

Learning about learning – supporting children to develop positive learning behaviour

Supporting children to develop their subject knowledge and to learn content will help them to feel secure and confident about their performance in the Year 6 tests. However, there will be some children who have developed self-limiting beliefs about their own learning which are a barrier to achieving their potential. Their under-confidence may mean that they experience difficulties remembering or learning facts or methods in revision sessions or their anxiety about the tests may be preventing them from achieving their best.

Here we are providing some ideas for **learning conversations**. These are small group discussions which aim to develop a dialogue with learners about their progress and preferences in learning. They are a forum for reviewing how, as well as what, learners learn and have an explicit focus on learning skills, strategies and attitudes. They should help you to help learners:

- to plan, organise and reflect on their learning more effectively;
- to make the best use of opportunities for learning in a range of settings and at home;
- to develop a language with which they can talk about their learning;
- to negotiate goals and targets and make increasingly informed choices about learning.

More information about learning conversations can be found at:

<http://www.nationalstrategiescpd.org.uk/course/view.php?id=25>

There are three sections to this resource:

1. Information about building a positive 'learning orientation', the issues children raise and some possible solutions. (page 2)
2. Three ideas for a series of learning conversations in the time before the test period. (pages 4 and 5)
3. Some information about how to set up learning conversations. (page 6)

You may also want to look at the SEAL 'Going for Goals' module which is also on this CD.

Building a learning orientation – issues and solutions

Learning Conversations should challenge the sense that learners are merely 'victims' of schooling by moving from

a performance orientation:

"I have to be intelligent to do well at school; I am worried that when I fail other people will think I am stupid; I enjoy it most when I get top marks, and do better than my friends; I can't do a problem, I feel so stupid."

to

a learning orientation:

"If I try hard I can be successful; I can improve as a learner; I enjoy tasks which challenge me: they give me a buzz when I'm successful; I enjoy it most when I can think difficult problems through and find solutions to them; the more I become involved the more I will enjoy the lessons."

Limiting beliefs

Limiting beliefs create a sense of failure and blame. Learners internalise their lack of progress and it becomes a barrier to achievement.

Examples of limiting beliefs

- *I'm no good at spellin.*
- *I can't do it.*
- *There's no point; I'm never going to be any good at fractions.*
- *I can't ever remember my 7 times table.*
- *My practice papers were awful. I'm going to fail all my SATs.*
- *I can't do science.*

Solutions

- Challenge the basis of generalisations about meaning and limits: 'I can't do science.' All science? Are some aspects easier than others? How can you transfer your learning skills to areas where you need to improve?
- Create a more positive frame of mind by acknowledging and validating the feeling: I hear what you're saying...It can be tricky. I found that...
- Chunk down the problem to make it more manageable: Which aspects of revision do you want to focus on? You said earlier you have difficulty remembering? Shall we look at how you can improve your memory? Introduce a note of optimism: ...at the moment... Prompt reflection on success in this context: So when can you remember things?
- Reframe the problem: Okay, when you've revised in the past you haven't been successful, so if we do something different it's not going to make things worse. Let's take the practice papers as a chance to experiment.

Perception blocks

Perception blocks are when the learner sees themselves as the victim of outside influences. Learners externalize problems and make the assumption that they are fixed conditions – beyond their control.

Examples of perception blocks:

- *Mr X doesn't like me.*
- *I don't work hard because lessons are boring.*
- *What teachers write on the board is mostly rubbish so I turn off.*
- *There's no point in learning maths.*
- *I'm a kinaesthetic learner so I don't like reading.*
- *Homework's a waste of time.*

Solutions

- Use the conversation to focus on the blocks to progress. Should your preferred learning style limit your progress in learning? Why is literacy central to learning?
- What do you learn from maths/science/English about learning as a whole? What can you do to make better progress in maths?
- What strategies can you use to make sense of the notes and information teachers give you?
- What pastime activities do you do at home? What skills do they involve? How might they help with homework?

Three ideas for learning conversations for Y5 or 6 pupils:

NB These are ideas for the kinds of subject matter the conversations could cover during the time before a test period. The conversations should all be guided by the individual needs of the learners and should all focus on moving learners from 'performance orientation' to 'learning orientation'.

The sequence

Each learning conversation needs to follow a clear sequence in order to ensure that the conversation progresses and is productive.

