



# Becoming a Better Learner

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**Welcome** to our ‘**Becoming a Better Learner**’ guide, one of the many ways in which we at the Campaign for Learning are working to celebrate and support learning. This guide has been developed to support your learning in the workplace but can also be used wherever and whenever you are learning, whether it’s with your family, in your community or in a classroom. We’ve developed this guide in response to numerous requests from people we work with, both learners and supporters of learning.

We know that learning through our lives makes us healthier, happier, longer-living and generally wealthier. And the more confident we are in our ability to learn, the more likely we are to try new things and develop our understanding and skills as well as pursue our interests. So this guide shares tips, advice and tools to help you with whatever you are setting out to learn and to be the best learner you can be.

## We’ll look at:

- **Learning – just what do we mean?** page 3
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- **What’s stopping you learning?** page 6
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- **Improving your learning** page 12
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The guide covers lots of different topics which should be useful at any stage of your learning, whether it’s starting out or reflecting on what you have done. We hope you find it helpful. We are interested in your feedback – please send any comments through to Julia Wright at [jwright@cflerning.org.uk](mailto:jwright@cflerning.org.uk)

**The Campaign for Learning**

# Learning

– just what do we mean?

If you asked a group of people what they think learning is, you will probably end up with a variety of answers – from acquiring facts to studying to personal development. All the answers usually fit into two main meanings:

1. **Learning as a process** – i.e. the activities and experiences we go through to gain a result we want, such as a qualification, skills or understanding
2. **Learning as an outcome or end product** – e.g. changes to what you know or can do, such as new skills that can be used, or ideas that may alter the way you look at the world

As humans we are constantly learning. It's something that we do both consciously and unconsciously - as individuals and socially with others. We may do it in a formal environment like a college, in the workplace with colleagues or by ourselves by reading or on the internet.

This guide focuses on helping you to improve 'learning as a process' - when you are intentionally learning and have learning goals rather than learning that may or may not happen as we go through life – and by doing so help you to improve your learning outcomes too.

## The Campaign for Learning's definition of learning incorporates both meanings of learning:

*'Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.'*

# Why learn?

**Our motivation for learning is likely to be stronger and the learning is likely to be more successful if it is something that we have decided to do ourselves and we can clearly see the benefits.**

When you are asked to undertake learning by other people, for example your line manager in relation to your job, it may be useful to find out more about the benefits that this learning will bring, both to yourself and to the workplace.

Answering the following questions will help you to identify the benefits from any learning you are considering. Some you may be able to answer yourself but you may also need to ask the person who has asked or invited you to learn. Whether there are answers for some of the questions may depend on the type of learning that you are doing.

## Emotional benefits

- The learning will help me feel better about myself – e.g. I can do this, I am worthy of doing this learning, I've been asked to do this learning because people believe I can do it
- By completing this learning I will feel more confident in this area
- By completing the learning I will feel more confident in doing further learning
- The learning will expand my understanding of an area that will be satisfying

## Family and friend benefits

- The learning will give me skills and/or understanding that I can pass on to family and friends
- I will be able to enjoy new types of experiences with family and friends

## Personal benefits

- The learning will help me develop skills or ways of doing things that I can use in my personal life (e.g. IT skills, language skills)
- The learning will help me explore and expand my own interests

## Social benefits

- The learning will help me to meet new people interested in this area
- The learning will help me meet new people



## Love learning?

According to research, people who learn throughout their lives are likely to be healthier, longer living and get more out of life generally. But did you know that learning can also lead to romance? A recent study shows that one of the best ways of meeting a partner is in a learning environment such as a college or evening class.

## Work benefits

- The learning will give me skills and understanding that will help me do my job better e.g. more accurately, more efficiently or more creatively
- The learning will help me to expand or develop my job role

## Career benefits

- The learning will be a step to developing my expertise in an area that will benefit my career
- The learning will give me a qualification that will be recognised

# Get ready for learning

**How good is your memory? Can you remember an experience that made you feel great, perhaps because of an achievement? Can you replicate those feelings again? Are you smiling already? Would you love to repeat the experience?**

According to researchers, when new learning opportunities arise we are unconsciously influenced by what has happened in the past. If we have had a good experience we will be 'positively' primed and will want to repeat 'rewarding' and emotionally pleasurable experiences. On the other hand, if our past learning experiences have not been so good, then we may be 'negatively' primed, and feel less willing to repeat them.

