

To plan or not to plan? **Building Learning Power**

Summary of my enquiry

The aim of this project was to research the impact of implementing Guy Claxton's Building Learning Power approach to improving learning. This approach is based on the theory that there are four major learning dispositions: resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness and reciprocity. Each disposition is made up of a number of different learning behaviours, or capacities. This theory sees the four dispositions as groups of learning muscles which can be developed. In order to assess this I particularly focused on the disposition of reflectiveness and the learning capacity of planning. My aim was to introduce a number of changes to the way I taught in order to try to change pupils' attitudes to, and use of planning. This would hopefully encourage pupils to plan more effectively and foster better learners.

I wanted pupils to make an educated decision about whether "To plan or not to plan?"

I was aware of the lack of planning by pupils I taught. Their attitudes and habits did not seem to change as they progressed through school and this led to significant consequences for pupils who take the subject at Key Stage 5. I qualified my observations by researching pupils' current attitudes to, and use of planning through a pupil questionnaire, classroom discussion and formal observation on the use of planning.

The context of my enquiry

I teach History at Whitchurch High School in Cardiff. Whitchurch High School is a mixed comprehensive school for pupils aged between 11 and 19. It is the largest secondary school in the UK with approximately 2350 pupils on roll. The school is spread across two sites, a lower and upper school. It is situated to north of Cardiff's city centre and the school's catchment area includes both relatively prosperous and economically disadvantaged areas. Eight per-cent of pupils are entitled to free school meals which is well below the unitary authority average. Over 330 pupils are on the school's special needs register, approximately 25 per cent of these are statemented; these are above average figures.

The focus for my study was my Year Ten GCSE History Class. There are seventeen pupils in the class: eight boys and nine girls. It is a mixed ability class and the whole ability range is covered in the class. There are two pupils in the class who

are on the SEN register; one of them is statemented for speech, language and communication difficulties. The class has five hours of History per fortnight. The pupils have already had some experience of 'Learning to Learn' strategies through previous school initiatives such as a Learning to Learn Day and Super Learning Week. My hope was that by carrying out this enquiry with a Year Ten class I would encourage good habits at the start of the GCSE course.

There were issues that I was aware of even before carrying out formal initial research. GCSE History requires a large amount of extended writing and this is something that pupils find quite difficult. This is especially noticeable in extended writing completed under exam conditions. There is too much evidence of badly structured writing which is not focused on answering the question and is missing key points of information. Quite simply, their writing is not thought through and *planned*. This is exacerbated in exam situations where pupils panic. To overcome this problem in lessons, plans that the teacher has written are given out, or a plan is discussed as a class and written on the board, however this is often heavily guided by the teacher. This has led to pupils becoming teacher-reliant and even greater panic in the exam room when there are no essay plans given to them, or teacher to guide them. It is increasingly noticeable that pupils taking History at A-Level struggle and lack confidence when it comes to planning extended writing.

The aims of my enquiry

These were:

- To understand why pupils don't plan effectively
- To improve the use of planning by pupils, with the hope that if pupils could plan effectively, this would impact not only the quality of their extended writing but also research activities, presentations and revision.
- To change the way pupils view planning
- To change pupils into self-reliant, confident planners.

Evidence of the initial learning situation

In order to identify the existing learning situation in the class regarding planning I carried out a pupil questionnaire.

The results of the questionnaire were very revealing.

- It showed that all pupils found either writing essays, revising for exams, or actual exams the most difficult type of work they do in History. In other words, tasks that require planning (see fig.1).

Fig.1 What type of work do you find the most difficult in History?



