



Using learning logs to explore the views of exceptionally able boys on learning inside and outside the classroom

Dr David Burnett
Westcliff High School for Boys
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

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Aims of the project

The aim of the investigation was to explore with some of our Exceptionally Able (EA) students specific aspects of learning which helped them to learn best and to assess what could be improved. We asked a group of EA students to fill in learning logs in order to find out:

- What motivates EA students to learn?
- How can schools help such students plan their own learning and encourage independence?
- What is the impact on teachers' practice when confronted with the "student voice" in the form of learning logs?

Dimensions of the study

Westcliff High School for Boys is a selective boys' grammar school and specialist Humanities College, with an intake of just over 1000 students, aged 11-18 drawn from the top 25% of the ability range. Students come from the local Southend area and from surrounding towns and villages. The school has over 60 teaching staff, mostly full time and most of whom are subject specialists, supported by a small team of teaching assistants. The school has been designated 'outstandingly successful' four times by Ofsted, most recently in November 2007.

The investigation involved 12 teachers and 12 EA students, from Years 7, 8 and 10, led by me as deputy head teacher. The teachers came from a number of subject backgrounds, including English, Mathematics, French, German, History and Geography. Over a period of weeks the students filled in a learning log for their particular subjects.

Summary of the main findings

The main findings were:

- Clear learning objectives and success criteria, were crucial in raising students' interest
- Students valued the teacher's questioning, especially open questions, for prompting whole class discussion
- Students valued one-to-one time with the teacher and discussion with other students
- Well-planned and well-resourced lessons sustained interest but it was also important to have some creative and open-ended tasks

- The quality of the topic and resources on offer mattered to students, particularly in relation to 'real world' knowledge

Background and context

The project started in response to the school's self-evaluation of provision for gifted and talented students. Although there was effective provision to stretch the most able in some lessons, and a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities, it became clear that this was not sufficient. In particular we needed to plan lessons that went beyond differentiation by outcome as the means to stretch the most able. Also, we noted that although gifted students were proficient in certain subjects they displayed their capacity for independent learning too infrequently. We felt this to be linked to students' perceptions of learning as examination hurdles to clear rather than as having its own intrinsic value. The school's Gifted and Talented list contained students who were EA in either a very broad range of subjects (typically six or more) or in a defined subject. I decided to use learning logs with EA students from this list to find out what stimulated their learning and a love of subject and led to a sense of independence.

The detailed findings

The quality of responses from students was very high. Overall students' responses indicated that they felt that:

- learning intentions were clear;
- there was a strong element of challenge;
- they were engaged; and
- work generated by students and the homeworks set were valuable.

However, students were less positive about the quality of teacher feedback and their own ability to work independently. The results also indicated that in some lessons EA students did not feel that they were encouraged to ask questions and nor were they sufficiently challenged. The students confirmed in interviews that there was a link between these elements and a lack of paired or group work. Overall, the log comments and interviews indicated the following findings.

1. Clarity of learning objectives for each lesson and the entire sequence of lessons helped to stimulate students to work independently

Clear learning objectives and success criteria, plus a sense of future learning to come, were crucial in provoking the students' interest so that they would carry out their own research independently. In Mathematics a student stated that "Before this lesson we had interacted and found out what we were doing in this lesson" and "now we were doing" and he "wanted to challenge myself". In History the clarity of the learning objectives was noted consistently on students' logs. Often they began with the phrase "To understand" and then went on to specify issues such as "the key factor in Charles I's execution" or "how Khrushchev differed from Stalin". When the teacher was confident about the learning to come and the means by which students would be successful, and then communicated this clearly and regularly to students, students felt more capable of pursuing their own studies beyond the classroom. When this was absent one student commented that, "It could be beneficial to be given an overview of the term's work, so each section could be linked and extra reading could be done before the time arrives to study a particular topic". In the

interviews with students this was confirmed by the entire group as an important aspect.

