

Jo Byrne (MA Short Course)

Learning to learn – A new way of working.

Miss...how do I start it?

General Further Education Colleges welcome hundreds of new students to their campuses each year to re sit English and maths. One of the biggest challenges for staff is to gain an immediate understanding of the challenges faced by the learners both emotionally and cognitively. Many students arrive for year 12 study with profound negativity towards maths & English following a difficult learning journey both at secondary school and during a previous resit experience at college. Many learners demonstrate gaps in their learning and struggle to adjust to study following a significant break during the summer and a viewed 'failure' on GCSE results day.

In cases where the cohorts are in the region of 600+ learners, the focus is on prior attainment and initial assessment to determine academic 'levels' of function. It can take several weeks and sometimes months for teachers to gain a clear understanding of how to support a learner. Historically, our assumptions of a level of attainment have been based solely on GCSE scores and have not taken into consideration attitude to learning or level of independent learning.

In 2018/19 our college witnessed the widening of the attainment gap for our more vulnerable, disadvantaged learners in English GCSE. What has become evident to me and my colleagues is the problem does not rest solely in ability. Expectations and learned behaviours are thwarting achievement and are creating a cycle of failure. Many students when asked to articulate their feelings on resitting English, expressed feelings such as, 'I just can't do English' and, 'my teacher told me last year that I would pass.'

Previously, we had assumed that learners 'can't be bothered' when in fact they didn't have the 'practice' skills to apply their understanding. A significant number cannot organise or record notes effectively - the process of learning, for some, is like reading a book without understanding the words. Not understanding how to learn left learners frustrated and disengaged.

We tolerated 'learned behaviours' and we didn't challenge fixed mind sets. We assumed that mind sets could not change. Our views on this were challenged however, when we noticed learners who were committed and focused in their year one, became less so in year two.

We realised that we needed to make changes to support our learners. Not every learner implicitly understands how to learn; lack of access to learning strategies can lead to lack of confidence in ability as learners simply don't know what to do with new information. The Working Memory Model (Baddeley and Hitch, 1974) cites the need for students to apply their learning through independent practice. Without reinforcement, information cannot become knowledge or skill (Oakes and Griffiths, 2009).

Literature Review

After months of reading, it is now clear that learning to learn can be labelled as a plethora of terms including, 'metacognition', 'study skills', 'systems and practice' and 'VESPA.' The key question in my initial research was: 'is there a study to demonstrate that coaching and study skills improve learner outcomes?' If so, what are the key ingredients and how do I create a curriculum delivery model to support this? Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is not rocket science and remains the foundation of pedagogical understanding.

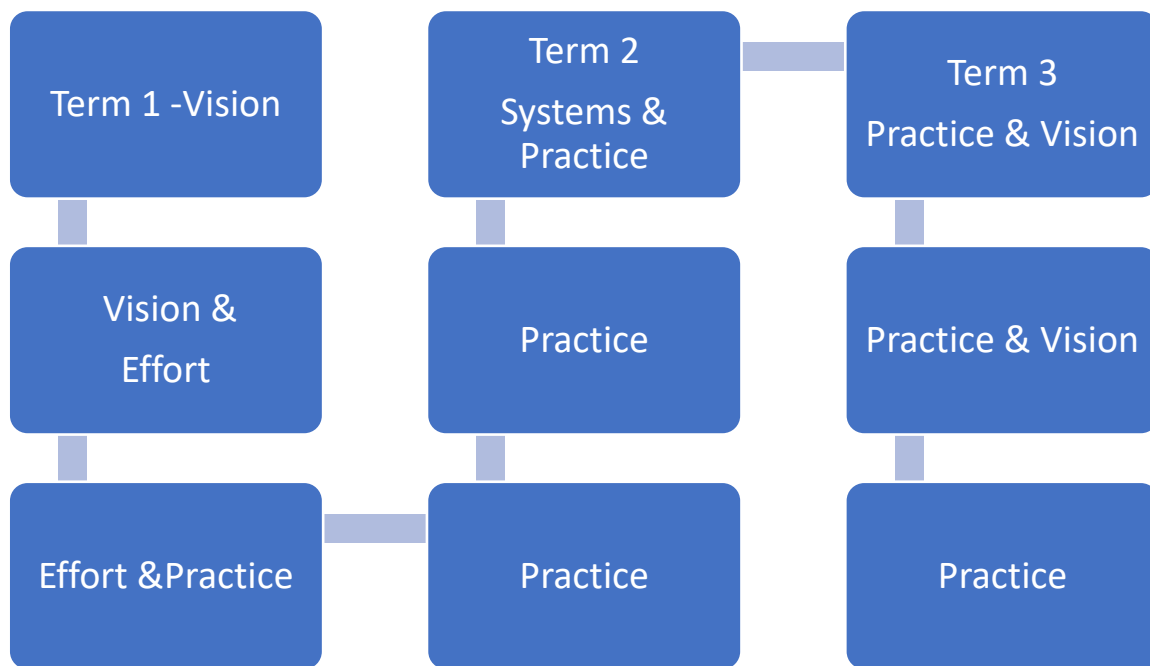
I was first introduced to the work of Steve Oakes and Martyn Griffiths at an Association of Colleges conference in February 2018. Their research and subsequent publication, '*VESPA Mindset Workbook: 40 Activities for FE Students That Transform Commitment, Motivation and Productivity*' looks at the key issues surrounding motivation and expectation. I was able to identify similar challenges surrounding my daily teaching practice and was keen to ascertain whether their approach could help students and staff in my learning community. The research of Oakes and Griffiths centres on what makes high achievers, achieve. They have identified five key elements for success: Vision, Effort, Systems, Practice and Attitude. Together with this, Oakes and Griffiths provide several activities that can support the VESPA mindset. Would this approach work for all students? Would I find that level 1 learners would make the same progress as level 3 learners?