- When asked, "*What makes a good learner in History?*" I had a variety of responses:
 - "You need to participate in discussion and have fun"*
 - "Someone who is well behaved and co-operates with others"*
 - "Someone who's interested in history and listens in class."*
 In fact, out of thirteen responses, nine mentioned listening as an attribute that marks a good learner in History. Not one response mentioned planning. This showed that pupils did not rate being able to plan as something that a good learner does. I was not surprised by this.
- I received a variety of responses when I asked, "*What is planning?*" Some were very specific and clear:
 - "Briefly writing what you will be doing in each part of an essay"*
 - "Doing bullet points or a spider diagram on a topic."*
 Others were much more vague:
 - "Planning is to plan something out so you no (note the text talk!) what you are going to do in the proper piece"*
 - "When you write a plan for like an essay or something"*
 - "A description of something."*
 These responses clearly showed that many of the pupils didn't really know what planning was.
- Most pupils seemed to recognise that planning was useful (see fig.2), but few actually planned their work in History (see fig.3).

Fig.2 Do you think planning is useful?

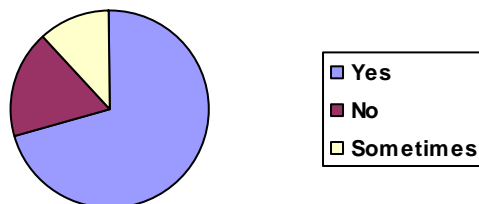
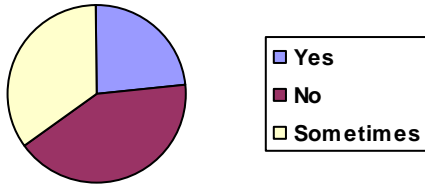
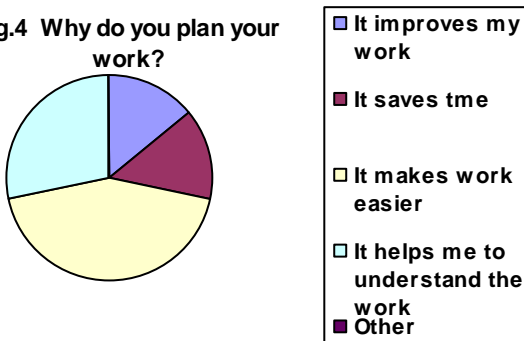


Fig.3 Do you ever plan your History work?



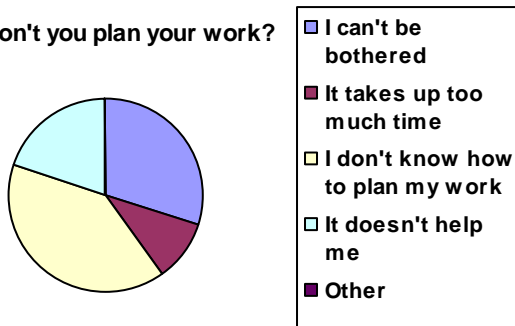
- Most who claimed to plan their work said it was because it made their work easier (see fig.4).

Fig.4 Why do you plan your work?



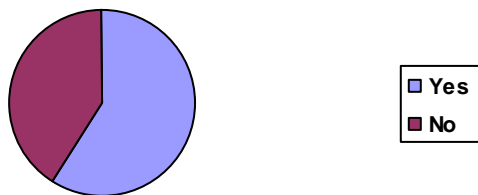
- Of pupils who said they did not plan their work, most either said it was because they could not be bothered or because they did not know how (see fig.5).

Fig.5 Why don't you plan your work?



- Opinion was divided as to whether they found planning easy (see fig. 6).

Fig.6 Do you think planning History work is easy?



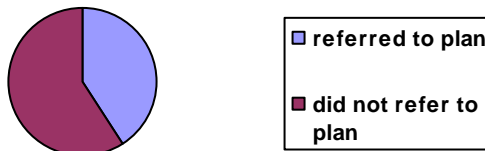
- It was also interesting to note that pupils used planning in other subjects.

The results of the questionnaire confirmed many of the observations I had already made about the Year Ten pupils and their use of planning. It was particularly useful to ascertain their attitude towards planning; they didn't plan their work very often because they didn't think it was that useful. They didn't know how to plan and seemed to have a poor understanding of what planning was.

In order to observe how pupils used planning generally, I divided them into single sex groups and asked them to plan a car journey. The boys' immediate response was confusion, stating, "*Well you just get in the car and drive*". This approach of 'doing without thinking' was one that I felt many of the pupils took towards activities that require planning. The girls however seemed to be much more methodical, producing very detailed lists of everything they could possibly need to take.

