

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF  
SELF MANAGED LEARNING (SML):  
EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH

With Introduction by Dr. Graham Dawes

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[AT THE TIME WHAT IS NOW SELF MANAGED LEARNING  
COLLEGE WAS CALLED 'SOUTH DOWNS LEARNING  
CENTRE'. THE NAME WAS CHANGED AFTER THIS  
REPORT WAS PRODUCED.]

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO SELF MANAGED LEARNING (SML)

Dr Graham Dawes

The Self Managed Learning approach was created by Professor Ian Cunningham in 1978, drawing on his experiences of action learning and independent study and underpinned by Gregory Bateson's theory of levels of learning (Bateson brought the concept of 'learning to learn' to the behavioural sciences).

Self Managed Learning is a structured approach to learning with the following two main elements: the Learning Agreement and the Learning Group.

**Learning Agreement.** The agreement is between the student, who undertakes to pursue their learning goals, and the learning group, who undertake to support them in this. The Learning Agreement comprises the student's answers to five questions:

1. Where have I been?
2. Where am I now?
3. Where do I want to get to?
4. How will I get there?
5. How will I know I have arrived?

The five questions provide a robust framework for goal-setting, bringing the student's attention to past experiences which may be relevant to a present goal, has them examine where they are now in relation to where they want to get to (something often ignored when the focus is too exclusively on the goal), and requires measures by which success will be evaluated (all too frequently missing from even corporate change initiatives).

**Learning Group.** This comprises six students (of roughly the same age) with an adult learning group adviser. The learning group adviser is not a subject expert, their expertise is in learning. Their role within the group, over and above that of any other group member, is to ensure that the structure of the learning group meetings is adhered to and that the focus on learning is maintained. The body of the learning group meeting is where each student has their 'individual time'. During this period they are the focus of the group's attention. The student is able to decide how they will use their time. Frequently, they will be reporting activities undertaken toward one

or more of their goals and the next steps they are contemplating. The other group members will be questioning them on what they have done, what went well, what didn't, how they might approach the matter differently and what they have learnt from their experiences. In considering their next steps they could find themselves challenged by the group if it is felt they are ignoring either potential problems or potential opportunities. A student might also choose to use the group, in their individual time, to help them devise questions for a visit they are undertaking to find out about a possible future career. They might also wish to rehearse something they are going to do so as to get feedback on their performance.

When it is someone else's individual time, students are expected to give their attention and to ask questions if there is something they don't understand, or where they think a student is ignoring an important factor bearing on their plans, perhaps offering assistance if, for instance, they could introduce a student to a relative who is following the very career that student is contemplating. In their individual time, then, a student's proposed plans, or any difficulties they have come upon in pursuing them, can benefit from the different perspectives of the five other students and the learning group adviser.

As this brief sketch of the Learning Agreement and the Learning Group will have made clear, Self Managed Learning encourages in a student not only independence, of both thought and action, but also interdependence - the ability to work with others and to draw on their experience, their knowledge, their perspectives and their assistance and, in turn, to contribute this themselves to their fellow group members. Most students find their learning group a supportive environment, even while it is where they are most likely to be challenged (about how they are thinking about or going about achieving their goals; or their behaviour in the group, come to that).

During an SML programme a learning group may, prompted by a student's learning goals, go out to visit a workplace or higher educational establishment. Alternatively, an exemplar of a particular profession or ability may be invited into the learning group meeting to be interviewed by a student wanting to gain insight into a world of experience which is unknown to them. These are just some of the ways in which students can pursue their learning and these can be valuable in bringing, for

instance, career options to life. All too often, students are making choices about their future with very little knowledge of what these would really mean to them.

Self Managed Learning is not an unstructured approach. Yet, it does allow a lot of freedom to the student. This may seem contradictory in that educational thinking tends to see a conflict between Structure and Freedom. We have touched on some of the structure in an SML programme. Every student is required to create a Learning Agreement and every learning group meeting is organized around the students' individual time slots. However, the choice of learning goals lies with the student as does the choice of how they wish to use their individual time; the only restriction is that they do have to have learning goals and they do have to use their individual time for something relevant to their learning.

The Self Managed Learning process operates in a different way to that found, typically, in the school context. While the process supports students in pursuing their specific learning goals the aim goes beyond those goals. After all, it is obvious that many things we learn today will become obsolete tomorrow. The main aim is to help students to become active learners.

Within most school activity, the process is one in which the teacher takes the initiative in terms of what is to be learnt during a particular lesson and how it is to be learnt. By removing the need for students to initiate the What and How of their learning, this can engender a dependence on the teacher and a general passivity in relation to learning. In later life, learning is rarely provided on this basis.

For roughly twenty-five years, Self Managed Learning programmes were designed for adults working in organisations, and not for school-age students. Programmes took place within single organisations or were public programmes with participants from different organisations, and the latter were often for post-graduate qualifications up to Masters level. During this time we frequently noticed participants dealing with issues which could well have been dealt with during their school years. For instance, a manager in an organisation finds he is having difficulty with team-working. Outside of the sports arena, this is not a focus of school activity; on the contrary, the tendency is to curtail interaction between students in the classroom. Yet the ability to

get on with other people and to work with them interdependently is valued by organisations.