To implement VESPA strategies for improved independent learning, we revised our scheme of work from 3 hours of English content delivery to 2 hours. The third hour was spent with an instructor, who facilitated independent learning activities including: note taking, revision strategies, prioritisation, and the self-identification of gaps in knowledge.

Each term was designed with a different focus, helping build skills for learning. Term 1 focused on vision and effort (coaching), term 2 on systems and practice (study skills) and term 3 on practice and revision.

Delivery method

GCSE English		
Session 1 Lecturer- content	Session 2 Lecturer- content	Session 3 Instructor – study skills and coaching



Term Planner

The sessions centred on developing metacognition were separate to teaching sessions and had two intended outcomes; for learners to become aware of how they create knowledge and for learners to feel supported to regulate their behaviours in the process. As a college with a high proportion of learners with SEND, this was an especially important consideration.

In order to monitor the impact of the new model, students undertook discussion-based assessments at the beginning, mid and end points of the project, using Oakes and Griffiths' (2019) 'vision questions. Students have also completed a survey and have answered questions based on VESPA with particular focus on Systems and Practice. As the project has continued, we have introduced additional questions for the case study interviews. These also include questions informed by Rosenshine's Principles in Action (Sherrington, 2019).¹

In January (post mock exam), ten-minute interviews were conducted with students so they could share their perspectives on the impact of our VESPA activities. This helped us understand whether learners were effectively applying VESPA strategies during their English learning. The interviews also helped us understand the impact of these strategies in relation to exam preparation and performance.

Together with the work of Oakes and Griffiths, I have also taken into consideration the recommendation of Tom Sherrington in his work, Rosenshine's Principals in Actions. Both texts have an intention of preparing learners for the future but interestingly, Oakes and Griffiths focus on the development of the learners with Sherrington, in my

¹ Please see appendices for examples of learner assessments and teacher reflections in relation to Rosenshine's Principles in Action.

opinion focussing on the development of the teacher. Both agree on the importance of 'practice'.

What is 'practice' and how important is this when learning? Rosenshine states that 'An important finding from information processing research is that students need to spend additional time rephrasing, elaborating and summarizing new material to store this material in long term memory.'

This is also supported by Dylan William who states, 'it is the amount of purposeful practice that is by far the most important ingredient of skill in almost all areas'.

Oakes and Griffiths refer to the work of Anders Ericsson who spent his career looking at top performers before concluding that top performers don't just practice hard; they practice in the right way.

The literature shared informed the curriculum delivery model we decided to test. We would use the third hour of teaching to introduce VESPA strategies with a focus on practice. Our aim was to help learners identify where their weaknesses were and how through practice, they could bridge gaps in their own learning. Would this help learners to see their study as relevant, meaningful, and personalised?

In addition to our separate instructor hour, lecturers are also embedding VESPA activities within teaching sessions. For example, the prioritisation grid² is used to judge confidence in learners and often follows a 'hinge point' question (William, 2012) when checking for learning.

This research also looks at the impact of coaching. To fulfil this aspect of the research we used the Vision activities (Oakes and Griffiths, 2019). At the start of the year we asked students to share their feelings on English GCSE and repeated the exercise several weeks into term.