Recognising the effect that negative past experiences can have on emotions and motivation is important so that we can stop them dominating our attitudes towards learning, and develop a positive disposition instead.

# What's stopping you learning ?

**Learning takes time, energy, dedication and sometimes money. Depending on the type of learning, it may require a change in your normal lifestyle. If you haven't learned for a long time, perhaps since school, you may also feel anxious about learning again. For some people these can be real barriers to taking up learning.**

Thinking about the benefits the learning will bring will help you weigh up what you may see as 'costs' of doing the learning against what you will gain. There are also other ways of minimising things that may stand in the way of you taking up a learning opportunity. Here are some common barriers that people face when it comes to learning and ways of overcoming them.



**Emotional barriers:** It's very common to feel nervous about taking up a new learning opportunity, whether it's a course or a more informal learning session. Common fears include not being 'bright' enough or fear of feeling stupid; being frightened of failure; or not knowing what to expect. Sometimes our fears may be related to previous experiences of learning including our school years.

### **It may help to:**

- Think about when you last learned something that went well – it could be anything from learning how to install and use a new appliance to finding out and using information from the internet.
- Find out more about what the learning opportunity will involve. Ask the tutor to explain to you what will happen when you get there. Learning as an adult is usually very different to what happened in school.
- Find out if there are any 'taster' sessions, where you can try a short sample of a course to get a feel for it, or if you can sit in on a session of an existing course.

**Time barriers:** The amount of time that you will need to dedicate to learning will depend on the type of course or learning that you are doing. Most learning opportunities will let you know if you need to dedicate your own time to study as well as the time when you are attending classes or a course.

### **It may help to:**

- Plan out your learning so you can put aside the time that you need every week to study and work out when will be the most suitable time. This will help minimise any possible clashes with other responsibilities you may have.
- If your manager or organisation has identified learning that they wish you to do, discuss with them the time it will take and see whether you will be able to take time from your normal duties if you need to do extra study.
- If you have identified the learning yourself, you may need to highlight the benefits of this for your role and the team to your manager and again discuss the time you may need to study.

# What's stopping you learning?

**Social barriers:** Some people think that learning may not be 'for them'. They may have come from a background where not many people value learning or see any benefits from it. They may not have the social support to take up learning and it can be a big step to do so.

If you question whether learning is for you it may help you to think about why this may be the case – do you think you may not have the support, or do you feel nervous because you don't know what to expect? Speaking to the course tutor may help, or somebody from your own background who has taken up learning.

**Skills barriers:** If you feel that your maths, English and IT skills are not up to scratch, this may put you off taking up learning opportunities.

To refresh your skills you could:

- Visit the move on website [www.move-on.org.uk](http://www.move-on.org.uk)
- Visit your local further education college

Brushing up your maths and English skills can make a real difference to your life.

To find out more about how the National Careers Service can help search online for

**National Careers Service**  
or call **0800 100 900**

**Money barriers:** You may not have to spend money on your learning, if for example it is being paid for by work, or you have found a free course\*. However, the cost of learning may be a barrier if you have to pay and/or you to consider extra costs including travel, childcare and any materials you may need.

If you think money may be a barrier you may wish to:

- Investigate the support there is for learning – for example, you may be able to apply for a grant or bursary, or help with buying books or equipment.
- Compare the cost of the learning to other things that you do. Is it the same price of going to the cinema once a week or a takeaway coffee every day?



# What happens when we learn?

There are three main explanations of what is happening when we learn. These are useful when we are thinking about how we can improve our learning. It is likely that when we are learning, we are going through all three processes in one way or another – and depending on what we are learning one process may be more dominant than another.

## A style of thinking

You may have come across ‘learning styles’ and ‘multiple intelligences’, which describe different ways that people are supposed to learn. Some ‘learning style’ models talk about the different ways in which people prefer to absorb and make sense of information. For example this could be through sight (visual), through sound (auditory), or by doing a physical activity (kinaesthetic). The ‘Multiple intelligences’ model suggests people have many different skills that they use in everyday life from linguistic (words and language) to interpersonal skills (understanding other people’s feelings).