I also carried out a structured observation of the pupils planning and writing an obituary for Martin Luther King in order to assess how they went about planning a piece of History work. A one-hour lesson was spent planning in pairs and discussing and reviewing these plans. I gave very little input in order to see the types of plans they came up with. Again there was a huge variety. Some plans were excellent, some were almost useless. I observed them using these plans to write their obituaries the following lesson and my observations were very interesting. Only seven pupils were regularly referring to their plan, even though they had spent an hour on it (see fig.7).

Fig.7 Number of pupils who regularly referred to plan when completing a task



At the end of the lesson we discussed these outcomes. Only four pupils thought that planning the piece of writing had been useful. Many pupils stated that their own plan was not very helpful, showing that most pupils did not know how to plan effectively. Others said they did not see the point of it. This confirmed the findings of the questionnaire. Pupils wanted to know why I didn't just give them a plan. This was something they mentioned frequently in the early stages of the enquiry.

Overall the evidence collected of the initial learning situation showed that pupils didn't find planning that useful, mainly because they didn't find plans that they wrote to be helpful which was because they didn't know how to plan

effectively. I felt that if I could get the pupils to plan effectively, then they would recognise the benefits of planning and do it more often.

Action taken

A process was then started to change pupils' attitudes to planning, and the effectiveness of their planning.



I introduced the Four Rs principle and discussed the learning dispositions and capacities with the pupils.

In the lessons that followed I tried to model myself as a planner. I shared with the pupils how I wrote plans for extended writing tasks that I gave them to do, because I needed to complete the activities first in order to assess their work. I demonstrated my planning to the pupils through

talking to them about how I regularly used planning for my work. I showed them rough plans of my worksheets and lessons, my Building Learning Power planning book and my school planner. I also discussed with the pupils how I used planning in everyday life. I talked to them about planning a car journey to visit friends, planning my wedding and how my brother and sister-in-law had had to plan for the birth of their baby. I hoped these discussions would convey the importance of the skill. We discussed how planning was a muscle that needed to be exercised in the right way in order for it to be strengthened.



Over a three month period I tried to coach the pupils in how to plan. Pupils were given opportunities to learn from myself and other pupils. I modelled a number of different ways of planning - mind mapping, spider diagrams, weighing scales to give balanced answers and simply using bullet points and key words. Each time I explained the process as I was planning. Pupils were also given the opportunity to plan a piece of work in pairs. They swapped plans and

evaluated each other's plans. This gave pupils the opportunity to identify and imitate good practice in planning. Pupils began to understand that they had to

find a method of planning that suited them and the task they were planning for. Throughout the period of the enquiry I tried to present the pupils with many opportunities to plan their work. We regularly discussed planning, both formally and informally.

Towards the end of the enquiry we discussed as a class what we thought were the key features of planning a task and put together a five-point prompt sheet that gave tips on how to



plan. We then used this to put together a wall display on planning. Each prompt was given a colour and a logo, chosen by the pupils, to help make it more memorable.

The pupils enjoyed being involved in the display and it gave them a sense of ownership of the planning process they had developed. The whole activity made them think about why and how we should plan and was a very useful exercise in consolidating the pupils' development. It was very pleasing to note that pupils from other classes commented on the display and used it, even A-Level and I.B. classes. I informed the Year Ten class of this and they were very pleased.

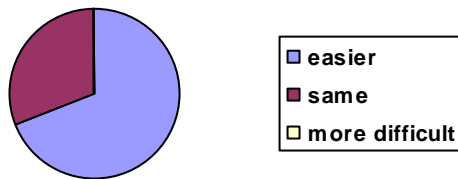


My findings

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions I had introduced, I carried out another pupil questionnaire. The results showed that indeed, using the Building Learning Power approach had made an impact.