2. The teacher's planning and questioning generated whole class dialogue, engagement and challenge

The EA students valued very highly having stimulating whole-class discussions led by the teacher. The teacher's questioning, especially open questions, and the ensuing whole class discussion that was provoked, were consistently seen as important for generating challenge, interest and engagement in a lesson. "Because of the ability to discuss I was thinking, writing and generally doing more", commented one student about his History lesson. A Mathematics student felt that "discussion ... made me question my own methods". One History teacher "asked lots of questions and made us eventually work out the answers on our own." There was sometimes a layered approach with group discussion building confidence for students to engage fully in whole class discussion and "encouraging everyone to think about the work carefully." In this case "the notes taken were built from student contributions prompted by the teacher's questions". Lessons without such qualities were quickly condemned by students as a tedious diet of standard tasks. A Geography lesson allowed students to produce coursework preparation materials using computers but because they only "copied down text and maps" one EA student felt that this was "mostly a passive lesson."

3. Working with other students was important in providing feedback and generating a climate for learning

The EA students valued collaboration with the other students. Peer working in mixed ability groups built reassurance for EA students that the lesson would be productive. In French one student commented that "oral work in pairs" "ensured my engagement" and that it was "very helpful ... as we both worked together to get better results". In mathematics another student explained that "we went through the questions and then we [i.e. the students] corrected them". In History, a student commented that "By not forcing us to be silent" the teacher "helped by giving us the ability to discuss and focus" and "because of the ability to discuss I was thinking, writing and generally doing more".

4. One-to-one time with the teacher stimulated learning and encouraged independence

Individual consultation mattered greatly, with several students keen to use the teacher to refine their understanding or approach. One English student commented that, "The teacher's feedback kickstarted my imagination". Another student, faced with an oral presentation, said that the (same) English teacher "[provided] valid points upon which to improve and encouraged me by telling me all of my good points". Similar observations were made in mathematics and geography. There was a consistent message from students that they would like to have lessons and opportunities outside lessons to engage with the teacher about particular aspects of learning that mattered to them as individuals.

5. EA students enjoyed creative elements within and across lessons and this encouraged them to work independently

Both a sense of structure and variety were important to students. Well-planned lessons with a variety of tasks sustained interest although a variety of mundane tasks sometimes amounted to very

little. It was, in addition, important to have creative and open-ended tasks across a sequence of lessons. When students had such opportunities, they felt enthused and encouraged to explore the subject. One student found that in French he enjoyed "the huge breadth and scope of the activities" and in History he had "the perfect balance between tough written work and attentive watching and listening". Students responded positively to creative approaches. One student described in his Log how they had "to formulate their own ideas" on the failures of Soviet industry and then explain these to each other. The fact that this activity was student-led made it "an interesting and engaging lesson". Next came a lesson based around a "Just a Minute exercise", with students reviewing the entire period of de-Stalinisation by having to select the most important aspects and speak to the class: "this tested students' knowledge in an interesting and enjoyable way".



6. Students were motivated to find a love of subject in the topics studied and valued the ability of teachers to bring it to life

The quality of the topic and resources on offer also mattered to students. They found joy in exploring "worthwhile", "real world" knowledge. The more a teacher conveyed this in the lesson the more students were stimulated to learn and develop a love of the subject. One Year 10 student found that in History he had "highly interesting subject matter" on the USSR's role in World War II that kept him "totally and utterly absorbed". When the teacher was interesting (in terms of voice, body language, movement around the classroom, turn of phrase, anecdote) then students felt enthused for the subject. One History teacher "gave us information only he knew" and "notes on the topic that were not in the textbook". An EA student, referring to "picture sheets" about the Industrial Revolution "thought being able to visualise the changes [to Britain's economy] was very helpful and much more interesting than reading it out of a slightly boring textbook". ICT provided a stimulus in Geography coursework as "a great tool [for] presentation and research" while in German one student "enjoyed being able to put [his] artistic creativity ... and IT skills" to use in preparing for an oral task.