It’s important to remember that how we go about learning will vary depending on where we are and what we are learning. Rather than think of ourselves as one ‘type’ of learner, we should try and develop or appreciate different ways of learning, as this will help us be more effective and flexible learners – able to adapt to different situations and circumstances where we need to or want to learn. Many course leaders today also vary the way they present information and support learning.

## 1. Learning is acquiring

The **acquiring** model of learning sees us as adding to our store of knowledge. This knowledge is what is needed to reach our learning goal. If we are successful we are able to reproduce the knowledge or behaviour that we have learned.

## 2. Learning is constructing

The **constructive** model of learning says that we learn by bringing together our own experience and understanding with the new ideas and knowledge that we are being taught or are exploring. Learning here is about changing our understanding through the way new ideas and experience interact with what we already think and know.

## 3. Learning is experiencing

The **experiential** model of learning says that learning is a continuous cycle of **finding out** new ideas, **applying** these ideas practically, **thinking about** what has happened as a result, and then returning to the ideas and confirming or modifying the original ideas based on our experience. The cycle may then start again. We may also start the learning process at any point in the cycle.

# Improving your learning

How can we become more effective learners? Here are some main ways that we can improve the learning process:

1. Understanding that **what we think of our own abilities** has an impact on our learning – do we think our abilities are ‘fixed’ or can they grow?
2. Making sure we are **actively involved in our learning** - this will enable us to reflect on our own learning, and take more responsibility - so that we are more involved in planning how we learn rather than just passively receiving information.
3. **Learning how to learn** so we improve continually how we learn.

## A question of attitude

Carol Dwek’s important research shows that what we think about our own abilities can have a dramatic effect on our learning, performance and motivation. Her research looks at two different kinds of ‘mindsets’ or ways in which we think about our abilities – ‘**fixed**’ mindsets and ‘**growth**’ mindsets. When a person has a fixed mindset they tend to believe that intelligence and abilities do not change. A person with a ‘growth’ mindset believes that they can develop their abilities and so are more focused on learning. These two types of mindsets may lead to the following beliefs and actions on page 13.

Whilst one of these mindsets may be more dominant than the other, they may also change depending on what we are doing and what we are learning.

From the table you can see that people with ‘growth’ mindsets tend to be more concerned with **learning** whilst those with ‘fixed’ mindsets are more concerned with **performing**. Generally, a person with a ‘growth’ mindset is motivated by factors internal to themselves, whilst a person with a ‘fixed’ mindset is motivated by factors outside of themselves, such as other people’s reactions. Because a ‘fixed’ mindset tends to prevent people from trying out different strategies when they are stuck, asking for help from others, taking up new challenges that will stretch them or even putting in effort as they feel there is no point, this can actually lead to a poorer performance. On the other hand, a ‘growth’ mindset which is focused on learning can lead to a better performance as the focus is on improvement and developing our abilities.

Fixed mindset	Growth mindset
I believe that my abilities are <b>fixed</b> and any success depends on those abilities that I may or may not already have	I believe that I can <b>grow</b> my abilities through effort and that will lead to success
I'm concerned with the need to <b>demonstrate</b> and <b>prove</b> my abilities	I'm concerned with <b>developing</b> and <b>improving</b> my abilities.
I am concerned with <b>performing well</b> as <b>defined by other people</b>	I get satisfaction from <b>achieving my own goals</b>
I <b>avoid</b> new challenges or <b>give up</b> if there is a barrier that may cause me to fail, as this may bring my abilities into question	I <b>enjoy</b> new challenges as they give me an opportunity to stretch myself and learn new things
If there is a difficult task I may <b>give up</b> because I feel I don't have the ability and can't do it (helplessness)	When there is a difficult task, I think about <b>how I might do things differently</b> or find out <b>who can give me help</b> so I can learn how to do it
I find it <b>difficult to accept feedback</b> on my work as I see it as a criticism	<b>I like getting feedback</b> on my work as this gives me the opportunity to find out how I can improve
If I haven't performed well at something I think it's because <b>I don't have the ability</b> and this can affect my work negatively	If I haven't performed well at something I think it's because <b>I need to improve my abilities</b> and this gives me a focus for my work
I like to <b>do better than others</b>	I like to <b>do better for myself</b>

## Check your own attitude

By answering the questions in the box on page 14 you should be able to see your attitude to your own abilities and see whether it may be having a negative effect on how you approach learning. You may also wish to do this for different areas of your life to see if there is any variation.

