:** monitoring and adapting along the way
- **Distilling:** drawing out the lessons from experience
- **Meta-learning:** understanding learning, and yourself as a learner

Reciprocity

- **Interdependence:** balancing self-reliance and sociability
- **Collaboration:** the skills of learning with others
- **Listening/Empathy:** getting inside others' minds
- **Imitation:** picking up others' habits and values



Resilience

- **Absorption:** flow; the pleasure of being rapt in learning
- **Managing distraction:** recognising and reducing interruptions
- **Noticing:** really sensing what's out there
- **Perseverance:** stickability; tolerating the feelings of learning

Resourcefulness

- **Questioning:** getting below the surface; playing with situations
- **Making links:** seeking coherence, relevance and meaning
- **Imagining:** using the mind's eye as a learning theatre
- **Reasoning:** thinking rigorously and methodically
- **Capitalising:** making good use of resources

Building interpersonal interaction

Reciprocity covers the **social** and interpersonal side of learning: being able both to argue your corner and keep an open mind in discussion; listening carefully and seeing other sides to the question; being a collaborative team member and team-leader; and being open to positive skills and attitudes that are being modelled by those around you.

Building responsibility for learning

Reflectiveness covers the **strategic** and **self-managing** sides of learning. It includes planning and anticipating needs and obstacles; taking stock and flexibly revising your approach as you go along; distilling out lessons and applications for the future; and honest self-appraisal of yourself as a learner.

On page 41 you can see the vocabulary we used to capture these complementary aspects of what we called 'the supple learning mind'.

Many schools clearly like this way of giving structure and meaning to the dispositions. Others, however, can either get stuck at the 'coarse grain' level, or dive down into the 'fine grain' level too fast, and get confused.

An accessible language

Third, if the language of learning is to have the pragmatic function we want—if it is to become part of the everyday lingo of a school—we think that it must be couched in terms that are accessible to students and their parents, as well as to teachers. This has meant resisting the temptation, all too strong in educational circles, to use language that is designed to look academic or abstruse. We have already mentioned 'reflectiveness', for example, which is an important facet of powerful learning. But the concept can perfectly well be brought to life through everyday phrases such as 'thinking about what you are doing', 'standing back and taking stock', or 'checking your approach'. We have almost had to become bilingual, using one kind of language to convince officials or academic colleagues of the legitimacy of the BLP approach, and another to get the ideas across to students, parents and teachers.

Optimising the positive

The need for accessibility also means looking for ways of designing and presenting ideas to schools that are attractive and appealing. We don't see any merit in perpetuating the idea that if something is to be taken seriously, it has to look dull. In our view, such an attitude is merely self-defeating. This is not a matter of 'dumbing down' the concepts, nor of 'being patronising' (both accusations have been levelled at BLP, mostly by academics). It is a matter of trying to optimise the positive impact of what we are doing, and what we care about.

Since 2002, schools have helped us learn a lot about getting the language right—though the feedback has not always been what we would have expected. Take the word 'reciprocity', for example. When we were putting the framework together, we were looking for a fourth word beginning with R to cover the social side of being a powerful learner.

'Relationships' or 'relating' were obvious contenders, but we rejected them on the grounds that were not quite the same kinds of abstract nouns as the other three R's—so we went with the rather fancier notion of reciprocity. Some schools have told us that they have had trouble with 'reciprocity', some joking that it's even hard to say. However, many have reported a different experience: children even as young as four love words like 'reciprocity', precisely because they are difficult, and they feel grown-up being able to say them and use them correctly. Our attitude to such questioning would usually be: look behind the words to the meaning they are trying to convey, discuss it with your staff and pupils, and choose the words that have the strongest resonance and 'stickiness' for them, but which hold true to the original concept. Ownership is more important than linguistic nicety; the letter is always subordinate to the spirit!

The frameworks of BLP

BLP has a clear social, moral and philosophical rationale. It puts at the heart of education the development of psychological characteristics that are judged to be of the highest value to young people growing up in a turbulent and demanding world. It has a robust scientific rationale for suggesting what some of these characteristics are, and for the guiding assumption that these characteristics are indeed capable of being systematically developed. With this in mind, what are the 'tools for thought' that are at the heart of BLP? What does BLP offer schools and teachers who resonate with its vision to help them implement it?

Essentially, BLP provides two frameworks.

- The first is a coherent picture of what the powerful learner is like—a working language for talking about young people *as learners*.
- The second is a route map of how regular schools can build the constituent dispositions of the powerful learner.

These two frameworks give teachers and students a 'big picture' to hang on to, the picture on the box, as it were, to provide a context whilst they are working on one small corner of the learning power jigsaw puzzle.

The first framework, which we called the **Supple Learning Mind**, is a pragmatic tool that illustrates the ingredients of learning power and provides a basis for discussion. It reminds everyone that they don't have to work on exercising all the learning muscles at once (just as you don't try to do your stretches while you are on the running machine). We can zoom in on 'managing distractions' knowing that, in due course, the big picture will remind us to work on building up 'empathy' or 'reasoning' as well.

This first framework is essential, we believe, if teachers are going to think precisely and creatively about how they can become more effective learning

Can you say reciprocity?

'Tools for thought'



The Supple Learning Mind