Taking the team with you

Asking colleagues to alter and adapt existing teaching and learning practices was not without challenge – an important consideration for anyone trying to affect cultural change within their setting. An unexpected challenge was a lack of motivation from a small number of staff to make changes to their practice despite acknowledging that learner outcomes were poor. In these instances, staff did not necessarily need to improve content knowledge but, in the spirit of William's 'love the one you're with strategy',³ we soon realised that for motivational work with learners to occur, motivational work with staff was also required.

Many teachers in the department were concerned that we were substituting content with wellbeing strategies. However, as a project team, we agree with Fisher (2013) that, 'education can, in other words, not only impart knowledge but also teach powerful

² Please refer to appendices for further details.

³ Available at: <https://www.dylanwilliam.org>

capabilities for evaluating and applying such knowledge.’ Colleagues who are invested see the benefits but agree with our project’s finding that a stand-alone instructor lesson does not always lead to independent practice transferring to taught sessions. This was an important moment in our research, illustrated in the reflection below:

Our group 1 (MV) students who engaged well with the Instructor hour did not demonstrate the same engagement in English lessons (core 1 & 2). As the lecturer, I had a weekly update from the Instructor who praised student A for an excellent piece of writing. She had asked student A to complete a task in 45 minutes. Student A was open with the Instructor about his concerns but also was able to ask questions to ascertain the expectations. However, when completing his mock exam, he was unable to ask me (the lecturer) the same focussed questions. We discussed this and he stated that ‘your lessons were just like school’ From this I took that he regressed to former behaviours when confronted by the pedagogical approaches like those at KS4. I became aware that the Instructor lessons were more engaging as the discussions were adult to adult and new environment for the learners.
(Project team reflection)

Similarly, with learning, teachers need to fully understand the Working Memory. During assessment in week 6 and week 10, learners’ results did not demonstrate above expected progress scores - research suggests that this is not a bad outcome. According to Bjork (2007), ‘the more they struggle and the worse they fail, the better the long-term memory’. Shifting perceptions and feelings around failure are important, especially for GCSE resit learners and for their lecturers

We also assessed attitudes to learning, with interesting findings. Learners responded favourably to questions about their English lessons in week 6, and this improved again in week 10. Typical questions on the survey included:

- How do you feel when you are in English lessons?
- How do you feel when you have a challenging English question?

The surveys conducted in instructor sessions demonstrated more favourable responses than those conducted in taught sessions. This could be due to several influences. The activities in the instructor session are created with the intention of raising self-esteem and motivation. Is this quickly lost in the traditional classroom setting?

Between September and January, we didn’t see significant improvement in terms of attainment during formal assessment. This led us to believe that improving systems and practice is not enough. We also need to acknowledge other factors when examining progress.

According to Melby-Lervag and Hulme (2013)⁴ the following are high and low impact factors:

- Low impact factors - Ability groupings & buildings
- High impact factors – Classroom practice and poverty

Our level 1 cohort has a significantly higher percentage of disadvantaged learners (27%), should we have the same scheme of work for level 1 and level 3, where that disadvantaged percentage is at 11%? We have previously streamed learners with prior attainment of grade 3 and in 2018, this made little impact as significant number of learners at grade 3 prior attainment were on their third resit. The data suggested exam fatigue and a break in trust (with the process and teacher) had a greater influence on outcome than sitting with peers with a similar starting point. This was further reinforced through the VESPA questionnaires.

Ethical considerations

Even before I had identified trust as a key element to the success of the study, I had to consider this as part of the BERA guidelines. The students who were in my classes were aware that I was undertaking action research. I felt that if I was transparent and answered their questions honestly, they were more likely to be honest in their responses. Quite often, I would be asked, 'why are we doing another survey?' My responses would be clear, 'I want to know if I can do things better.' Students, I believe, appreciate your investment into their learning.

Another consideration was whether the whole cohort should be included in this research. My decision to include the entire cohort was also influenced by BERA. All students should have the opportunity to improve not just a focus group.

Findings

I believe that students and teachers have benefitted from the introduction of coaching and study skills. At the college, our English and maths attendance averages between 75-80% but when filtering on session 3 only (instructor sessions), in places this rose to 85%.

Further analysis of the attendance data also demonstrated that attendance and engagement was better where the third session was run by an Instructor and not a teacher. It would suggest that teachers may struggle between the two roles. When the instructor session was added to a two-hour block of teaching and led by the teacher, the students became fatigued and lacked motivation in session 3.