# Improving your learning

– a question of attitude

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Stongly Disagree
1	I enjoy learning new things or undertaking new work even if I make a lot of mistakes				
2	It's important that people think I'm good at what I do				
3	I feel good if I'm the only person who can do something				
4	What motivates me to study or do my work is that I enjoy it				
5	The reason why I get on with my work is so that other people don't think I'm incompetent				
6	I like things that are really challenging or make me think				
7	It's important that I don't look stupid or embarrass myself in front of other students or colleagues				
8	I'm motivated to learn so I can improve my personal performance				
9	The reason I learn new things is to get better at what I do				
10	I like to be better at what I'm doing than other people and outperform them				

If you mainly agree with statements 1, 4, 6, 8 and 9, which highlight **internal** motivators, then you tend to be **learning orientated**. Your personal development and growth are the key motivators for your learning and work. You see mistakes just as opportunities to gain feedback, which you use to improve.

If you mainly agree with statements 2, 3, 5, 7 and 10, which highlight **external** motivators, then you tend to be **performance orientated**. It is important to you how others at work see you, value you and evaluate you. This can have drawbacks when it comes to learning, as any mistakes you make can undermine your confidence and performance. This may make you avoid further challenges and opportunities, which can help you grow.

## Fixed and growth mindsets in maths?

How often have you heard a person say that they are no good at maths? Could they have a fixed mindset? Recent research by the Campaign for Learning and Get On shows that people who rate their maths skills as below average or poor are more likely to think good maths skills are down to natural ability, whilst people who feel they have above average maths skills don't.

# Improving your learning

## Get involved

Being actively involved and responsible for your own learning, also known as 'self-directed' learning, can improve the way we learn and help us to get the most out of our learning experiences.

Being a self-directed learner doesn't have to mean learning on your own, or not getting help – it's to do with taking charge of your own learning and having a clear idea where you want to go.

A useful way of becoming more involved with your learning is to think about the plan-do-review activity cycle.

The three phases of activity can be applied to whatever you are setting out to learn. You can use it to structure your overall learning plan as well as smaller chunks of learning. This cycle supports continual improvement in how you approach your learning, as you can use the review phase to help you plan better for your next learning stage and use different approaches if needed.

For each of the activity phases, there are a range of actions that you can do – see the table on page 18.



## Think about...

...the last time you had a successful learning experience. List 5 things that made that experience go well. These can be actions that you did or things that happened whilst you were learning. Do any of these fit in with the activities of a self-directed learner as shown in table X?

## Memorisation – is it learning?

Remembering is important but we memorise things in different ways dependent on what we are learning. For example, rote learning where we memorise through repetition and strategies such as rhyming may help us when we have to learn the meanings of symbols, a series of actions or rules. This type of approach would not be suitable when you need to understand more deeply how something works and why. In this case you usually remember through understanding the topic itself. If you find yourself trying to memorise and copy or reproduce large amounts of a topic it may be that you are 'surface' learning and have not got to grips with understanding the topic properly.

## Learning tactics: organisational techniques

There are lots of different ways to organise information, which can help you learn and remember what you have learned. Recognising patterns in the ways information is organised can be a helpful guide for learning. Here are some common patterns that you may come across or you may wish to use to re-organise information:

**Sequences** e.g. events over time, most important to least important, location or position in space, stages of progression. If you were studying how to use a new computer program, for example, information may be organised in a series of instructions to get from one point to another. Alternatively, it may highlight the most important functions of that program that you should learn first.

**Classification** organises information on the basis of characteristics or categories, as we've done with the characteristics of a fixed or growth mindset in the table above, for example.