Such instances led to a desire to contribute to the provision for students of school-age. We also found that many in organisations had maintained their rather passive approach to learning. This was seen in the tendency, when faced with the identification of development needs, to expect that there would be a course they could take to address them. Automatically seeking the closest thing to the classroom demonstrated a lack of confidence in their ability to learn under their own steam. It was this that our SML programmes in organisations were designed to address and we thought we may be of greater service by also addressing it earlier in life.

This brings us to the pivotal point for every learning and development professional: you cannot do only one thing. The learning process is always 'teaching' something else other than the intended content. Learning happens on different levels at the same time. As we have observed, the focus of a subject teacher might be on the content of their lesson while there is another learning, that of dependence and passivity, taking place at another level. That learning of dependence and passivity is operating at a higher level of generalization and, therefore, attaches to learning itself rather than to the specifics of the lesson's content. It is also more abstract and much less amenable to conscious recognition. A student might be able to repeat the subject content of the lesson, but they will not be able to tell you what they have learnt at this higher level. Additionally, in our organisational work we were confronted with the fact that, while much of the subject content of the school years faded over time, these more abstract learnings tended to remain.

Taking account of these theoretical considerations means being cognizant of the higher level learnings likely to arise from whatever learning process is being proposed. In the case of Self Managed Learning, the requirement that the student identify their own learning goals (rather than these being handed down by someone else) and to figure out how they will go about achieving them (rather than this being decided by someone else) enhances the likelihood of the student developing as an active learner, someone who can self-manage their own learning. Of course, what might at first appear as wonderful freedoms can be quite a challenge when students

are faced with responding to them. Thus the importance of the support of the learning group in helping group members to think through their choices and enlarge their sense of the possibilities open to them.

Nicola Sankey's compilation, of research studies and evaluations of Self Managed Learning programmes in schools, captures the student experience of SML. It addresses the challenge that comes up when speaking to school teachers of this approach, namely, "What evidence do you have that this works and that it has any beneficial effect beyond the length of the programme?"

(Parenthetically, such a call does not necessarily signify a willingness to be persuaded by such evidence; it is often the resort of those seeking a justifiable excuse for dismissing the matter.)

Interestingly enough, the question above was brought up within a group of teachers and learning assistants which happened to include a teacher from one of two schools featured in a DVD on our work. That teacher had not been involved in the programme and was at the meeting having heard about SML and being interested in learning more. In response to another teacher putting the question to us, he mentioned that he had had a career discussion with one of the students shown in the DVD. Until having just seen him in the DVD he had not realized this student had been part of an SML programme and he now said this explained something which had puzzled him about their conversation. Typically, he found students ill-prepared to discuss their future. Even those who had some idea of what they wanted to do usually had thought little about what would be involved and what it would require of them. This student had surprised him by arriving fully prepared and well-able to articulate his plans for his future. He had decided he wanted to pursue a career in music. However, he understood his parents' concern over the uncertainty of such a profession and had decided also to undertake other qualifications which he could fall back on if life as a musician proved too unreliable. The teacher took this as evidence that there had been longer-term effects from the SML programme.

This was doubly interesting in that the detail of these future plans had not been something the student had worked upon during his time on the SML programme. As

with all students, he had been encouraged to think about his future and what he wanted of it but, at that time, his primary focus had been on the much more immediate goal of passing one of his music grade exams. Consequently, his future plans, which had so impressed the teacher, were not a result of assistance he had received in the learning group but of what he had gained from the process and been able to take forward into his life after the programme.

That the Self Managed Learning approach is not suitable for every student is an argument that has often been made. It sounds reasonable and it is surely the case that different approaches to learning will appeal to different types of student. However, the larger context is worthy of some consideration. Those who find SML more difficult tend to be those who like to be told what they need to do to succeed and are disturbed by the uncertainty of a process where there are no pre-existing goals and no laid down paths to achieving them. Such students can often be highly successful within the school system, where both the What and How of learning is decided by others, and such success can be both reassuring and gratifying, thus rather difficult to relinquish.

The bigger issue is that the world is one of increasing uncertainty and the students of today can be expected to be living their working lives with professional and personal uncertainties beyond those known by today's adults. Resilience in the face of uncertainty will, therefore, be a highly valued quality in any currently conceivable future. The question then becomes how the young people of today will come to develop that quality.

An anecdote might be illustrative here. One learning group included a girl considered one of the brightest stars of the school. She was so academically able that, even while taking a large number of GCSEs, she was expected to get A stars in all her subjects. Yet this was the student about whom the learning group adviser had the greatest concern; the very one the school was least concerned about. She found it extremely difficult to contemplate her future. She had no idea what she wanted to do. She had no basis, in being better able in one thing than another, for a decision about a profession that she would find fulfilling. In her case, it was less for the uncertainties of the future that she needed to develop the qualities of a self-managed learner but



because the process of becoming more self-managing is one in which we get to know ourselves better and this gives us a better basis on which to evaluate our choices.

What this illustrates is that even those who do best within the school system could benefit from the SML approach. This is much less obvious than that it can give another chance to those whom the current system does not serve.

