



SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S LEARNING

a guide for teaching assistants

LYN OVERALL



SAGE

Supporting Children's Learning

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A Guide for Teaching Assistants

Lyn Overall

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About the Author



Lyn Overall is Principal Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. She is an experienced primary school governor and she works regularly with teachers and children on managing learning in the classroom. She enjoys working with Teaching Assistants on SHU's Foundation Degree, with trainee teachers on primary and secondary routes and on the Playwork degree. She is involved in

HLTA work both on the local steering committee and as an assessor.

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I want to thank the many teachers and teaching assistants and workers in non-school settings who have let me into their worlds; it has been a great pleasure to see them in action, to play and work with the children and young adults that they support, and to listen to their ideas on what works and what doesn't.

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Lyn Overall

How to use this book

What is this book about and who is it for?

Teaching is a complex activity; moment by moment there are decisions to be made in helping those we work with to learn. It would be useful, but very boring, if there were recipes that we could apply, if every time we set out to teach we just had to work through a set of instructions. We may think we are teaching a topic with well defined learning objectives, ‘to know ...; to be able to ...’. But children and young people may be in another place, more concerned about what is going on in their own heads than what you are trying to teach. We are not working with robots, we are working with people. What is in our heads is not necessarily in theirs. What they learn may not be what we intended. This means that even when we think the teaching has gone well, at the same time we nearly always have issues about its successes and failures.

Bearing in mind that the book has been written for teaching teams, I hope that others will also find it interesting. Schools and early years settings are an important part of children’s and young people’s lives, but most learning goes on beyond these places. For me, parents and carers are heroes. Playworkers also undertake sterling work in helping children to learn.

This book is a broad brush attempt to introduce the discipline of psychology as it relates to supporting learning. The psychology introduced here will help to inform the choices we make about what to do in our teaching and to underpin the actions that we take. To do this, though, we need to reflect on our teaching and then put these reflections into practice. To be effective the teaching cycle has to be systematic. In other books, I have suggested, with a colleague, the steps that are involved in the cycle:

1. Identify the cause for your concern – name the issue.
2. Consider the available strategies.

3. Select a strategy.
4. Try it out.
5. Did it work?
6. If yes – keep it in the repertoire.
7. If no – select another strategy and try again (Overall and Sangster, 2003a: 8, 2003b: 8).

Naming the issue, deciding what needs to be addressed, starts by looking for the positives in our teaching, identifying what went well about a session, 'the learners were on task most of the time' – and thinking about the strategies that helped with this: eye contact, verbal praise, careful preparation, the particular things you did on that occasion. At the same time you will have noticed issues that you want to address: a particular student's misbehaviour, some information that was not quite understood by learners, the session ending was not smooth, whatever your careful thinking leads you to want further to consider. There may be many issues you could select for attention. But to try to deal with too many would not be profitable so part of the reflective process is to be selective, to deal systematically with the two or three issues you will choose to address in the next sessions. There will be a range of strategies that you can choose from, either those you have thought about for yourself, or you have seen, discussed with colleagues, or read about. Steps 3 and 4 put your plans into action. Steps 5, 6 and 7 evaluate the success, or otherwise, of your teaching in implementing these strategies. This brief explanation of the cycle of teaching is more than likely what you already do. The psychology described in this book will help you to think about the choices that you make. It should enable you to understand and be able to explain why you select and use one strategy rather than another.

It is our curiosity about how learning happens and how to support this that is behind this book. My students' questions, 'why do they do that?' and 'how do they do that?', have been the basis for what to include and what to leave out. It is their reflections made using the cycle of teaching that have provided the stories that I tell. I think that it is great to see children and young people flourish, and I know that some of that success is down to those who work with them: parents and carers, playworkers and teaching teams. My view about teaching is that, if you enjoy it, then it is the best job in the world. It is seldom boring, often frustrating, and sometimes joyous. My hope is that this book will answer some of the questions you have about development and learning.

