

Building the habits of...

Successful Learners



Curriculum for Excellence: the educational balancing trick

Scottish schools are more fortunate than many others in having, in CfE, a curriculum that pays balanced attention both to the higher purposes of educating young people for their future lives, and to the more obvious classroom business of curriculum areas with knowledge and specific skills to be inculcated and acquired.

But keeping the balance is always challenging. The ever-present pressure of the day-to-day, plus eventual qualifications, can squeeze out attention to the longer-term, higher-order learning and dispositions.

Yet the two sides can work synergistically instead of competitively, in concert rather than in conflict...

CfE says that **Successful Learners** are:

- enthusiastic and motivated about learning
- determined** to reach high standards of achievement
- open** to new thinking and ideas

and that they can:

- use literacy, communication and numeracy skills
- use technology for learning
- think **creatively** and independently
- learn **independently and as part of a group**
- make **reasoned** evaluations
- link** and apply different kinds of learning

Uniting the models of CfE and Building Learning Power

All powerful learners cultivate a set of key learning characteristics. Successful Learners, as described by CfE, would deploy a subset of these characteristics: some of the most important are highlighted in the diagram below.

Reasoning: Using logical skills to work things out rigorously. Constructing and presenting persuasive arguments and spotting flaws in others.

Interdependence: Learning alone or with others; understanding where to step forward or take a back seat; confident to ask for help when appropriate.

Making links: Seeing connections between disparate events and experiences to weave a web of understanding across subjects and ways of working.

Collaboration

Listening

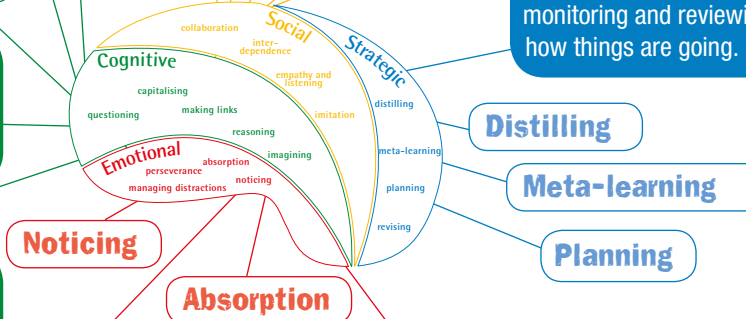
Imitation

Empathy

Revising: Being flexible, revising plans in the light of change, monitoring and reviewing how things are going.

Capitalising

Questioning: Asking expansive and incisive questions to delve beneath the surface.



Imagining: Using imagination and intuition to explore possibilities playfully, wondering 'what if'.

Noticing

Managing distractions

Absorption

Perseverance: Being determined to keep going, channelling the energy of frustration, and knowing that learning is often a slow and uncertain process.

Successful Learners

This resource sketches an approach that schools and teachers could use to deliver the CfE promise of helping young people to become Successful Learners.

We see 'Successful Learners' as the key capacity of the four that make up CfE's Purpose: not because it is of more ultimate value, but because it will contribute hugely to achieving the other three.

There is just a lot of learning for a young person to get through in their school career — a powerful learner can expect to learn more, faster, and more thoroughly. Which, by the way, should help hugely with the 'outcomes' side of the curriculum balance.

The BLP approach

There are two main parts to Building Learning Power:



A a model of a learner and learning, in terms of a set of characteristics that work together to make a person a highly capable learner; we use 'learning power' to describe the effect. (Several of these characteristics appear in this card.)

B a view of the kind of pedagogy that will nurture and strengthen the learning characteristics in young people.

These are bound together by the fundamental idea that 'learning is learnable', and by explicit, detailed discussion of how learning works, supported by a rich repertoire of words and action.

