

ASK: How to Teach Learning to Learn in the Secondary School  
Juliet Strang, Philip Masterson and Oliver Button  
Crown House Publishing, £24.99

Homer Simpson isn't often held up as an educational guru, but I was reminded of something he said when reading this book: 'You're a "but" man. That's the difference between success and failure – the use of the word "but"'.

He's talking about resilience – sticking with things instead of finding excuses to give up – and it's a key element in effective learning. Many of our students think that the main ingredient in determining who does well at school is brain-power: the brainier you are, the better you do.

Experience, as well as research, teaches us otherwise. Memory, the interest of your parents and your resilience – all of these will powerfully affect how successful you will be, whatever your IQ.

This book is part of a trend in some schools to teach students how to learn. It is essentially a handbook of practice from Villiers Park, West London. It therefore has a particular house style and its own jargon. The title itself refers to Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge. Learning is "co-constructed" with students; they develop the "5Rs" of resourcefulness, reciprocity, resilience, responsiveness and reflectiveness; they teach "meta-learning".

All of this makes it a potential candidate for the Guardian's weekly "Bad Science" column which regularly lampoons the pseudo-scientific principles of brain gym and would have a field day with some of the assumptions here.

On the other hand, it's hard not to admire a book which aims to give the skills to all students which are currently possessed only by a high-achieving few, and to equip them with the skills they will need as learners in the real world throughout the rest of their lives.

Its weakness is, as the authors say, that "we are not yet in a position to evaluate fully the outcomes of ASK." (I'd suggest you don't look the school up the performance tables). I also felt that despite the very detailed and intensive lesson plans (perhaps predictably called "learning episodes"), we needed more guidance on how to link the approach into regular lessons. It would be self-defeating if students were being immersed in a learning-to-learn approach in tutor time or PSHE, but then having the pants bored off them in an old-fashioned didactic science lesson.

If you're already a convert to the Campaign for Learning approach, this book will provide many practical examples of how to develop a whole-school approach. For others, it may provide a tantalising but untested taster of what the emphasis on, er, meta-learning might look like.

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