Research methods and strategies

Designing the learning log

The key step was designing a learning log specifically for the Exceptionally Able. The one I used included eight questions for rating on a 1-5 scale (1 maximum, 5 minimum) and two questions requiring a 'Yes/No' response. The most important aspect of the log was the space for students to write their own comments about what had helped or hindered their learning. The questions were as follows:

- a) *I knew what we were trying to learn in this lesson.*
Write down the learning intentions for the lesson here.
- b) *I was encouraged to ask questions.*
- c) *I was encouraged to think hard.*
What aspect of the lesson challenged you most?
- d) *I had a chance to work with others. Yes or No?*

If yes, explain how you worked with others and how it helped or hindered you.

e) *I felt engaged in the lesson; thinking, writing, discussing, doing. Yes or No?*

If yes, explain what you did, for how long and how it helped you.

f) *I understood the link between homework and the lesson and could see how it helped me.*

g) *The teacher's feedback helped me to understand better.*

If you recorded 1 or 2, explain briefly how the teacher helped you.

h) *The notes I made in the lesson will be useful for revision.*

i) *By the end of the lesson I understood the learning intentions and the next steps to come.*

j) *I know what I have to do in order to improve my own learning.*

If you recorded 1 or 2, explain briefly what you are going to do next.

Preparing the students to use the learning logs

Initially I interviewed students and presented them with the logs and a worksheet explaining that the focus was on the students' learning. Each student filled in one learning log as a trial. The log was returned to me for analysis and I sent a copy to each of their teachers. The teachers reported they felt confident in the process. Creating trust and understanding amongst all involved was an essential pre-condition to the process.

Initiating and sustaining a dialogue with teachers and students

The students completed the learning logs over a six-week period. At the end of each week copies of the logs were forwarded to the individual teachers. I held individual interviews with each of the teachers concerned, followed by a group interview with the EA students. The objective in the interviews was to elicit a more precise understanding of what had happened in lessons, what had been successful and why, and what had not been successful in terms of engaging these students and building independent learning. In addition I observed a Year 10 Mathematics lesson with four Year 10 EA students present. This provided useful confirmation of some of the comments in students' logs and in our discussions.

The final stage was students designing an individual learning plan for themselves indicating the type of lesson, teaching approaches and resources that they would find most helpful in formal lessons and outside the classroom. In so doing it was hoped that each student would help the individual subject teachers to become more consciously aware as to what characterises effective teaching and learning for Exceptionally Able students.

Conclusions

The EA students began to develop a more precise understanding of what it is that helps them to learn and what else is needed if they are to be more than examination successes. Teachers have been reflective and open-minded and seen criticism about lessons from students as constructive and not personal.

The motivation to learn for the EA students was bound up with their sense of engagement in lessons, including the engagement of others. Vibrant classrooms, bustling with discussion crafted by the teacher through carefully-selected tasks and questions were ideal. The EA students felt secure in such an environment and able to enjoy lessons and learning. Given a range of appropriate resources, the EA students felt that they could become intrigued by the topics studied and that they could develop a genuine love of subject. Their independence was harnessed by the clarity of the learning objectives and a sense of sequence of learning to come: they had been 'taken to the future'. The central thread running throughout every aspect was the role of the teacher. When the teacher provided the right structure, resources and environment for learning, then the EA students responded and had the confidence and sense of purpose to be more independent in their learning.

Suggestions for further reading

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). (2008) *The National Strategies: Gifted and Talented Education Guidance on preventing underachievement: a focus on Exceptionally Able pupils*. Bedfordshire: DCSF.

West-Burnham, J. and Coates, M. (2005) *Personalising Learning: Transforming Education for Every Child*. Stafford: Network Educational Press Ltd.

Black, PJ et al. (2002) *Working inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom*. London: nferNelson.

DCSF (2008) *What Works in Improving the Educational Achievement of Gifted and Talented Pupils? A systematic review of Literature*. London: DCSF. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-EPPI-04-08.pdf>

NACE materials: <http://www.nace.co.uk/>

Author's contact details

Dr David Burnett, Deputy Head teacher
Westcliff High School for Boys
Kenilworth Gardens
Westcliff-on-Sea
Essex SSO 0BP
01702 475443
e-mail: burnettd@whsb.essex.sch.uk

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All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

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To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk