

General Information about the Supple Learning Mind:

- Most people, when first introduced to it, struggle to remember all 4 of the domains of learning, let alone the 17 learning behaviours that sit within them. Do not worry about this at this point – we are still at the overview stage.
- In preparation, think carefully about **what you are going to say** in relation to each learning capacity –
 - the examples you will use
 - the anecdotes
 - the references to existing practice in the school
 - the students that you will mention.
 - It is through this that you will stimulate (or lose) interest in Building Better Learners.
- Do not take the ‘brain’ image too literally – our brains are not split in four sections, each one of which operates a discrete range of learning behaviours. The **domains are a clustering device**, a means of organising the learning territory so that similar types of behaviour are grouped together.
- **Avoid at all costs using** the R words (Resilience, Resourcefulness, Reciprocity, Reflectiveness) - they confuse rather than illuminate.
 - Stick with Emotional/Cognitive/Social/Strategic or with
 - Feelings/Thinking/Relating/Managing –
 - which do you think will play best in your school?
- Be careful with the language you use. We tend to use the terms learning **behaviours**, learning **capacities** and learning **skills** interchangeably, but we **reserve** the term learning **habit** for a **behaviour/capacity/skill that has become habituated**. Skills are what we *can* do, but habits are what we *do*
- The following notes are not intended as a script. Rather they are background information that you may use to shape how you are going to talk about the 17 learning capacities in the Supple Learning Mind.

Emotional Engagement: The Big One – because without Emotional Engagement, learners are unlikely to be on task, or sufficiently attentive, or will be lacking in the motivation to employ any of the learning behaviours in the other three domains of learning.

- **Absorption** – the ability to get lost in learning, to become engrossed, to be so interested that you appear to lose the ability to see or hear what others are doing or saying. Some learners do this frequently, while for others it is a feeling that they have yet to experience, while others can do it on their Playstation game but not in the classroom. Of course, such high levels of absorption will not exist until such time as the students have developed the ability to
- **Overcome distraction** – at a simplest level, distraction can be caused by an external source - the unexpected noise or event that interrupts concentration. But the little voice that says ‘I don’t think I can do this’ or ‘I wonder what is for lunch?’ can be

equally disruptive. Distractions happen – the important thing is how quickly and effectively we can recover from it and regain focus. At its most sophisticated level, it is this skill that enables us to manage our own learning environment and balance all of the competing pressures that might throw us off course.

- **Attentive Noticing** – a strange inclusion in Emotional Engagement, perhaps? Noticing may well be a cognitive skill, and it certainly is a pre-requisite for many other learning behaviours. It is included here because the *inclination* to notice is an emotional response. Attentive Noticing helps learners to go beyond obvious surface detail, to explore in greater depth. It takes time, which may be why some learners appear to avoid it, but what hope is there of producing high quality outcomes without attention to detail?
- **Perseverance** – the cornerstone of Emotional Engagement. When asked, most teachers mention their learners' inability to stick with things, their inclination to seek help rather than 'have a go', their reluctance to tackle things they perceive as 'tricky', their preference for easy success over making an effort, their dependence on adult support and encouragement.
 - Ask your colleagues – is this something they recognise in their learners?
 - If you really want to unsettle them, ask how come learners are like this – it forces teachers to face up to the possibility that they may, in part, be responsible for creating these high levels of learner dependency.

Sometimes a lack of perseverance is put down to laziness or taking the easy way out, but there may also be other forces at work here: some students believe that either you get it first time round or not at all, so perseverance is irrelevant; some believe that effort is what stupid people use to overcome a lack of ability; some believe that clever people do things quickly, so they best do so also, irrespective of the quality of the outcome; some believe that getting something easy right is preferable to risking a mistake on something more tricky; some believe that learning finishes when you get stuck, while others understand that being stuck is the point at which learning really begins. The reasons to avoid perseverance are many-fold.

Moreover, perseverance is not always the best course of action – when it really is too hard or impossible, giving up is a sensible course of action. When it is too easy, you do not even need perseverance (something that many able students experience much of the time). Perseverance only pays off in situations that are hard but not too hard, do-able but only with effort, in the zone of proximal development.