**Cause and effect** organises information as a relationship when one thing leads to another – for example, the results of smoking or drinking for your health

**Lists** bring items of information together on a particular topic or area.

**Compare and contrast** which organises information on the basis of similarities and/or contrasts and differences e.g. between an Apple Mac and a PC.

# Improving your learning – get involved

## SUGGESTED ACTIONS

PHASE	PLAN	DO
	<p>Choose your learning topic or area.</p> <p>Choose and set your own <b>learning goals</b>. Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What knowledge and understanding do you expect to have or which skills should you be able to apply?</li> <li>• If you are following a course, can you use your tutor's goals as a guide for your own learning goals? They will have highlighted the important topics or areas that you need to focus on</li> </ul> <p><b>Organise</b> the information included in the topic and break down the work into manageable steps.</p> <p>Decide how much time you will need or consider any deadlines you have to meet.</p> <p>Think what <b>resources</b> and <b>support</b> you will need or that will be useful e.g. books, newspapers, films, internet and online resources, tutor notes, the people you can ask for help and direction.</p> <p><b>Create a plan</b> using all the information you have.</p>	<p>Follow your <b>learning plan</b>.</p> <p><b>Set up a support group</b> with colleagues or people who are learning the same thing. Agree on common goals and work together to reach them.</p> <p><b>Identify and work with a coach or mentor</b> who can guide you and keep you motivated.</p> <p><b>Avoid 'surface' learning</b> so that you are really understanding what you are studying and not just reproducing or copying what you are taught or are learning e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try and see the <b>bigger picture</b> of what you are learning not just the facts and details.</li> <li>• <b>Capture and follow your curiosity.</b> Constantly ask questions of what you are learning and keep a note of these, as well as any connections you have made or ideas – follow these up using your resources. Try using 'concept maps' to illustrate links and connections</li> <li>• Try using <b>creativity exercises</b> to help you think more widely</li> </ul> <p><b>Put your learning into practice by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using opportunities at work or at home to regularly practise what you have learned</li> </ul>

DO (continued)	REVIEW
<p><b>Keep track and monitor how well you are doing by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Asking for <b>feedback</b> from your colleagues, your tutor, line manager or friends</li> <li>- Using <b>self-testing</b> to see how well you are developing your understanding and making sense of what you are learning</li> <li>- Thinking about <b>what happens when you practise</b> what you have learned – does this confirm what you originally learned or do you need to modify it at all? (experiential learning)</li> <li>- Keeping a learning diary or log to capture all your thoughts</li> </ul> <p><b>Try out different tactics.</b> If you feel you are not understanding or being successful in what you are learning, be resourceful and try something different.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look for resources including people who can explain or present in a different way what you are having difficulty learning</li> <li>• Ask others how they approach this area of learning</li> <li>• Can the topic be organised differently to make it more understandable? See box on page 17</li> <li>• Present the information in a diagram to explore connections</li> </ul> <p>If you are learning facts try a different memory technique</p>	<p>Look at <b>how well</b> you have done compared to your plan. Review your learning diary and consider any feedback. Ask yourself questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Am I at the point I think I should be?</li> <li>• Is there anything I still need to do?</li> <li>• What went well and what didn't go well?</li> <li>• What could I have done better or differently?</li> <li>• What changes do I need to make to improve for next time?</li> <li>• Do I need to develop particular skills that can support my learning e.g. analytical skills, critical thinking skills, note taking, skim reading or research skills</li> </ul>

# Improving your learning

## Learning how to learn

Becoming more self-directed as a learner and choosing how you will approach your learning can also help you to reflect more on the process of learning itself – i.e. how you are learning rather than just what you are learning – and what you need to do to become more effective.

The Campaign for Learning's 5Rs for effective learners highlights the key skills and attributes that support learning how to learn, some of which we have already looked at in this booklet.

There are close links between the Rs and developing one R may support another.