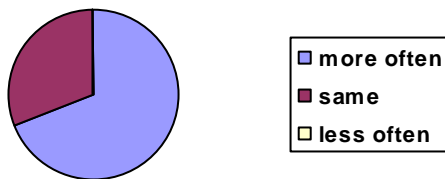
- Eleven pupils out of sixteen now found essay writing *easier* than before I used the Building Learning Power approach. All pupils said they found it easier or the same as before (see fig 8).

Fig.8 Do you find essay writing easier now than you did in October?



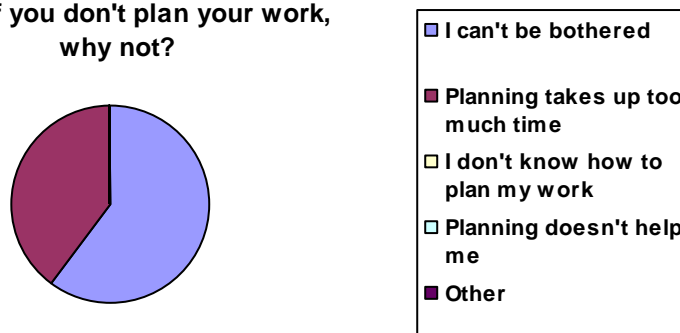
- Ten pupils said that they planned their work more often than before (see fig.9).

Fig.9 Do you plan your work more often now than you did in October?



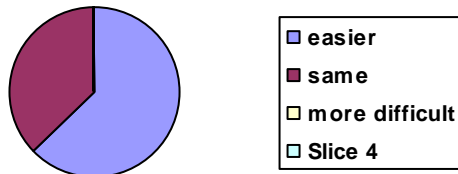
- When those pupils who still did not plan their work were asked why, nobody stated that they didn't know how to plan their work, or that they didn't think planning helped them. Instead it was because they couldn't be bothered or because it took too much time. This was very pleasing and showed a shift in attitude from before implementing Building Learning Power. Previously a number of pupils stated that the reason they did not plan work was because they didn't know how (see fig.10).

Fig.10 If you don't plan your work, why not?



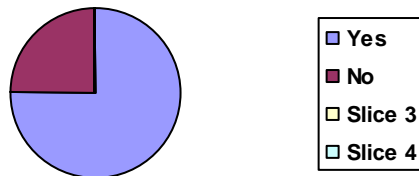
- The majority of pupils found planning work easier than before (see fig.11).

Fig.11 Do you find planning your easier now than you did in October?



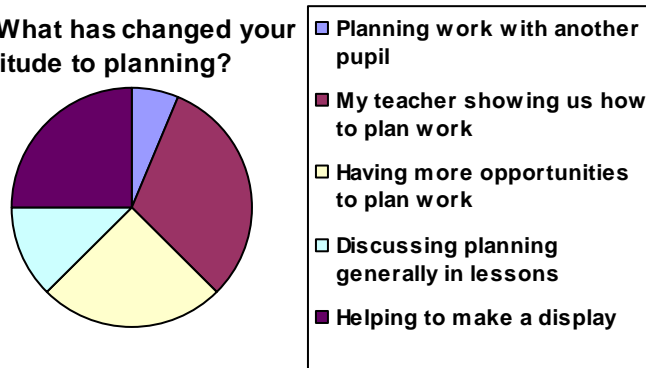
- Twelve out of sixteen pupils said their attitude to planning had changed (see fig.12).

Fig.12 Do you think your attitude to planning has changed since October?



- When asked what had changed their attitude I received a number of responses. All of the strategies I had used were cited as reasons for their change in attitude. These results showed that a combination of strategies I had used had helped change pupils' attitudes. The view that pupils learn in different ways was supported by the fact that different pupils found different approaches helpful (see fig.13).

Fig.13 What has changed your attitude to planning?



- When I again asked the pupils, "What is planning?" responses were much more specific and detailed, showing a greater awareness of what planning was than previously. At least ten answers were very note worthy.
- It was pleasing to note that a number of pupils mentioned planning when asked, "What makes a good learner in History?" compared to not one pupils mentioning planning as a quality of a good learner when asked at the start of this enquiry.

General observations of the pupils during the process also revealed a number of outcomes. Over the past three months I have definitely witnessed my pupils enhance their learning skills. I feel that the pupils are now much more reflective learners through improving their capacity to plan. In the beginning, a planning activity was often met with negative grunts but gradually these have stopped. I haven't been asked to, "just give (them) a plan" for a number of weeks. The pupils definitely seem to be much more confident now in their ability to plan a piece of work than three months ago. Pupils have become more independent in planning their work, although some still need the reassurance of having me near to check things. When pupils plan a piece of extended writing they are now much more on task. It also takes far less time now to get pupils to plan a piece of work effectively. The root cause of these positive outcomes appears to be that fact that the pupils now know how to plan.

Conclusions

The findings of this enquiry could convincingly be attributed to the adoption of Guy Claxton's Building Learning Power approach. Alternatively, it could be argued that these developments are due to a natural increase in the levels of maturity of pupils in my Year 10 class. On the other hand, the changes I have observed could possibly be due to pupils taking work more seriously as they move further into the GCSE course. However, from my own teaching experience I would argue that the Building Learning Power approach has been the significant cause of the changes I have observed.

Carrying out this enquiry into implementing the Building Learning Power approach to improving learning power has highlighted many things, about the pupils in my class and the way they learn, and me and the way I teach.

The main thing I have learnt from this enquiry is that you cannot expect pupils to effectively model a learning capacity without giving them guidance on how to do so. We all need to know how to do something before we can do it effectively. I have also concluded that pupils are far more receptive to adopting a learning capacity when they understand why they are doing it.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that pupils are far more receptive to doing something if they have a hand in how they go about it. The pupils were far more willing to plan a piece of work when they started to draw out planning principles themselves. This gave them confidence and a sense of ownership in what I was asking them to do. The planning prompt sheet and display helped very much with this.

Modelling a learning capacity myself also proved to be an effective tool. When I was planning something with them, they could see that I sometimes made

mistakes, or failed to include an important point and could see the processes I went through to effectively plan a piece of work. They could also see the value of planning in the world outside of History lessons.

This enquiry has shown that pupils are responsive when they feel valued. The pupils in my class were aware that they were part of an enquiry I was conducting and this gave them and the work we were doing a greater sense of importance. They often mentioned my project and asked if specific work was related to it.

Focusing on one disposition over a short period of time has been an effective way of encouraging improving performance in this disposition. It allowed myself and the pupils to measure their improvement in this area.

The pupils in my Year Ten class have arguably become better learners.

As well as noticing a change in the pupils' attitudes to, and use of planning, I have noticed a number of changes in my teaching methods and outlook. I now talk about myself as a learner much more, and recognise the importance of this in developing pupils learning. Modelling is a tool that I have used before, although never in such a concentrated way, and is certainly something to which the pupils were very receptive. I am now far more aware of the need to empower the pupils by developing their learning capacities so that they can take greater control of their own learning.

I have also noticed the importance of talking to the pupils and finding out their views on learning situations in the classroom. Through doing this, I had a far greater understanding of why pupils were not planning effectively. This insight allowed me to develop targeted strategies to develop the capacity of planning.

Also, the enquiry provided an opportunity to see success in one area. This is in contrast to the usual learning situation where I try to deal with a number of issues at one time, not giving any the individual attention needed to see progress. I had the opportunity to work towards a specific and achievable target. It was very rewarding to see how the pupils' attitudes and learning had changed in such a short space of time through focusing our efforts on one area.

I'm sure that all of these findings have changed me as a teacher. I certainly plan to repeat many of the strategies I used with other classes. I hope to introduce the planning prompts to other classes and offer them to other members of my department. I also plan to make a conscious effort to continue to talk about myself as a learner with all of my classes.

At the start of this enquiry I stated, "I wanted pupils to make an educated decision about whether 'To plan or not to plan?'" I now feel that the pupils in my class know how to plan more effectively, and why planning is beneficial. They are, therefore, able to make the decision 'To plan or not to plan?' in a more informed way.