Cognitive Range: The one we concentrate on – because classrooms have become increasingly obsessed with 'knowing stuff' and passing examinations, hence the focus on the thinking skills aspects of learning.

- **Questioning & Curiosity** – Questioning is the ability to ask the questions that reveal the information you are seeking, and it is about being skilled at interrogating a range of sources to find things out. Curiosity is the inclination, and bravery, to ask those questions. As any parent of a 2 or 3 year old will attest, asking questions backed by

insatiable curiosity, is not a problem for very young children. However research shows that this innate curiosity seems to wither very quickly in the face of 'schooling'. The number of questions asked, per day, by a child in reception is 75% fewer than when the same child was at nursery. Why does this happen? It appears that children come to believe that their role at school is to answer rather than ask questions; some fear that asking questions will make them look stupid; while some find it difficult to frame the questions they really want to ask. Many teachers consider curiosity one of the most important learning behaviours, and without doubt it ties very closely to motivation and engagement – after all, if you are curious about something you are much more likely to invest time and energy in finding out about it.

- **Making Links** – at a simple level it is about seeing connections, sensing patterns, seeing how things fit together. It is supported by activities that require students to identify similarity and difference, cause and effect, the odd one out – all exercise the link making learning muscle. At a deeper level, it is about how humans build an understanding of the world around them, how they make sense of and link new information into prior knowledge and so build an increasingly subtle web of understanding. Without this skill, spotting connections between subject areas or making links into the wider world is inhibited. Some call it Making Meaning, which is perhaps a more accurate term for this key learning skill.
- **Reasoning** – the 'hard' end of thinking, methodical, logical, the ability to draw logical conclusions, to create coherent lines of argument, to present your reasoning in a way that convinces others – it is the cornerstone of mathematics and philosophy.
- **Imagining** – the 'softer' end of thinking, blue sky thinking, exploring possibilities however unlikely, trying novel ways of doing things to create innovative, unusual solutions, out of the box, left field ideas. The preserve of the Performing and Creative Arts.
- **But wait.** What of hypothesising? Or speculating? Or visualising? Or estimating? Or predicting? All are somewhere in between the rigours of hard, deductive logic and the complete freedom of blue sky thinking. It is naïve to see Reasoning and Imagining as alternatives – there are a lot of thinking behaviours that are a blend of the two. It is not whether you are logical or imaginative that is important, it is how well you are able to move between the two as the occasion requires.
- **Capitalising** – the ability to make the most of what is available to you, to make the most of a bad job, to make independent and intelligent use of the things and the strategies that you have at your disposal. Sometimes we refer to this as the ability to resource your own learning. The ability to capitalise is a key indicator for independence.

Social Interaction: The one we think just happens – because there is an assumption that having learners sitting around a desk and talking will lead, in time, to effective group work, that they will somehow pick up the complex social skills necessary to learn with and from each other.

- **Interdependence** – the ability to know when it is to your advantage to work with and learn from others, and when you need to 'do it for yourself', to balance sociability and self-reliance. It is a high level skill that can really only develop once the learner

understands how they learn best, and the advantages/disadvantages of working with others or alone. It can almost be interpreted as a high level collaboration skill – knowing when not to collaborate to good effect.

- **Collaboration** – not just the ability to cooperate with simple pair work or group work, but the ability to learn both *with* and *from* your peers. In classrooms it is a key learning behaviour, as teachers mostly organise students to learn with others. And yet the behaviour is rarely directly attended to in the expectation that an invitation to ‘work with a partner’ will suffice. For some students this is sufficient, but for many, group working is an opportunity to slack – what we often call social loafing, seemingly part of the group but making no contribution to it, ‘hiding’ in team working situations.

This is an opportunity to make a point about the need for a common language for learning, as we teachers have lots of different names for ‘working with others’ – collaboration, cooperation, teamwork, group work, pair work, working with others etc etc. We may know that all refer to the broadly to the same thing, but in the early stages of introducing this to students it is best to agree a common terminology, so that learners hear the same message from all areas of the school / curriculum. We do not feel it matters much what you call it, so long as everybody uses the same term. Later, the school will choose to expand the language to illustrate that these terms all mean the same kind of shared learning activity, but in the early stages, choose one *and stick to it*.