Learning behaviours to build powerful Successful Learners

The architecture of

Classroom cultures

Relating – How you relate to your students; gradually sharing more of the responsibility for learning with them

- **Make the learning process visible**
 - » Act as a learning coach. Model the learning process, including strategies for overcoming difficulty
- **A positive learning environment**
 - » Create a positive atmosphere for learning so that students feel enabled to take responsibility for their own learning
- **A community of enquiry**
 - » Provide more opportunity for students to question and co-construct their understanding

A shift in relationships



Talking – How you talk about learning; the sort of language content and style you use to enhance and explain learning

- **Surface the learning process**
 - » Talk about and explore learning as a process rather than as an outcome
- **A common language for learning**
 - » Use a language that focuses on the process and the experience of learning itself
- **Effective feedback**
 - » Ensure that feedback offers clear specific support so that students can take action to improve

A shift in learning language



Constructing – How you construct learning activities; the tasks and classroom routines you use to build positive learning habits

- **Build in reflection on learning**
 - » Incorporate reflection on the what and 'how' of learning so that students can observe and regulate it
- **Stretch and Challenge**
 - » Design activities to build students' relish for difficulty, using their learning habits to resource solutions
- **Possibilities thinking**
 - » Build confidence by encouraging exploration of alternatives and tentative ideas

A shift in how learning is constructed

Celebrating – What you celebrate about learning; what you prize, recognise, display; the outward signs of beliefs about learning

- **Recognise development in learning behaviours**
 - » Praise development in learning behaviours so that students build their skills and confidence as learners
- **'Stuck' and failure are seen as positive**
 - » Flip the concepts of stuck and failure to being positive. Students approach stuck as an interesting place to be and mistakes as valuable aids to learning

A shift in what is celebrated and valued

Making the shift

Students will first need to embrace the language of learning and be offered opportunities that enable them to become conscious of using their learning behaviours. Teachers need first to gradually shift the culture of the classroom and devolve more responsibility for learning to students. Later they take a more forensic approach to designing classroom activities using the learning behaviours to deepen engagement and understanding.

For many teachers this shift is likely to call for changes in practice. Take it steady! Think about what you might...

Stop

Thinking of learning only as outcomes

Start

Reducing the scaffolding around learning

Start slowly

Re-framing and valuing — stuck, challenge, mistakes, etc.

Experiment with

Reflecting on learning process; making students conscious of their own learning

Classroom activities and talk to nurture Successful Learners



Starters – to engage learners. For example:

Driving questions

Begin with questions to stimulate curiosity: 'Why don't people stay at home?' rather than 'We're doing Migration'; 'Why doesn't the rain wash the colour out of grass?' rather than 'We're doing chromatography'. 'What could I do if I lose my memory?' 'Where in the world is this?' 'Which animals can we learn from the most?' 'What shape is time?' 'What's the colour of wonder?'

Thinking routines – to embed learning behaviours. For example:

See, Think, Wonder

This visible thinking routine encourages students to make careful observations (See) and thoughtful interpretations (Think). 'Wonder' helps to stimulate curiosity setting the stage for enquiry.

When looking at an object, image, artefact etc, ask students three questions:

- What do you **See**?
- What do you **Think** about that?
- What does it make you **Wonder**?

Activities – to stimulate use of the learning habits. For example:

Build a three-level questioning habit.

'Re-Quest' is a structured process for deepening questions:

- » On-the-line questions: ask questions for which the answers can be seen just by looking closely at something.
- » Between-the-line questions: questions whose answers can be inferred by looking at something.
- » Beyond-the-line questions: whose answers need to be elicited by making interpretive links from the source.

Activities – to stimulate use of the learning habits. For example:

Strategy games:

- » Use games that require strategy and logical thinking. From Noughts and Crosses to Chess, from Hangman to Backgammon, games help to develop and refine reasoning skills. Many appear in the form of maths investigations and problems: Frogs, Tower of Hanoi, Nim, Connect 4, etc.