From the learner interviews, I have seen progress in the ability of learners to self-identify topics that are challenging. One student who has autism commented that, 'my teacher helps when things get a bit much.' The learner also commented that he was no longer 'afraid of the English class.' This student described teachers at a previous

⁴ Melby-Lervåg, M., & Hulme, C. (2013). Is working memory training effective? A meta-analytic review. *Developmental psychology*, 49 2, 270-91.

setting as aggressive. On further questioning, it became evident that this was more likely frustration as the very able learner had previously described 'shutting down' when things became challenging.

For me, the interviews showed that the culture had to change within the department, students seemed to enjoy the adult to adult discussions on the way they work best. I had previously believed individualised learning pathways to mean that we set the right level of activities and assessment but an individualised learning pathway is much more than this, it is also identifying the right learning environment for a learner to thrive. By simply repeating a curriculum and mimicking a delivery method from KS4, we are not giving the learners a new experience, we are asking them to repeat a cycle of failure.

Within my classes, there was also an improvement in effort. This is achieved by consistency and clarity in expectation. Not only did we state how long students should spend on their studies, we also supported this clearly with data to demonstrate that a student doing an additional 2 hours per week would make X amount of progress. The students began to take more responsibility when faced with the truth. Previously, I felt that I had to start the academic year with nothing but positivity and hope. I would use statements such as 'You will pass this.' On reflection, this is ridiculous and at the first hurdle (half termly assessments), students would have lost trust and motivation. Instead, I now adopt the belief of Bjork (2007), 'the more they struggle, and the worse they fail, the better the long term memory,' The challenging part is learning to be open, honest and to treat them as young adults.

March saw us move into lockdown and it really did test how well the learners had developed study skills and were able to engage in independent learning. I can only make my judgement on data collected between the 13th and 30th of March. On the 1st of April, the college informed learners that Ofqual advised centres not to take work undertaken during lockdown into consideration when considering centre assessed grades. This meant that many learners failed to engage as they did not see the point.

There were several emerging findings from the data collected:

1. Level 1 learners were more likely to struggle with a change of teacher/instructor perhaps suggesting that the success of the project for level 1 was linked to trust and student-teacher working relationships.
2. Level 2 and 3 students were preoccupied with the outcomes of the centre assessed grades, perhaps suggesting that the work on vision had been a success.
3. More students than ever before were engaging with independent study. Using work set over October half term as a benchmark, I saw a 300% increase in students engaging in independent study.
4. We will continue to have problems with trust due to centre assessed grades. In previous years, students could blame a process. Now they are likely to blame the person.

Summary

My research has been incredibly rewarding. In previous years, I have assumed that supporting learners meant awarding more hours to core teaching. We now understand that learning will only be effective when the student is open to learning, feels safe and secure in the learning environment, can be empowered by self-regulation and truly sees the importance of learning. This research has given me the strategies to promote and create the learning situations above.

I also believed that we should assess learners based on prior attainment in the form of GCSE scores. Our initial assessments did not take into consideration attitudes to learning and emotions associated with resitting GCSE. I know now that we have to address attitudes to learning and promote discussion through coaching.

The research has also shown me that although work on vision, effort, systems, practice and attitude is effective for all learners, level 1 learners in this study benefitted from the coaching discussions based on vision and effort to a greater degree than level 2 & 3 learners.

This year, I have made the following recommendations.

1. Learners will not have a change of teachers more than once.
2. Lesson 3 is still to be called English and not Vespa por Instructor Hour
3. Learners with lower prior attainment will work on vision and motivation for at least two terms.
4. Honesty about starting points. Clear expectations must be given to students
5. Students starting points must include their feelings towards study.

It is a new way of working but it is time to change.

