

James Nottingham's

'The Learning Pit'

Midlothian Council Educational Psychology Service

The Learning Pit = The Learning Challenge = Visible Learning!

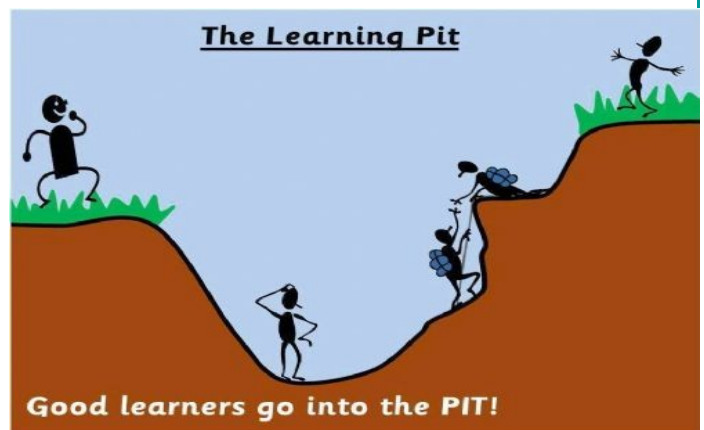
Visual Learning Series
Spotlight 5

James Nottingham came up with the concept of the *Learning Pit* during his time as a teacher in Nottingham in 1999. He found it a helpful analogy to use with students to help them understand why more challenge leads to enhanced learning.

This tool fits in well with the principles of Visible Learning and can be an effective tool to help pupils visualise their learning journey and see the purpose in what they are learning and understand why challenge and effective feedback are important.

Nottingham outlines 7 core values to his concept of the *Learning Pit*, which all have links to Visible Learning:

1. Pupils are generally more interested in learning when others around them are curious and more willing to express uncertainty. The ideas behind Visible Learning and Learning to Learn also promote the idea that making mistakes is ok and not knowing something immediately is fine because these things help us learn.
2. The *Learning Pit* assumes we are all willing to admit, or even draw attention to, our own errors. This approach will help us understand our own strengths and weaknesses in how we learn.
3. Learning is enhanced by participation in guided inquiry.
4. High quality learning comes from making connections and understanding relationships between ideas. Being in the *Pit* compels us to make these links. In terms of Curriculum for Excellence we want to try pupils to have increased transferability of knowledge and skills across curricular areas.
5. Knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes transcend school subject categories. Therefore attention should be given to the transferability and connectedness of what is learnt.
6. Everyone who takes part in lessons involving the *Learning Pit* should aim to be thoughtful, reflective, supportive and reasonable. Nottingham believes that within teaching and learning, personal qualities should not be overlooked and that these kinds of virtues tend to be developed in the *Pit*.
7. Most lessons involving the *Pit* will result in agreement about the 'right' answer but Nottingham says there are occasions where (often in philosophical questions) when no right answer is achievable but this doesn't make the experience any less valid. It is the process of thinking together, reflecting and giving reasons that is at the heart of learning.



The 4 Stages of the Learning Challenge

Stage 1: CONCEPT

The *Learning Pit* begins with a concept. This concept can come from the media, conversations or simply what the pupils are learning about in class (this is a good place to start with younger pupils). As long as most pupils have a basic understanding of the concept then the *Learning Pit* can work.

Stage 2: CONFLICT

This stage can be helpful for older pupils in High School. Once a concept has been chosen, 'cognitive conflict' can then be created in order to help pupils reflect on the issue. Cognitive conflict arises from having at least two opinions, both of which we agree with but that are in conflict with each other. For example, I agree that stealing is wrong but I also think that Robin Hood was a good man.

Stage 3: CONSTRUCT

Giving pupils the opportunity to reason and construct meaning for themselves is the whole point of the *Learning Pit*. After they have struggled in the *Pit* for a while some students will begin to make meaning and some may even have a 'eureka' moment. This idea of pupils struggling together and then beginning to create better answers involves some key features of learning: (1) children help each other to learn; (2) knowledge constructed through social interaction is often far more meaningful than knowledge that is served up on a plate by a teacher/parent; (3) children who 'teach' others are more likely to remember information in the long term than those who are 'taught'; (4) this sort of challenging dialogue often provokes 'Eureka' moments.

Stage 4: CONSIDER

The final stage encourages pupils to reflect on how their thinking has changed, been adapted, assimilated and/or constructed throughout the course of the lesson. Thinking about thinking, or metacognition, is a crucial factor in the learning process. The *Learning Pit* provides a frame of reference to help structure this metacognitive reflection for pupils.

Links with other aspects of Visible Learning:

Growth Mindsets (Carol Dweck) - Working on the *Learning Pit* encourages pupils not to give up with their learning. Looking at the *Learning Pit* helps pupils understand that learning is challenging but we can get better at it (i.e. get out of the *Pit*) by using strategies which can help us.

Language of Learning (John Hattie) & Learning Powers (Shirley Clarke) - The *Learning Pit* is an excellent way to help pupils of all stages to engage with the language of learning which Hattie believes is crucial to helping pupils become 'assessment capable learners'. The *Learning Pit* also complements Shirley Clarke's idea of different 'Learning Powers', e.g. 'Don't give up' and could be used to help explain these Learning Powers in more detail with pupils.

Practical example of using the *Learning Pit* with pupils:

- Primary 4 Problem Solving lessons in Maths
- Art lessons at all stages
- Philosophical lessons with older pupils in High School

For further lesson ideas *complementary* and resources:

<http://www.jamesnottingham.co.uk/about/learning-pit>

Videos:

<https://vimeo.com/117364809>
<https://vimeo.com/128462566>
<https://vimeo.com/130324029>

