

# Self Organised Learning: A gateway to personalising learning

Gerv Leyden and Jackie Dearden

## *Introduction*

How did you learn how to learn? How effective are your personal learning strategies?

For most of us, schooling was about teaching rather than learning and exams to be passed, or failed. About *what* was to be learned, and probably forgotten. Ironically, it is possible to spend 20 years or more in the educational system without any opportunity to learn about and improve on our own learning strategies. Most of us carry into adult life habits and practices picked up through trial and error in our school days, remaining at the stage of 'what' to learn rather than 'how' to learn it.

Encouragingly, as David Hargreaves recently pointed out, education providers in the UK are now being challenged to include 'learning to learn' as one gateway to personalising learning. Which brings us to self organised learning ... by **reviewing** your **purposes**, learning **strategies** and intended **outcomes** you are on the way to becoming a more effective learner, able to coach others via learning conversations.

## *What is Self Organised Learning?*

'Self Organised Learning' (SOL) is a person-centred system, developed at Brunel University by Laurie Thomas and Sheila Harri-Augsten. It focuses on the learner and the learning as distinct to the teacher and the curriculum. It provides a framework, learning tools and techniques to assist the learner in identifying, reflecting on and improving her/his skills as a 'self-organised learner.'

SOL is not an 'off-the-shelf' standardised package. Its theoretical basis draws on the positive psychology of George Kelly and Carl Rogers. It brings about change through 'learning conversations', which enable learners to identify the purposes and strategies and improve the effectiveness of their own learning.

Current definitions of learning require revision to reflect the changing needs of the learner and society. John West-Burnham and Max Coates ('Personalising Learning,' 2005, Network Educational Press) describe the autonomous or self-organised learner as being able to 'learn how to learn' and possessing a disposition to do so. Such a learner can analyse his/her own learning strategies and outcomes as well as support the learning of others. S/he also knows how to make an effective contribution to and benefit from the processes of teamwork and working with others.

## *Applications of SOL*

In our own work in the UK we have been impressed by ways in which SOL has been enthusiastically embraced by; learning mentors, teachers, pastoral staff, classroom aids, learning assistants and peer tutors. Most recently it has proven effective in our work with

members of multi-agency and social support teams, working with the most vulnerable youngsters in challenging circumstances.

The potential applications of SOL have also been recognised by organisations as diverse as the

Nuffield Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, DfES the Welsh Office and the Post Office. The School of Psychology at the University of Nottingham draws on SOL in its professional training programmes for educational psychologists.

Internationally, SOL has stimulated seminars, radio and TV programmes in the USA, Mexico, Australia, Europe and India. In Australia the University of Sydney, as well as sports psychologists and coaches, have taken it up. SOL has also featured in courses offered by universities in Singapore, Korea and the USA.

#### *About us*

#### **Gervase Leyden**

Gerv is an experienced educational psychologist (EP) and trainer, having worked in LEAs at senior management and specialist levels. His career has also incorporated experience as tutor to the professional training courses for EPs at the universities of Birmingham and Nottingham, where he is currently tutor on the doctorate programme for practising EPs. He has additional qualifications in occupational psychology, is an associate to the Special Needs Consultancy and a board member of the Marsha Forest Centre for Inclusion, Community and Education, Toronto.

Gerv has also served on the National Executive of the Association of Educational Psychologists and is a former chair of the Training Committee of the British Psychological Society. His research and publications include the role of psychological services, the application of psychology to support the needs of vulnerable children, and making schools safer, 'healthier' and more inclusive.

#### **Jackie Dearden**

Jackie is involved in a range of training and consultancy, which includes working as an educational psychologist in Nottingham City and being an associate with Strategic Services for Children and Young People. Her doctoral research has led to publications about resilience and multi-agency working and the establishment of a Collaborative Research Network, which aims to sustain links between Nottingham City Children's Services, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Nottingham.

Jackie's current interests also include action research (especially in relation to challenging assumptions and improving practice for young people with severe communication impairments), graphic facilitation and effective inclusive practice.