

Training learners to be resilient

You'll notice that many of the ideas in this section are routines. Effective and purposeful routines are helpful to student learning, giving them a powerful sense of familiarity and security. They also demonstrate that a teacher is thorough and believes in the principle that practice makes perfect.

Metaphors for learning – the pit

Choosing the right metaphor for learning can help learners to appreciate that learning necessarily involves struggle and effort. We know that for 'flow' to become embedded into a classroom culture, learners have to engage with high levels of challenge. When teachers describe learning in ways that make the idea of struggle and overcoming obstacles seem both inevitable and motivating, and get their learners to buy into this idea, the chances are they're on the right track.

Guy Claxton uses a metaphor of the brain as a muscle, in that 'its intelligence grows with exercise'. Another educationalist, James Nottingham, uses the metaphor of the learning pit: 'The pit encourages learners not to sit back and wait for the answer to fall into their lap; instead it requires them to think about almost every decision that they make.'

We see 'the pit' as a brilliant metaphor which helps to sell challenge. We ask teachers to innovate on our courses and to come up with their own interpretation of our ideas. In the two examples below – one from a primary teacher and one from a secondary teacher – the message they're giving their learners is that to understand something they'll need to struggle with it first. The struggle may make you feel anxious, they explain, or frustrated, or even confused, but with effort and our support you'll be able to get out of the pit to a new place where clarity and confidence reigns.

The ability to cope with and overcome difficulty and challenge is one of the key elements in becoming a successful learner, not just in school but outside school too. The pit teaches each learner strategies for knowing what to do when they don't know what to do. This is why we love it. When learners successfully emerge from the pit they feel an overwhelming sense of achievement and renewed confidence. They experience that exhilarating 'eureka' moment that says, 'I've worked this out for myself. I've overcome the challenges and found a decent answer.'

Teachers adapt the metaphor of the pit in different ways. Often these become visual metaphors that help learners to realise that new learning will often involve feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that have to be worked through.



Here is Adele Reece's way of introducing the pit to her learners, visually inviting them to understand the metaphor as a core part of their learning. She wants them to feel comfortable that feelings of confusion and anxiety can be overcome, but not without effort. She also offers them a ladder, a metaphor for the skills and strategies she will share with

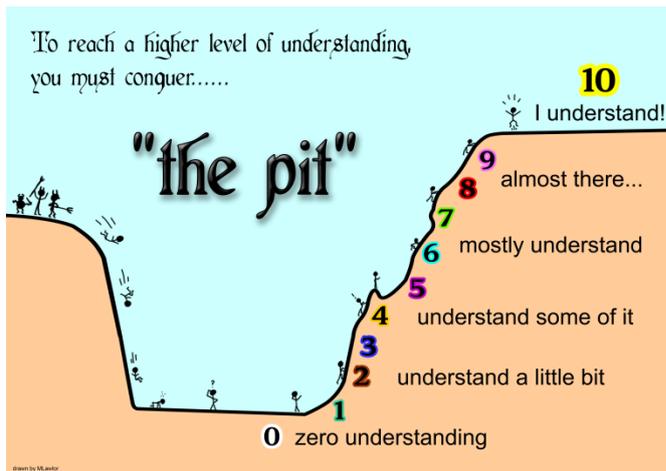
them to support their success. The right-hand side of the pit promises that by taking risks, experimenting, and reflecting, they'll be able to feel amazed, ecstatic and proud.



Photo: Adele Reece



Secondary teacher Mark Lawlor recognises that there are different levels of understanding that learners will go through before their knowledge is secure. The metaphor of the pit helps him and his class to develop and use shared language. It also gives him quick access to feedback about where each of his learners is at any given time, helping him to differentiate and decide what needs to be done and with whom. Often, he'll ask those learners who have mastered the new learning to teach those who are still struggling with it. Mark recognises that those who have just learned something can frequently teach better than their teachers who learned it a long time ago. These teachers have often forgotten that it was difficult once, but new learners know exactly what the tricky bits are! Besides, one of the best ways to know that we have really learned something is to teach it to someone else and get feedback that now they know it too.



Source: Mark Lawlor.

In some classrooms, there's a huge elephant in the room that needs addressing immediately if any quality learning is to take place. This elephant is the fear that some learners have of making mistakes, or the fear that they'll look stupid if they don't get what they're being taught. All the ideas and strategies in this section are really about sending the message to learners that learning will often make them feel uncomfortable and that mistake-making is a necessary part of achieving knowledge and understanding. As learners begin to understand this, and start using successful strategies, they'll be able to deal more effectively with these feelings of fear and discomfort, work through them, and ultimately achieve success beyond their current imagination.