

## Principal's Message – week ending 06 03 20

Dear Families

### How do we learn best? Part 1

As a teacher, this question has always fascinated me and although I have spent a lot of time thinking about it, reading about it and discussing it, I know that there is still a lot more to learn about it.

Here are some of the things I have heard people say over the 30 years I have been in education:

1. 'We all learn in different ways.'
2. 'I learn best when listening to music!'
3. 'I can easily multi-task: I can do my homework whilst doing Instagram and watching Youtube!'
4. 'I'm a visual learner. If you want me to learn anything, don't ask me to read about it, show me a picture!'
5. 'I'm a left-brain person. Don't expect me to understand Maths!'
6. 'I'm just no good at writing. Never have been and never will be!'
7. 'You've either got it or you haven't. Some people are born smart and they're lucky!'

I don't believe any of these are true.

In fact, we all learn in remarkably similar ways. We learn some things by doing: babies will copy their parents' behaviour long before they understand what they are doing, and with much of the activity that involves the application of basic skills, it's practising that counts – how many people have ever learned to ride a bike by reading a book? We learn many things, including much of the learning of subjects at school, through a combination of words and images that in various ways, we are invited to think about. Clearly, thinking is key to learning, which is why questioning is amongst the most common teaching techniques in the world – questions encourage us to think. What is the capital city of France? What is the name of the river that runs through London? See? I bet your mind jumped to the answers for those two questions when you read them.

Statements 2 and 3 above are about multi-tasking. We may **prefer** to listen to music whilst we are trying to learn something, but the music is not helping the learning. In fact, what we are doing is not multi-tasking when we are sending messages on Instagram whilst keeping an eye on Youtube whilst doing that Maths homework - in these situations, what we are actually doing is switching rapidly between tasks. Task-switching does NOT improve the Maths learning. The best we can probably say about task-switching is that if the music on helps our child to stay on task for an extra 30 minutes when otherwise she would have stopped, then maybe that's a price worth paying? However, with complex activities such as those involved in learning new things, the brain likes to focus on one task at a time.

The visual learner, left-brain/right-brain issue goes back to statement 1. It **IS** true that some, perhaps many, people have preferred ways of learning. We know this because when surveyed, people will often express a preference for learning in a particular way. However, **that does not mean that we learn best in that way**. We learn best by thinking hard, by engaging with words and images, through lots of practice, through asking and answering questions and by retrieving our knowledge regularly (i.e. trying to remember things we have tried to learn). Those things are true for everyone.

Statements 6 and 7 bring to mind the nature-versus-nurture debate: you are either born smart or you aren't and if you aren't there's nothing you can do about it; and some people are just better at things

than other people... Well, the last statement is unequivocally true: I play football on Sunday mornings but by any objective measure of performance, Lionel Messi is a far better footballer than I am. My own view on the nature versus nurture debate is that no one truly knows, at the point when a baby is born, whether they are or will be any good at football/Maths/singing/selling/writing/engineering and so on. And even if we did, as a teacher and school leader I would have no control over that. What we DO know, and can measure and prove, is that **you get better at things if you practise them**. Lionel Messi got to where he is through a combination of things, including motivation, but surely a key thing was his deliberate practice: hours and hours and hours, over years and years. As a school leader and as a parent, the key message for young people must be: you get better at things you work hard at over time. Practice probably doesn't make perfect, but it certainly makes better.

Next week, more on how we learn best: specific strategies everyone can use to learn well.

Kind regards

Mark Patterson  
Principal