Teacher Talk – to nudge learning habits and open possibilities. For example:

- "Imagine what would happen if..."
- "Learning often involves **changing your point of view**"
- "**Making links** that seem outrageous often leads to good ideas"
- "What **questions** are you asking yourself?"
- "How are you looking at things **differently now?**"
- "Can you describe **how you learned** that?"
- "Can you spot the **false step** there?"
- "Why not sketch a **plan of action?**"
- "Ask yourself **what makes you think this evidence is reliable?**"
- "Don't be afraid to walk away and **come back to it later**"

Use 'Could be' language rather than 'Is' language to leave open the possibility that things may not be cut-and-dried, that other avenues are worth exploring. This immediately invites students to be more thoughtful, critical, or imaginative about what they are studying. How could you use more 'could be' language in your classroom?

Successful Learners are likely to:

Keep an eye on how things are going

Make unusual connections

Ask 'What-if' questions

Enjoy creating fresh ideas

Enjoy solving problems

Cope maturely with frustration

Look for red herrings and flaws in arguments

Learn from their mistakes

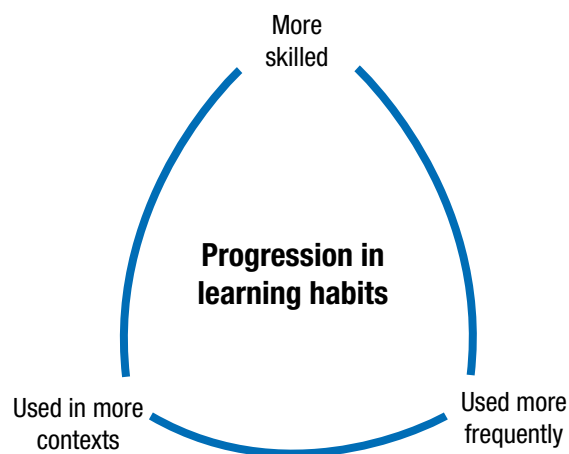
Seek help when necessary

Growing learning behaviours

From behaviours to habits

If the big ambition of Curriculum for Excellence is to work, the learning qualities suggested have to become more than 'can-do' skills; they have to become habitual tendencies that students adopt in learning. The point is to grow and develop these behaviours to become dispositions or habits. Thus over time, students get better at persevering, questioning, reasoning, changing their ideas and so forth. They use these behaviours more frequently and in a wider range of contexts. They become powerful Successful Learners not just in school but for a lifetime of learning and employment. Curriculum delivery becomes the how of Scotland's 'Developing the Young Workforce'.

Three aspects of progress in building learning habits



I can't	Tell me	I'll try	I see why	I make sure	I am
Gives up easily, craves constant support, no coping strategies		Perseverance			Seeks out and relishes challenge, knowing they have the skills to succeed
Just does things. No rethinking or retrying. Uninformed by sense of standards		Revising			Approaches everything as a process of improvement / change / reinvention
Expects to be told things. Fears asking questions		Questioning			Seeks and questions new experiences / knowledge to achieve unique results
Firmly based in reality. Has no language to deal with imagination		Imagining			Challenges and scrutinises the status quo to create innovation
Lacks confidence in sharing what they think. Tends to 'hide' in groups		Interdependence			Confident ideas-builder, not given to group-think, works well in any team
Lack of life experiences inhibits understanding		Making Links			Recognises their own knowledge system is provisional / ever-changing
Jumps to conclusions. Unable to say why they think like that		Reasoning			Applies a wide range of reasoning techniques to achieve successful outcomes

This diagram outlines possible starts and ends of the growth of a Successful Learner. From the unskilled, untrained learner on the left to the learning-powered learner on the right lies a progression that can be mapped. The headings across the top suggest the progress of students' skill and attitude towards their learning.

Find out more:

You can find out more about how the learning habits of Building Learning Power could help with growing Successful Learners (as well as Confident Individuals, Responsible Citizens and Effective Contributors) at blp.how/4caps
That also has an expanded on-line version of this card, plus three more for the other CfE capacities (all free of charge).