Hopefully, the reader will find much more to consider in the report that follows.

## **The Student Experience of Self Managed Learning: evidence from research**

*“ It’s not strict learning ... like having to learn a subject you might get bored of... you learn what you want to learn” (student, year 13)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The above quote refers to a student’s description of his recent experience of Self Managed Learning (SML). He is one of over one hundred students in the South of England who have been involved in a learning programme which offers an alternative approach to schooling. Originally designed for adults, SML has more recently been adopted with young people through the work of the South Downs Learning Centre (SDLC) and under the supervision of its creator, Professor Ian Cunningham. Over the last four years the South Downs Learning Centre has worked with students from both traditional and alternative education backgrounds and it now has premises, which will allow a small number of young people to engage in SML on a daily basis. The approach is a new concept in education and although it has been ‘rigorously evaluated’ (Centre for Self Managed Learning, 2000 p3) in adult contexts, there has been little research into SML with children. Interest in the programme is growing (SDLC, 2006; 2007) and this project aims to meet the demand for relevant research.

SML epitomises personalised learning, reflecting current interest in Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and the recent government review on Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (QCA, 2006). It offers a way forward for schools interested in these issues by providing opportunities for students to learn beyond prescribed curricula in a way that best suits their individual needs and interests. Working in small groups with a Learning Group Adviser, the students are required to answer five questions relating to their learning experiences, abilities and aspirations to identify what they want to learn and what they need to do in order to learn it (SDLC, 2004). The answers to these questions form the basis of an individual learning agreement in which goals, learning methods and criteria for success are proposed by each student. Other group members contribute to the formulation of this document by

discussing the thoughts and intentions that underpin it and agreeing to support one another in the pursuit and accomplishment of their goals.

I was first introduced to the work of the SDLC when I attended a presentation made by Ian Cunningham and his team. The lecture supported a 2<sup>nd</sup> year module of a BA (Hons) Education degree which considered the nature of epistemology and the pedagogical implications of different approaches to knowledge and learning. SML was presented as an alternative to the traditional education system, placing emphasis on learning method rather than content. The approach is based on a 'process curriculum' (Cunningham, 2006 p70), designed to develop skills of self-management and lifelong learning.

Personal interest in the programme and a wish to gain experience as an educational researcher led to my involvement in a research project organised by the SDLC under the patronage of the Centre for Educational Innovation (Fielding, 2007). The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience of SML and to draw out some common themes relating to the benefits of the programme. The evidence that is presented in this report derives from a range of evidence taken from interviews with students, learning advisers, parents and teachers as well as written and video feedback.

## RESEARCH STRATEGY

The overarching question 'What is the student experience of SML?' provided a focus for the empirical research and the aim was to address the following questions:

1. What do students like/dislike about SML?
2. What do schools like/dislike about SML?
3. How is it beneficial to students?
4. What do students learn?
5. Have there been any unintended or unexpected outcomes?

## **EMPIRICAL RESEARCH EVIDENCE**

This report encompasses the comments of over 40 SML students, aged between 7 and 16 who have come from both school and home-educated backgrounds. Their feedback is supported by comments from parents, Learning Group Advisers and schoolteachers who have had direct involvement with the work of the South Downs Learning Centre. The evidence ranges from direct quotes recorded at pre-arranged interviews to evaluation reports. It encompasses the written work of primary school children, student group evaluations in secondary schools and film footage of students talking about their experience of SML.

Similar issues and opinions were raised and there was, perhaps surprisingly, little disparity between the differing age groups and educational contexts in this survey. This research revealed a number of common themes concerning what was liked about SML and what had been learned from the programme and the following quotes are presented with these themes in mind. Reference is also made to occasions when SML went less well. The breadth and scope of this data offers a rich insight into the work of the South Downs Learning Centre and the outcomes and successes of SML with young people to date.

### What did the students like about SML?

#### **1. A different way of learning**

The structure of SML provides students with an opportunity to learn in alternative ways and to adopt a different approach to that offered by traditional schooling. The participants identified the different approach as a positive aspect of the programme. Students from mainstream schools particularly welcomed the opportunity to work outside their daily routines and many welcomed the holistic and person-centred approach:

Student comments:

*"It was quite lucky that I accepted to be in this group because I think it's the best thing I've done in school really. And I've learnt a lot more through this process than I have from maybe like the last year and a half in school"*  
(student, year 10)

*"it was different in the respect that in our curriculum you don't really get the chance where you just get to sit down and talk about yourself and hear what others are doing for an hour or so"* (student, year 10).

*"I think SML is amazing and it is a fun way of learning"* (primary school student)

*"It was too short....I wish it didn't have to stop. We should do it all the time and everyone should it!"* (student, year 9).

*"in SML you talk to adults as equals and it helps you with how you think about learning"* (home educated student, age 13)

*"this proved extremely beneficial as it enabled us to recognise our aims and abilities"*  
(student, year 10)

*"it is very beneficial... you get to go out and find out about work... to get out of lessons to do different things instead of doing the same things all the time"* (student, year 10)

*"it was a very supportive process . SML went through each stage with me from GCSEs to entering college"* (home educated student, age 16)

*"SML is wicked! It's really fun and we learn lots too. I almost always learn something new and I really enjoy it too...we always do fun learning to make us enjoy learning and it makes us know more"* (primary school student)

*"I didn't like school... still don't really... but I would if we could do more of this"*  
(student, year 9)

*"It was easier than sitting down in a classroom and listening to the teacher- we got to discuss things"* (student, year 11).

*"You could be creative... it had a feel good factor"* (student, year 9)

*"we are learning but we don't know it"* (primary school student)

*"they want you to find a love for something and then explore all the avenues"* (home educated student, age 16)

*“We all had fun doing these groups together and have all learned a lot from them”  
(student, year 7)*

*“we had to talk about what we had done or were going to do during the week, it wasn't ‘you are going to do this’ “ (home educated student, age 13)*

*‘Its just being able to say what you want and being actually asked about what you want to learn rather than being told what they think you should learn’.* (student, year 9)

*“[school] was overcrowded; there was loads of destructive behaviour which was the opposite to SML learning groups where students were creative. The lessons were to pass exams and were not about learning” (home educated student, age 13)*

*“ all in all I think this has been a very good learning experience for all of our group. We all learned and had a tremendous amount of fun over the last few weeks”  
(student, year 7)*

*“we got to discuss a lot more of what we actually want to do in the future and ways in which we could do that” (student, year 10)*

*“Well, basically it's just like chatting about what you want to do when you grow older and goals of where you want to get to and working out how you are going to achieve those goals”. (student, year10)*

*“it just helps you plan the steps you are going to take to actually achieve your targets”. (student, year 10)*

*“It was quite hard for the people who were trying to explain to us exactly what it was, because sometimes when you describe it, it sounds a bit, sort of, loose and tenuous. But once you actually get into the groups you actually realize how you can benefit from it. It is really beneficial for each of the students involved.” (student, year 10)*

*“it's a great idea and it should be put into action in schools, because it's the kind of thing that young people need”. (student, year 10)*

*“it was nice that it wasn't all planned out for us because that gave us a chance to actually use it for our own advantage. .. we actually said this is what we want to do and this is what we think is going to be helpful so that just gave us the chance to really get a lot out of it because we had control over it”. (student, year 10)*

Adult comments:

*“they are actually becoming the shapers of their own future” (secondary school assistant principle)*

*“They set their own targets where as in the classroom it is the teachers setting the targets” (secondary school assistant principle)*

*“The focus is on learning but it is not about going to a subject lesson and finding out about something external to you...they are not limited to what they talk about ...and it gives them opportunities to hear about other people...It gives them another way of looking at the world.” (secondary school deputy principle)*

*“It allows them to see that learning takes place not just in the classroom but in a whole range of environments” (secondary school assistant principle)*

## **2. Mixed Groups**

The SDLC recommend that SML be used with mixed ability groups as they believe the programme has the potential to benefit all children. Schools have tended to use the programme to target specific groups but comments from students and Learning Group Advisers in schools supported the South Downs Learning Centre approach:

Student comments:

*“I think we should mix the groups because different types of people can be good inspiration for each other” (student, year 10)*

*“I don’t know what sort of group of people they worked with in other schools but, as I said, in our school it was Gifted & Talented. But I really think it could benefit a variety of other people” (student, year 10)*

Adult comments:

*“I think it could benefit any student. And adults as well.” (secondary school assistant principle)*

On occasions when groups with mixed needs and abilities were run in schools the benefits were clear. Learning Group Advisers commented on how this approach had allowed students to demonstrate skills and qualities that had previously been unrecognised. In one secondary school the effects of placing boys labelled ‘challenging’ with girls who were lacking in confidence was thought to be successful. The boys seemed to rise to the challenge of helping and the girls draw confidence from the group discussions that ensued:

Adult comments:

*"The boys were so sweet helping [student's name]... you really do see them in a new light" (school learning group adviser, working with year 9s)*

*"If some of the teachers could have seen, they would have seen a very different side to how he is in class" (school learning group adviser, working with year 9s)*

### **3.Relaxed approach**

Participants said they liked the relaxed atmosphere created in the groups. Learning Group Advisers, senior school staff and parents all felt that students responded well to the less pressurised environment and school students considered the approach a treat compared to the constraints of the normal classroom. SML provides each student with time to explore personal issues and many recognised this as a benefit of working in small groups. Being given time to talk was a key feature for the students and many in traditional settings reported this as something they rarely experienced:

Student comments:

*"Today, at school... You do get mentoring sessions but they are rushed, like ten-minute slots, so it's nice to just sit down and reflect on what's going on at the moment. " (student, year 10)*

*"you had time to talk without being interrupted" (student, year 9)*

*" 20 minutes to talk about ourselves...we're never allowed to do this in class" (student, year 11)*

*"a chance to step back and reflect" (student group evaluation, year 10)*

*"you get to talk about things that you can't talk about in the classroom and the teacher listens to everything everyone has to say"(student, year 10)*

*"you're meant to get opportunities to discuss these things in form time but you're lucky if you get the chance" (student, year 11)*

*"we have the chance to discuss individual problems that we may have, this can be anything, not just educational" (student, year 10)*



*“it was taking a little time out of school and having a chance to just sort of reflect and to have a less strenuous and stressful time to talk about these things and to make yourself less stressed about them” (student, year 10)*

*“you usually get talked at [in class], rather than getting to talk” (student, year 10)*

*“people actually listen to you. It wasn’t somebody else trying to push their ideas upon you” (student, year 10)*

#### **4.The role of the Learning Group Adviser**

The informal approach taken by the Learning Group Advisers was also welcomed. Their role is to facilitate and mentor students and not to control or impart knowledge in the way of a teacher. The Learning Group Advisers become members of the group whose role is to maintain focus and assist students by asking questions, offering advice and keeping track of progress. This was appreciated and for many the relationship that was built between the Learning Group Adviser and the students was key to making the experience more enjoyable:

Student comments:

*“it was like a friend relationship really... you could talk to her about anything and she would advise you on what to do” (student, year 11)*

*” you didn’t get shouted at, they weren’t strict and stern like a teacher” (student, year 9)*

*“they were really friendly and easy to work with...they took time to talk to us” (student, year 11)*

*“It was a very friendly atmosphere...we had a laugh” (student, year 13)*

*“cool facilitator” (student group evaluation, year 10s)*

*“people actually listen to you” (student, year 10).*

*“They’re not biased in any way” (student, year 10)*

*“Yeah, these ones, they’re just completely neutral” (student, year 10)*

*“whatever you tell them they have an open mind about it” (student, year 10)*

## 5. Feeling safe and sharing ideas

The learning groups involved in this study agreed to adhere to a confidentiality clause and this was an aspect that the students particularly liked. It helped the group to bond as a team and created an unthreatening environment in which they could discuss personal issues. A school Learning Group Adviser remarked that they were 'amazed' at what the students were willing to share and the groups appeared to develop a caring/sharing ethos that many welcomed:

Student comments:

*"I talked more to the people in the group...they didn't judge you"*  
(student, year 11)

*"you get to share your own ideas. It's fun!!!"* (primary school student)

*"you weren't laughed at whenever you said anything... normally they would gossip a bit"* (student, year 11)

*"the confidentiality clause was good – it helped to build the team"* (student, year 9)

*"we are like a family"* (primary school student, year 3)

*"we share our secrets with the group"* (primary school student, year 3)

*"it would be good for people who aren't very popular. They could make friends and talk to people"* (student, year 9)

*"it was really open and because it was confidential we could talk about anything...in a classroom there are things that you cant talk about"* (student, year 9)

*"because we were with our friends we could more openly discuss what we were going through where as if we were with our parents there would be things we wouldn't want to discuss "* (student, year 10)

*" we could all bounce off each other with our different ideas and things."* (student, year 10)

*"People never usually sit down and say, "Oh, I'm struggling with this," or "I need to do this but I don't know how." So you could talk about things that you wouldn't talk about even if you were just in conversations with your friends."* (student, year 10)

*“you find things out about people that you never realized before. The interests people have. Which can benefit you, as well... So it’s about sharing information as well.” (student, year 10)*

*“you know little things about them now that you wouldn’t get even if you were just friends with them” (student, year 10)*

*“ It was good because it was all more personal. You didn’t feel that there was anything you couldn’t say. It doesn’t stop you from saying personal things. There’s a secrecy rule that we weren’t allowed to say each other’s goals and things outside of the group” (student, year 10).*

*“Career isn’t usually a thing you talk about with your friends, so to be able to talk about it . . . and it’s interesting to hear what other people want to do with their lives and to get their input on your plans” (student, year 10)*

*“ it’s good to hear about what is going on in other people’s lives too because you can learn from other people” (student, year 10)*

*“It was quite inspirational listening to other people’s goals” (student, year 10)*

*“it was really interesting to hear what others were doing and how they were managing” (student, year 10)*

Adult comments:

*“[student’s name] told the group about a tragedy that had happened when he was younger...they were really supportive and I think it was a relief for him” (School Learning Group Adviser, working with year 8s)*

*“this is particularly important for boys who tend not to talk about personal issues with their friends” (school learning group adviser, working with year 10s)*

## **6.Collaborative Learning**

Being encouraged to share ideas and help one another was a concept the school students were largely unfamiliar with, however they found the practice of collaborative learning an enjoyable and useful experience. The approach promoted teamwork, respect and interdependent learning:

Student comments:

*“we compared our ideas and helped each other...I liked working together; we could use one another’s opinions rather than just one” (student, year 11)*

*“sharing made tasks easier” (student, year 13)*

*“we work together” (primary school student, year 3)*

*“she was allowing us to help each other, which we’re not usually allowed to do” (student, year 11)*

*“some of the other members of the group might have contacts or resources that they might be able to supply to the individual” (student, year 10)*

*“Other people would give us their contacts and other things they thought you could do.” (student, year 10)*

*“One of my goals was Grade 5 Music Theory and it just happened that someone else [student’s name] had passed hers and was able to give me some help with where I was struggling” (student, year 10).*

*“her goals were mostly to do with her youth arts group and she got lots of advice on that and it really helped her to talk about it because talking about it made her think about it more, and she could organize it “ (student, year 10)*

*“When you talk about it you are actually thinking about it a lot more” (student, year 10)*

*“It’s quite helpful. Because there’s a large group of us. If one person says they want to know about computing, my brother is quite knowledgeable about computers and I can put forward that and they can gain something from that by talking to my brother” (student, year 10)*

*“someone else wanted to work in an office so we went to an office and saw what office life was like. And I got to have that opportunity as well and it’s very helpful to have more opportunities really’ (student, year 10)*

*“We all helped each other in our learning group. From one person looking at a problem or a situation, they might not be able to see the easiest solution and with just someone else’s input into it you can have an easier solution just because someone else comes at it from a different frame of mind” (student, year 10)*

*“It’s good because we can all encourage each other”(student, year 10)*

Adult comments:

*“Other people in the group are supporting her ...giving ideas on how she could find information out. They are also offering to do the seeking out of information for her. So they have a commitment to her not to let her down” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with yr 8s)*

*“Although each individual student sets their own goals, because they are a peer group of a similar age some of the goals often are relevant to other members of the group as well. For instance, time keeping...That’s relevant to the whole learning group and they were all making contributions today about addressing that with regard to things like organising homework and making sure they have plenty of time for social events, etc” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with yr 8s)*

*“[student’s name] decided that he felt quite uncomfortable doing all the questioning for himself and the group were very happy to take turns and to support him with that by asking questions as well” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with yr 8s)*

*“The group gave support to the interested student as they formulated useful questions to ask the coach” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

*“the rest of the group were completely involved and ‘on task’ even though they had not been particularly interested in the experience other than to support [student’s name]” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

*“constructive feedback was given by the group...which furthered the potential learning experience as self and group evaluation took place” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

*“The group realised they needed to work together in order to achieve or ‘get things done” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

*“the students were on task for longer periods of time and interacted with increasing competence” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

How was it beneficial to students and what did they learn?

## **1. Making connections**

Schools were impressed by the way the learning groups had helped students to make connections between their work and their futures. Some students were

introduced to working professionals in areas that interested them and some were taken to local businesses and colleges to demonstrate the opportunities that lay ahead and to allow them to ask questions about how they might pursue their goals. The students were required to envisage the possibilities for themselves and to consider ways in which they could make their goals more achievable. Students and adults both recognised this as a benefit of the programme:

Student comments:

*“They organised a day trip for us to go to Sussex University, which was really good because until then I hadn’t seen universities. And if you don’t actually get to visit any universities it’s quite daunting. Just to go there it really got me excited about going to university rather than dreading it. I just saw all the people there enjoying themselves and lots of other parts of the university you don’t really think about. And I’m just really excited about going to university” (student, year 10)*

*“we have been able to prioritise our lives and work out what helps us to get there and what doesn’t” (student, year 10)*

*“It was good, I enjoyed it - really helpful for your future career” (student, year 11)*

*“they’ve got an incentive to work hard to get what they want” (student, year 10)*

*“I love SML because I get to think about my future. It is so fun and I enjoy it so much. SML is BRILL” (primary school student)*

*“found out how to get into architecture” (student, year 9 )*

*“made me think what is needed for a degree” (student, year 9)*

*“Building up contacts for the future” (student group evaluation, year 10s)*

*“found out basic things I needed – what ‘A’ levels” (student, year 9)*

*“.it helps us on to what we’re doing in the near or far future” (primary school student)*

*“it helps us to decide what job we might have and how” (primary school student)*

*“We went to Sussex University...to find out what was there and what we would need to do to do, that sort of thing” (student, year 7)*

*“this learning group experience has helped us think about our futures, this includes further education and possible careers” (student, year 10)*

*“this helps us to decide on something we want to do rather than doing something we don’t want to do” (student, year 10)*

*“it gave me more enthusiasm about [special needs teaching] as a career and there might now be an opportunity for work experience” (student, year 10)*

*“it will help to prepare for when we are choosing our A levels” (student, year 10)*

*“[Student’s name] wanted to be a cricket coach and we thought of the different goals in between that he could do to get to that point – coaching exams and things” (student, year 10)*

*“it stops you dreaming about your goals and you think more realistically about your life” (student, year 10)*

*“just thinking about things sub-consciously doesn’t always get things done. Once you start to talk and start to open up, listen to others, you start to realise things about your life that you didn’t before” (student, year 10)*

*“they sort of gave me ways of getting in contact with people to get work experience in Exeter and I’m going down there in the Summer to have the week with some environmental scientists.” (student, year 10)*

*“ It helped me think of my future much more because before I wasn’t really thinking of outside school and things. And now I am really deciding what I should do after my A Levels and things. I got lots of advice from [the Learning Group Adviser] and the others in the group, what they think I should do and things” (student, year 10)*

*“You definitely start to think outside of school. You can keep up your hobbies and things as well as your subjects at school, but also think about your future. (student, year 10)*

*“joining the learning group helped me plan my future really, and to look into what I plan to do with my life, career, choices I want to make and if I hadn’t have been in the learning group I would probably have continued not to plan ahead. By looking through and planning for what I want to do in the future it kind of reassures you on what you’re doing” (student, year 10)*

Adult comments:

*“[student’s name] would have been excluded if it hadn’t been for the group. They took him to the skills centre...and that gave him a vision of what he could do...it was really beneficial’ (school learning group adviser, working with year 9s)*

*“[The Learning Group Adviser] took them to a garage in the high street so they could see that they needed ICT skills, communication skills, English...it became real to them...they had something concrete to work towards... They have probably been told that by parents and teachers but thinking it for yourself is something totally*

*different ...In the group they had time to reflect on it for the first time and it really brought it home to them” (secondary school deputy principle)*

## **2. Raised confidence and personal awareness**

A universal outcome for the students was raised levels of confidence, self-esteem and personal awareness. SML encouraged an exchange of thoughts and ideas which helped them to develop a deeper understanding of who they are, and what they need to learn in order to achieve their goals. It was also evident that developing a wider awareness of the experiences and perspectives of those around them had helped in this process. The students learned to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and to recognise what they needed to build on. School teachers noted that raised confidence levels had positively affected the ways in which some went on to approach their daily schoolwork:

Student comments:

*“It changed the way I think about myself. I used to be big headed and thought I knew it all but now I know I don’t. Talking to others in the group made me realise there’s lots of stuff I don’t know” (student, year 9)*

*“Seeing what other people want to do has made me more aware of my options...it’s all about yourself really and it really helped me” (student, year 11)*

*“It helped me to realise what I could and couldn’t achieve” (student, year 11)*

*“I’m now more aware of helping others” (student, year 9)*

*“I learned what I’m capable of” (student year 9)*

*“it’s fun!!! It makes me more confident” (primary school student)*

*“ I had known some of the people in my group since I was 5 years old but I realised there was a lot you didn’t know about people just from looking at the surface” (student, year 10)*

*“ I’m much more looking into the future rather than living sort of day-to-day. Before I was just thinking about what homework I had to hand in and stuff like that. And although that’s important you’ve got to look at the bigger picture in your life and plan ahead and make sure that what you’re starting off to do is actually what you really want to do and it’s important to decide that from the very start rather than get started on something you may later regret” (student, year 10)*



Adult comments:

*“ they are starting to realize the possibilities because they are almost endless, within reason, of what they can achieve. That’s a tremendous asset if you can get in touch with that early on in life, that life has tremendous potential, lots of possibilities’.* (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 8s)

*“All students could benefit from a bit of ‘ me’ time...it improves confidence and self esteem which ultimately makes schooling a more enjoyable and successful experience”* (school learning group adviser, working with year 9s)

*“The groups make them feel they’re not on their own –that will help them to build themselves up again... it has a knock-on effect in the classroom’* (school learning group adviser, working with year 9s)

### **3. Raised motivation**

There were clear examples that the programme had a positive impact on students’ motivation to learn. This was observed in numerous ways and encompassed a range of outcomes. The process of encouraging students to think about what was important to them and the impetus on teamwork and discussion appeared instrumental in this. In addition to this, the concept of students controlling and monitoring their own learning also appears to have raised their motivation. Some explained how they had completed tasks on a voluntary basis because they did not want to let the group down; others explained how having a personal stake in the learning made the work more worthwhile.

Student comments:

*“You didn’t have to do the work at home but everyone did...you did it for the group’* (student, year 9)

*“we could chose whether we did the tasks or not...we did the tasks because we wanted to not because we had to or because we might fail an exam or something”* (student, year 9)

*“you’ve got someone to answer to but its different from when its coming from a parent or teacher...working in this type of group its coming from yourself but you also had a bit of encouragement behind you”* (student, year 10)

*“I only had three weeks to the next meeting and I didn’t have any excuses, I needed to feed back to the group in order to progress”* (student, year 10)

*“they actually said, well, why don’t you do this. Instead of just thinking about what you could do in the future, why don’t you go to do it now” (student, year 10)*

*“In a classroom it’s very much like, you may not want to know about what they are teaching you. And, generally, if there’s something that I don’t really want to learn about I don’t pay attention and I just muck around and try and do something different. I find I work a lot better with the things that I want to do” (student, year 10).*

*“I think I’d say just to take it on yourself. Rather than waiting until it happens in your future do it now so you know it can happen. Or, at least, get some experience so you don’t end up doing something and, when you’re doing it, realize you don’t want to be doing it.” (student, year 10)*

#### **4. Improved behaviour**

As with raised motivation the effects relating to improved behaviour in school were numerous. Self-management and peer assessment were thought to be key factors in the improving behaviour observed and both Learning Group Advisers and students reported instances in which the students had managed themselves to great effect. The school Learning Group Advisers recalled occasions on which they were surprised by how well the students accepted comments from each other and one student explained how the group developed a mutual respect for one another, which made the peer management acceptable:

Student comments:

*“you had your name on the board and if you did something wrong like swearing or kicking you would get a tick against your name, and then another tick and then another. Then he would have to leave the room and you would have a vote: ‘do you reckon he should get kicked out?’, and then if we voted ‘yes’ he would have to go. But after a while no one even had their name on the board” (student, year 10)*

*“We helped one person whose goal was to improve their behaviour in class...they told us about situations and we discussed it and gave them advice” (student, year 9)*