Focus

As a starting point it is important for all the participants to agree the objectives and process of the conversation. It is also important for all groups to agree ground rules around behaviours etc. within the conversation time.

Develop understanding: Share

Talking about ideas, examples, experiences and attitudes, and strengths and weaknesses in learning, provides the basis for further discussion, reflection and subsequent action.

The conversation should encourage pupils to share ideas and experiences.

Develop understanding: Clarify

As the learning conversation continues it is important to probe and make clear the issues about learning, to develop a language for talking about learning and make relevant connections within and beyond school.

Develop understanding: Review

Participants can reflect on and summarise the key points of the conversation before agreeing next steps.

Agree action

The conversation concludes by looking forward, with opportunities to negotiate next steps and key actions for the learner and, where relevant, the coach and the school.

1. Inhibitors – foregrounding anxiety

Focus:

Focus the conversation on understanding the anxieties we have about test situations. The conversation should prompt learners to identify those things they find difficult in tests (e.g. remembering) and also those areas they think they are more successful at.

Share:

All the participants (including the coach) share their experiences about test situations. For some this will be an opportunity to hear that others share their worries and to 'release the concern' by talking about it. Participants (guided by the coach) should also share their experiences of successful test situations or times when they were really worried but were then able to get a positive experience. What were the strategies that helped them overcome their initial worries or fears?

Clarify:

The coach uses the conversation to help participants to clarify those strategies that have been successful for them, and therefore possibly for others in the group. She does this by talking about herself as a learner, by using open questions to ask more about successful situations or about worries that were overcome. She facilitates the group to ask one another questions about successful situations.

Review:

Review the conversation by highlighting those 'self-limiting beliefs' that have hampered participants in the past and also by highlighting learning oriented strategies.

Agree action:

Agree that participants will try one of the suggested strategies to remember a piece of work and feed back at the next conversation.

2. Reviewing different learning processes

Focus:

Begin by reviewing the previous conversation with participants – can they remember the suggested strategies? What have they tried? What worked well? Use the initial discussion to remind participants that they are active in the learning process and to share things they have tried out.

Share:

What are the kinds of strategies and processes that are most useful to you as a learner? e.g. underlining/mind mapping/key wording

Clarify:

That some strategies are more useful than others to different people, some are more useful than others in different situations. Are all participants clear about the strategies that are most useful to them? And when?

Review:

The range of strategies available. The possibility of learning about learning from your peer group.

Agree action:

Using a new strategy to learn something new. Feed back at the next conversation.

3. Doing your best in the test

Focus:

What are the things you can do in a test situation that make it easier for you?

Share:

A range of learning approaches: e.g. re-reading / underlining / emphasizing the detail.
Behaviours that may make it easier to cope, e.g. revision strategies, having a drink or biscuit between tests, knowing you have a treat at the end, making a timetable.

Clarify:

The learning processes and strategies that the learning conversations have highlighted as useful, which are the ones that have been most useful for you. The different way those strategies have made you feel as a learner.

Review:

Specific actions or targets that each individual has, the range of strategies available for both revision and during the test.

Agree action:

For the participants in terms of preparation/revision etc. For the school in terms of structures etc. that could be put in place to make the situation more comfortable.

Organising a series of Learning Conversations:

The group

The learning conversation should provide children with the security, space and time to think about themselves as learners. The group interaction should develop pupils' self image and understanding of themselves as learners. It is therefore desirable that the group size is small; the pilot programme has shown us that three or four children is the best group size. It is also important to think about the make up of the group (personalities, gender, behaviour etc.). The learners in each group should be able to work and talk together.

The learner

The learning conversation offers a supportive forum where learners build on their capacity and motivation to learn. This can help them to raise their confidence, motivation and engagement and to transfer their learning to different contexts. All children will benefit from learning conversations but these examples are principally designed for those children who may not be working below age-related expectations in class but who find preparation for and performance in the tests difficult.

The coach

The learning conversation is not simply about group discussions amongst learners. The adult group leader acts as a **coach** whose role within the group is to:

- extend the range of conversation;
- introduce concepts and vocabulary;
- challenge perceptions;
- talk as a learner;
- make links between the discussion and applying learning skills in and beyond school.

A key role is to **listen to** and **build on** what the learners say. The coach uses dialogue to elicit as much as possible from learners, enabling them to construct their own understanding and to carry this forward into action.