Psychology is a fascinating subject but it is often frustrating because the

answers it provides do not directly answer the questions we ask. Like any discipline it has its mysteries, sometimes impenetrable jargon, and methods of working and thinking that seem designed to make outsiders keep their distance. This book is for people who apply psychology to their work, particularly teaching assistants, but also teachers and undergraduates on teaching, education, early childhood and playwork degrees. Teaching assistants working on a daily basis with children and young people are concerned about their progress and aware of the dilemmas in teaching. They are rich in experience and interested in, but often without much previous knowledge about, the discipline of psychology.

Each chapter in this book sets out to ask questions and describe ideas, and ends with a summary of the main points and suggestions for further study. Throughout each chapter there are tasks for you to do and additional information supporting the chapter's themes appears in boxes. The glossary towards the end of the book explains the key terms used.

Study Guide

As you read each chapter you will find tasks that are designed around particular issues. You can successfully complete most tasks on your own, but some are for use in groups.

The further readings from books, sections from books, articles and websites are included at the end of each chapter both because they are accessible and also to take you a little further in the journey of understanding the relationships between action and the underlying theory. Appendix 1 also includes suggestions for further reading and offers you some ideas about what to expect from these books.

Each of the self study sessions outlined below will take between three to four hours to complete.

Suggested self study timetable

Chapter 1	Learning and development	Session 1
Chapter 2	The brain and learning	Session 2
Chapter 3	The senses and learning	Session 3
Chapter 4	BIG theory 1: Skinner	Session 4
Chapter 5	BIG theory 2: Piaget	Session 5
Chapter 6	BIG theory 3: Vygotsky	Session 6
Chapter 7	Managing learning	Session 7
Chapter 8	Managing discipline	Session 8

Session 1: Chapter 1 Learning and development

This chapter sets the scene by exploring theory, the principles of research into human actions and the key issues in learning and development. It asks questions about nativism or empiricism, continuous or discontinuous, stability or change dichotomies.

Task 1.1 Informal theories

This task introduces some feeling for the methods that can be used to research humankind. It also asks you to begin to think about research ethics and some of the main methods used in research. *Follow-up reading:* Keenan (2002), Chapter 3.

Task 1.2 What's inherited and what's not?

This task offers a chance to think about both your genetic heritage and your acquired knowledge. *Follow-up reading:* Keenan (2002), Chapter 4.

Task 1.3 What is development? Evidence from pictures

Finding a sequence of pictures and using these as evidence about growth and development can be supported by reading Keenan (2002), Chapter 2. The second part of the task uses the National Portrait Gallery's website which is an activity that reminds us about the different ideas that there are about childhood. The third part is about what we can learn from media images. *Follow-up reading:* Bee and Boyd (2004), Part 6.

Session 2: Chapter 2 The brain and learning

This chapter provides a brief introduction to some aspects of brain development. You are invited to learn more about the brain's anatomy and to think about the ways in which things like colour, light and sound levels work to support learning. The policies about early learning arise, at least in part, from the work of brain scientists. A general question is, are some settings more conducive for learning than others? 'Hothousing', that is, providing extra stimulating settings and activities for babies and toddlers, is one of the issues. The colour of the walls, the visual impact and the noise level for settings beyond the home could be issues to be addressed by teaching teams.

Task 2.1 Finding out about the brain

The interactive models from the BBC website enables you to explore the anatomy of the brain. Enjoy the quiz, you will find the most possible answers

are in Appendix 2. *Follow-up reading*: Blakemore and Frith (2005), Chapters 2, 11, and 12; Winston (2003), Chapters 1 and 2; on the Canadian government web pages you will find a very interesting paper (Doherty, 1997) which begins to explore brain development, 'Zero to Six: The Basis for School Readiness – May 1997' on www.sdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/sdc/pkrf/publications/1997-002557/page01.shtml

Task 2.2 School is a foreign country

This task invites you to think about where you work. Do light levels, noise levels and other aspects of the setting impinge upon learning?

Session 3: Chapter 3 The senses and learning

This chapter describes how sight and hearing work. Kinaesthesia is introduced. You are invited to think about how the senses may determine a preference to learn in particular ways. The way the senses work together is illustrated by considering some of the complexities that the learner meets in learning.