- **Listening and Empathy** – the ability to listen attentively: at a simple level to hear what the speaker is saying and maybe come away with some information; but at a deeper level this is the inclination and the ability to pay attention to the speaker, to evaluate the relevance/accuracy/worth of what is being said, to perceive the values, beliefs and motives of the speaker, and to hear what is *not* being said. Most children hear, but fewer actually listen, perhaps because it takes effort and depends on a willingness to step back and allow someone else to do the talking. Empathy for others is the ability to see the world through the eyes of another, to see and understand their point of view even if you do not agree with it. More than sympathy with which it is often confused, Empathy tends to grow as a result of what we hear others say.
- **Imitation** – the ability to spot others being successful, working out what they are doing to be successful, and then adopting or adapting those behaviours for yourself. It is how we learned a language, to throw a ball, to use a spoon etc etc. It is one of the first learning behaviours to emerge in the young child, and yet in time it can come to be seen as ‘cheating’, stealing someone else’s ideas or way of doing things. It is similar to Capitalising in some respects – where Capitalising is about making best use of *what* you have to hand, Imitation is making best use of *who* you have to hand.

Strategic Responsibility: The one we tend to forget about altogether – because too often teachers retain responsibility for doing the reflection *on behalf* their students – by offering advance organisers to help to structure responses; by pointing out what is and is not important; by focusing talk on what has been learned at the expense of how it has been learned.

[Important point about Strategic Responsibility:

The reason that we come to Strategic Responsibility last of all is that the skills within Emotional Engagement, Cognitive Range and Social Interaction are used **when** we are doing learning, whereas the skills in Strategic Responsibility are used when we **stop doing learning** and start **thinking about doing learning**.]

- **Planning** – the ability to think ahead of taking action, to resist impulsivity, to decide on a course of action having weighed up what needs doing, how it could be done, what might get in the way, how long it might take, the order you will do it in etc. It involves spending time upfront deciding what to do before actually doing it. In an effort to be helpful, teachers sometimes offer what we would call advance or graphic organisers to help students to structure their work. PEE (Point Evidence Explain) helps students to structure a response to a question, the TASC Wheel (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) helps students to structure an extended project. Useful as these may be as aids to planning, they can sometimes assume the status of a ready-made plan, thus relieving the student of having to do their own thinking ahead.
- **Revising** – the inclination to change your mind and do things differently in light of feedback, to be flexible and adaptable, to be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things.

A word of warning: Having made the point about building a school wide language for learning, give attention to the word Revising. Here we are using it its literal sense of Changing, but it has an unfortunate resonance with ‘Revision’ and we have found that many students, and some teachers, confuse the two. We have toyed with using Monitoring instead, as monitoring as you go along is one of the crafts of the flexible learner – keeping an eye on how it is going and changing tack if necessary. Equally we considered Evaluating, which is more about looking back over what has been done with a view to changing the approach next time if necessary. But both monitoring and evaluating *can* be done as ‘checking up’ type activities but *without* the intention to do it differently in future, thus missing the critical aspect of change. We have ended up using **Refining** as an alternative to *Revising*, but your school will need to think its own way through this.

- **Distilling** - the ability to think back over what has been learned and how it has been learned to separate the important aspects that need to be committed to memory from the background information that can safely be forgotten. It is like using a sieve, panning for gold, or, quite literally, the distillation process. It links to the Making Links capacity as it is about linking new information into our web of understanding, to Noticing what is and is not important, and to Meta Learning itself. Often dealt with at review points or plenaries, distilling can be reduced to teachers telling students what they intended to teach them, little more a restatement of the intended learning outcomes. To be effective, Distilling needs to be done **by** students, not **for students**.
- **Meta Learning** – the ability to see yourself as a developing learner, to understand your learning strengths and relative weaknesses, to know how you wish to improve as a learner. It is a high level skill that requires both self-awareness and the

inclination and ability to self-regulate. The skill will remain embryonic at best until students understand the process of learning, have a sufficiently sophisticated language with which to discuss it, and multiple opportunities to do so – hence the emphasis elsewhere on the need for a school-wide common language of learning. Moreover, until their teachers are using the school’s chosen leaning language, *frequently* and with *fluency*, students will also struggle to do so.