**Readiness** – this shows in your motivation, curiosity, the belief that you can achieve and that you deserve to be successful

### People who are ready to learn:

- Are motivated towards learning (see page 4)
- Assess their preferred learning environment and are in a positive state to learn (see page 5)
- Can set their own learning goals (see page 18)
- Can manage their own learning process (see chapter Get Involved)

### Resourcefulness

– characterised by learning with and from others, learning creatively in different ways, being flexible, applying what you have learned

### Resourceful learners can:

- Assess and make the most of their preferred learning approaches and environment and those of others
- Develop and expand the tools and approaches they use for learning and use different approaches and be creative when needed
- Find and use information including through ICT
- Communicate effectively in different ways
- Apply or use what they have learned or are learning, including in different contexts

**Reflectiveness** – this shows in looking back, improving your learning and performance, and practising

**Reflective learners can:**

- Stop and reflect e.g. ask questions, observe, and look for patterns (see page 18)
- Make connections between what they are learning and other areas of life
- Evaluate their learning (see page 18)
- Use different learning and memory approaches (see page 17)

**Responsibility** – this shows in your self-awareness in learning, taking ownership of your learning, and being able to learn alongside others

**Responsible learners can:**

- Understand and express their own areas of strength and weaknesses in learning
- Take ownership of their own learning and plan and set targets (see page 18)
- Think about others as learners and ask for and offer help when needed
- Work alongside others to learn effectively (see page 18)

**Resilience** – this shows in keeping going, learning under stress, and managing your feelings about learning and the people you are learning with

**Resilient learners can:**

- Draw on self-belief that they can succeed and remain optimistic, even when things are difficult
- Recognise and manage their emotions so they are able to continue with their learning
- Use different learning and memory approaches when stuck

# Useful information

The following organisations and services offer support for learning:

## The Campaign for Learning

The Campaign for Learning's website has information on a range of books and resources that you may find useful. Visit the **Your Learning** section at [www.campaignforlearning.org.uk](http://www.campaignforlearning.org.uk)

Also on the website there are lots of resources and case studies produced by people looking at learning to learn in a range of different environments including reports on how to support other people's learning and your own development. Visit the **Learning to Learn** section for more information.

## Directgov

Directgov is the government's online portal to all its services. The education and learning section offers information and advice on all aspects of learning including funding and course searches. Visit:

[direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/AdultLearning/GetLearning/index.htm](http://direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/AdultLearning/GetLearning/index.htm)

## National Careers Service

The National Careers Service makes it easy for everyone to find accurate information on learning and work, with professional advice to help you make the right choices. It's free of charge and available online, via webchat and over the phone.

To find out more search online for **National Careers Service** or call **0800 100 900**.

## Lifelong Learning Account

A Lifelong Learning Account is a free online service offering you greater flexibility and choice in developing your skills. It provides you with a range of tools, the results of which can be stored in a secure single access point that you can return to and update. To open a Lifelong Learning Account visit:

**[direct.gov.uk/lifelonglearningaccount](https://direct.gov.uk/lifelonglearningaccount)**

## UK online centres

UK online centres aim to empower people to become skilled and confident citizens, at ease with ICT. It works with a range of organisations in partnership to make technology reach and work for individuals, families and communities. The UK online centres network, which includes local centres in libraries, community centres and schools helps people to access computers and use ICT to develop individuals' skills and confidence.

Visit: **[www.ukonlinecentres.com](http://www.ukonlinecentres.com)**

## Local Council Websites

Most Council websites have information on learning opportunities for adults near where you live: you can normally find this under Adult Learning, Lifelong Learning or Education on your Council's site.

## Union Learning

If you are a Union member, ask your Union Learning Rep or visit your Union's website to find out about courses and other learning that you can access through your Union.

## Unionlearn

Unionlearn is the lifelong learning service of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which aims to help Unions offer learning opportunities to their members. It runs the Union Learning Fund, which supports Unions to run projects which offer extra learning to their members.

Visit **[www.unionlearn.org.uk](http://www.unionlearn.org.uk)**

## Ever wondered how you can become a better learner?

This booklet looks at range of activities that can help you maintain motivation and develop strategies and tactics for successful learning.



This handbook has been produced by the Campaign for Learning. The Campaign for Learning is an independent charity which aims to stimulate a love of learning for life that leads to positive change.

For more information on our work visit: [www.campaignforlearning.org.uk](http://www.campaignforlearning.org.uk)