Task 3.1 Checking sight and hearing

Think about your results of checks in class on sight and hearing. What can be done to include the learners with sight and hearing that is less than adequate for school learning? *Follow-up reading*: Blakemore and Frith (2005), Chapter 5.

Sessions 4, 5 and 6: BIG theory

This introduction to theories about learning and development spans three chapters. Chapter 4 is about behaviourism with an emphasis on operant conditioning as proposed by Skinner. In teaching we use this theory a great deal, we reward successes. Generally this can be thought of as the control approach to learning. In the next two chapters the guidance approaches to learning are introduced. These approaches put the learner in the centre of the picture, seeing teaching teams as the experts who support and guide. Chapter 5 is about the impact of Piaget and cognitive development theories on our teaching. Chapter 6 introduces Vygotsky and social cognitive theory. The summary for all three chapters is provided in Table 6.2.

Session 4: Chapter 4 BIG theories: An introduction; BIG theory 1: Skinner and the behaviourists

Task 4.1 The shaping game

This task provides an introduction to operant conditioning. A group activity and also a great party game, it is a useful way of beginning to think about how theory underpins what we do in classrooms. *Follow-up reading*: Keenan (2002) provides more general information about behaviourism.

Session 5: Chapter 5 BIG theory 2: Piaget and the constructivists

Task 5.1 Piaget's conservation problems

This task offers opportunities to discuss how research is conducted, but to do it you will need to 'borrow' some younger learners. *Follow-up reading*: Bee and Boyd (2004), Chapters 6, 7 and 8; Donaldson (1978) Introduction; Coleman and Hendry (1999), Chapter 3; Smith, Cowie and Blades (2003), Chapters 12, 13 and 15.

Session 6: Chapter 6 BIG theory 3: Vygotsky and social constructivism

Task 6.1 Design a teaching task using Vygotsky's ideas

Use this task as a starting place for thinking further about how we plan for learning. Analyse your solutions by thinking about the match with the summary provided in Table 6.2. *Follow-up reading*: Keenan (2002), Chapter 6.

Task 6.2 What would you have done?

These stories raise some issues about teaching and are preparation for the final chapters. There are no right or wrong answers. Some teaching requires that decisions are made instantly; sometimes we get this right, sometimes not. You may like to identify when you are using the control approach and when the guidance approach to teaching. And you may like to think about the consequences of the approaches that you choose on the learners. When we make the right decision we need to note it for further use; when we do not, we need to do something about it. The cycle of teaching mentioned above can help to make reflection a routine part of practical teaching.

Session 7: Chapter 7 Managing learning

Applying theory to managing learning means that there are many issues to consider. This chapter starts to explore some of them. As you read think about the consequences of using either the control or guidance approach to learning. When do you choose to use one approach rather than the other? Why is that?

Task 7.1 'I know that now'

This task offers the chance to reflect on 'ah ha' moments in our own lives and relate this experience to learning theories. *Follow-up reading:* Fox (2005), Chapters 6 and 8.

Session 8: Chapter 8 Managing discipline

Discipline, the management of good order in school, is considered in this chapter. As you read, think about the consequences of using either the control or guidance approach to issues about conduct. When do you choose to use one approach rather than the other; why is that? Using the reflective cycle of teaching set out on pages xiii and xiv may help you in the tasks.

Review Task 6.2 and Task 7.2.

Task 8.1 What is misbehaviour?

When learners' conduct becomes inappropriate is the point you may wish to consider. I often sing, hum and whistle but I would not do any of those things in the company of other people. One way of thinking about misbehaviour is as an opportunity to raise learner sensitivity about what is acceptable and what is not. The option of doing nothing can be under-used in school. Sometimes it is best to let learners sort things out between themselves.

Task 8.2 Managing an event

Our aim is to help learners to develop self-regulation and self-control. The task offers the opportunity to think carefully about the choices that we make in discipline. If you can, you should discuss what you think with others.

Follow-up to both these tasks: Revisit your school's policies on discipline and anti-bullying, thinking about how the principles they set out fit with the ideas in Chapter 8.