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Appendix

VISION	EFFORT	SYSTEMS	PRACTICE	ATTITUDE
<p>What interests do you want to go to? Why?</p> <p>What do you want to do next? What if you don't get the grades? What other options are there?</p> <p>What do you wish for in life?</p> <p>What would be the best you will achieve after school?</p> <p>What OBSTACLES do you think you may have to overcome while at school?</p> <p>Where do you see yourself in ten years time?</p> <p>How much do you think you are wanting to contribute for yourself or for other people?</p> <p>Do you compare yourself to other people (anybody)? Why would you do that?</p> <p>What's the worst that could happen if you don't...?</p> <p>What's the best that could happen if you do? ...?</p> <p>What do you see yourself need to achieve in life?</p> <p>Where do you want to achieve in the next year?</p> <p>What do you wish to achieve by the time your course ends?</p> <p>What do you wish to do after IT education?</p> <p>What would be important to you in a job? Describe a great day at work. Why did you choose to do this subject?</p> <p>What is your dream job?</p> <p>What is your favourite subject which subject do you enjoy most?</p> <p>What do you admire most and why?</p>	<p>How many hours a week of independent study do you currently do?</p> <p>How many hours have you studied for <u>tests</u> outside the classroom?</p> <p>How much work would you have to do in order to be satisfied?</p> <p>When working how do you know you have done enough?</p> <p>Do you think you should spend more time studying?</p> <p>Do you work more or less than your friends?</p> <p>Do you think you make enough effort...?</p> <p>Which subject do you work the hardest on? Why do you think this is?</p> <p>In your great achievements with your present effort?</p> <p>How much effort do you see yourself putting in to achieve your wish in life?</p> <p>What amount of effort deserves a reward?</p> <p>What is your best time of day for working?</p> <p>If you had an extra hour every day, how would you use it up spending it?</p> <p>Have a student who works harder than you. What do they do?</p> <p>How do you use your study periods?</p> <p>What is the biggest obstacle to your progress?</p> <p>What do you normally do during your study periods?</p> <p>When do you normally spend your study periods?</p> <p>Do you consider study periods 'free periods'?</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10 how much effort are you putting in?</p>	<p>If you could change one aspect about the way you work - what would it be and how would you change it?</p> <p>How do you feel on a Sunday night? Ready for the week ahead or not? How do you make sure?</p> <p>What is your most useful tool for you?</p> <p>How do you decide what you need to revise?</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate yourself in terms of organisation?</p> <p>Do you still work in the same ways as you used to?</p> <p>What is good about these ways?</p> <p>What isn't working and why?</p> <p>How do you back writing an extended response to a difficult question if you're given a week to do it?</p> <p>How do you record VLE tasks?</p> <p>What do you do with work you get back?</p> <p>Show me the file you are proud of.</p> <p>How do you plan your college work?</p> <p>Have you ever done anything that is NOT set by your teacher?</p> <p>How do you organise your subject notes?</p> <p>How do you organise your work?</p> <p>How do you organise your time?</p> <p>How do you prioritise your work/assignments?</p> <p>How do you organise external 'transit' on your time?</p> <p>What do you think you need to do to improve your organisation?</p> <p>Do you have a workspace in which to do your work?</p> <p>How do you ensure your work is up to date?</p>	<p>If you could start with from the beginning, what would you do differently?</p> <p>Is getting something wrong a disaster or is a spur to (eventually) find the right answer?</p> <p>Which techniques do you prefer to use for practice?</p> <p>What do you think you should do more of to help you improve?</p> <p>Have been achievement make you feel?</p> <p>In your studies - how do you feel about when you have made a mistake?</p> <p>Do you tend to backpeddle the content that you enjoy?</p> <p>What notes receive your most attention? How do you use them?</p> <p>Do you review your work to make it better?</p> <p>When was the last time you tested yourself?</p> <p>When did you last ask someone else to test you?</p> <p>How do you practise your key skills in class?</p> <p>How do you review?</p> <p>How do you feel when you review?</p> <p>How comfortable is the process of revision for you?</p> <p>Describe your response to the last disappointing grade you received.</p> <p>What do you do with feedback you get on classed work?</p> <p>What do you think is your most common error in class?</p> <p>When are you most productive?</p> <p>Where are you least productive?</p>	<p>How do you feel when you get something wrong?</p> <p>Are you willing to contribute in class? Name a student who contributes more than you. What is their learning like?</p> <p>What do you do when you encounter a problem?</p> <p>Do you think you're in control of your life - or is it just chance?</p> <p>What do you do when you're absent the whole time you're absent the whole time?</p> <p>How do you respond when you get work back?</p> <p>Do you mind how you look in front of other students?</p> <p>Are there any people who are stopping you from achieving?</p> <p>When something goes wrong what do you do?</p> <p>What's the biggest mistake you have made so far? What have you learned from it? Did you deal with it?</p> <p>Tell me about a time you had to start something again from scratch. How did you feel at the time? Once it was done?</p> <p>What have you done since September that you are proud of?</p> <p>When did you last fail forward?</p> <p>In thinking, what are you scared of?</p> <p>Describe your most challenging subject. What? What do you do about it?</p> <p>How do you respond to setbacks?</p> <p>How do you respond to not getting the grade that you want?</p> <p>Do you have realistic expectations? What makes you happy?</p> <p>Describe a moment when you felt proud.</p>

Prioritisation Grid