Evaluation

Overall I found the project stimulating and very helpful to developing my teaching. It provided me with an opportunity to carry out a research project, a task that was very new to me. I have been able to try something new and develop research methods. I have also been able to develop strategies that I can now use with all my classes. Carrying out this enquiry has changed my outlook and practice in many ways.

However, adopting these strategies was not free from problems. Lack of time, as always, was a major hindrance. The enquiry generally took up a lot of time, but time taken up within lessons has been a particular problem. Helping the pupils to become better planners has been time consuming and I am now behind in teaching the GCSE syllabus. Not having a classroom of my own has also been a hindrance. It has meant that I have not been able to impact my other classes through the display as much as I would have liked, as many of my classes are not taught in the classroom containing the display.

Overall it has definitely been a worthwhile experience and has reaped huge benefits for myself and my Year Ten pupils. I will be very interested to mark their end of unit exams to further measure the impact of this project. Additionally, I am excited to think that these pupils will continue to become better learners and the impact this will have on their GCSE History result.

Appendix 1

Learning Questionnaire 1

Learning in History

- 1. What type of work do you find the easiest in History?
 - a) *source work*
 - b) *writing essays*
 - c) *revising for exams*
 - d) *other* _____

- 2. What type of work do you find the most difficult in History?
 - a) *source work*
 - b) *writing essays*
 - c) *revising for exams*
 - d) *other* _____

- 3. What type of work do you enjoy most in History?

- 4. What do you think makes a good learner in History?

Planning

- 1. What is planning? _____

- 2. Do you think planning is useful? *Yes/No*

- 3. Do you ever plan your History work? *Yes* (go to Q. 4) / *No* (go to Q.6)

- 4. Why do you plan your work?
 - a) *It improves my work*
 - b) *It saves time*
 - c) *It makes work easier*
 - d) *It helps me to understand the work*
 - e) *other* _____

- 5. How long do you spend planning your work? _____

6. Why don't you plan your work?

- a) *I can't be bothered*
- b) *It takes up too much time*
- c) *I don't know how to plan my work*
- d) *It doesn't help me*
- e) *other* _____

6. Do you think planning History work is easy? *Yes/No*

7. Do you plan you work in any other subjects? *Yes/No*

8. If so, which subjects? _____

Appendix 2
Planning Prompt sheet

Planning Prompts

1

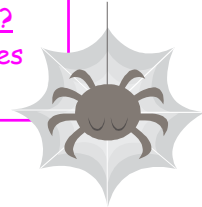
What is the question/task about?

Tip ~ Underline key words



2

What points do you want to include?
Are there any particular criteria you need to fulfil?
What order do you want to write about them?
Tip ~ mind map/spider diagram/ weighing scales



3

Are there any areas where you need to find out more information?

Tip ~ check exercise book & internet
~ add to your plan



4

How much time do you think it will take?
Tip ~ don't leave it until the last minute



5

What do you think it will look like at the end?
Tip ~ length, paragraphs, presentation



Appendix 3Learning Questionnaire 2Learning in History

1. Do you find essay writing easier **now** than you did in October?
easier
same
more difficult

2. Do you plan your work more often **now** than you did in October?
More often (go to Q. 3)
Same (go to Q.4)
Less often (go to Q.4)

3. Why do you plan your work more often?
a) I've realised how useful planning is
b) I've realised that planning improves my work
c) I've realised planning makes work easier
d) My teacher tells me to
e) I've realised that planning is an important skill to develop
f) Other _____

4. If you don't plan your work, why not?
a) I can't be bothered
b) Planning takes up too much time
c) I don't know how to plan my work
d) Planning doesn't help me
e) Other _____

5. Do you find planning your work easier **now** than you did in October?
easier
same
more difficult

6. Do you think your attitude to planning has changed since October?
Yes
No

7. If so, what has changed your attitude?
a) Planning work with another pupil
b) My teacher showing us how to plan work
c) Having more opportunities to plan work
d) Discussing planning generally in lessons
e) Helping to make a display
f) Other _____

8. What is planning?

9. What makes a good learner in History?