Adult comments:

*“The group were faced with a number of difficult situations e.g. a member of the group ‘snatching’ fruit and water at snack time. The group dealt with the situation very positively as the participant agreed to the decision of the group” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

*“The huge value is ideas from their peers...they would say ‘shut-up’ and he would listen far more” (school learning group adviser, working with year 8s)*

*“One group member was chewing gum and stickers were snatched. Again the group used its power to regulate the behaviour by challenging it according to the ground and school rules, then offering alternative suggestions on how the person could handle it better” (South Downs Learning Centre learning group adviser, working with year 3s)*

*“One girl had an issue about her behaviour in class and for the first time ever she sat down and listened to what some of the other kids felt about her behaviour....The classic comment, which you hear every day “that teacher hates me!” ...the kids said, well in fact that’s not the case, this is what happens, this is how we see you respond - it does have quite an impact” (school learning group adviser, working with year 10s)*

## **5. Developed Skills**

The participants cited a range of skills that had been learned or developed in the learning group process. Improved planning, problem solving, research and team-playing skills were mentioned as well as goal setting, however the most common developments quoted were improved abilities to communicate, listen and interact effectively with others. Primary school children celebrated their learning by designing certificates for each other in recognition of their achievements:

Student comments:

*“I am more confident at giving advice and better at listening and communicating with people” (student, year 9)*

*“I learned how to set goals for myself” (student, year 11)*

*“Peers have commented to me that I am able to communicate with others, especially tutors at college” (SML student now at college)*

*“it will help when I want to find out about things in the future” (student, year 11)*

*“it will help with study skills when I get to Uni as we won’t be given much help”(student, year 13)*

*“we learned how to help ourselves and each other” (student, year 9)*

*“Although I didn’t actually achieve my goal ... I learned how to find out about learning” (student, year 13)*

*“developed ability to find things out” (student, year 9)*

*“we gained confidence speaking in a group” (student, year 10)*

*“ a list of things we got from our learning group... taking action, exploration, targets, motivation, strengths and weaknesses, development, priorities, past, present and future, achievements” (student, year 9)*

*“the main thing the learning group helped me to do was taking action on things and not just thinking about it... I had to pick up the phone and talk to a complete stranger which I wouldn’t usually do’ (student, year 10)*

*“one of the things we progressed in was developing our own independence in our learning” (student, year 10)*

*“Everyone in the group had goals...but nobody really followed it up until [the Learning Group Adviser] came along and helped us by giving us some idea about how to get there...once I had the ideas I was able to follow it up with my own independent research” (student, year 10’*

*“Through doing this I think it made me take a step back and look at what was important to me and how I could better organize my time and do everything to the best of my abilities “ (student, year 10)*

*“I think, it sort of set us up with the idea that we do have the skills to go out and find things out for ourselves and it’s just a case of being innovative about your own development.” (student, year 10)*

*“[we learned] how to talk as a group – like don’t interrupt” (primary school student, year 4 )*

Adult comments:

*“ the process taught tolerance and respect to work as a group. Something that is hard to replicate in a home-school setting” (independent researcher, 2007)*

*“They are learning the usual range of study-skills. They are learning a lot of interpersonal skills because they are working in a small group. They are learning team-work. They are learning how to find out things for themselves, They are learning what learning really is. There are lots of things that they are picking up, either implicitly or explicitly, from the work that they are doing”. (secondary school assistant principle )*

*“They are learning to look beyond the teacher in the classroom and being told what to do” (school learning group adviser, working with year 10s)*

*“They definitely learn new skills...different approaches and skills that could be used to solve their problems...independence...teamwork” (school learning group adviser, working with year 10s)*

## **6. Long Term Impact**

The aforementioned feedback on skill development suggests that SML has proved beneficial to the students who went on into further and higher education. Some participants in this study had the benefit of up to three years hindsight on SML and the ongoing impact on their motivation to learn and their behaviour was recognised. Students discussed how their attitudes towards learning had changed and how SML had raised their motivation to plan and work towards their futures. Others commented that although they were sceptical at the time, they realised on reflection just how beneficial the learning groups had been:

Student comments:

*“it made me want to set more goals” (student, now year 11)*

*“I feel more capable and determined...more ambitious” (student, now year 9)*

*“I learned about the courses I could do in year 10... I really wanted to do well because otherwise they wouldn't let me on... I had to get better grades” (student, now year 10).*

*“we became more motivated and started to enjoy ourselves...moving on and being more motivated about our futures” (student, now year10)*

*“When you're doing it I don't think, you don't always realize the benefits of it, but looking back you do” (student, now year13)*

*“I think I definitely benefited from it” (student, now year 13)*

*“I think once you got into it more and you looked back on it, you realized how much it had helped” (student, now year 13)*

One school offered an example of where SML had been a fundamental factor in a pupil's ongoing progress. Formally labelled as a 'troubled student' the boy had gone on to take an informed interest in his year 10 options. He actively participated in information sessions and successfully managed his final GCSE selection with no

parental guidance. The school were impressed with the improved level of self-motivation and maturity that he demonstrated in the year following his SML experience:

Adult comment:

*“he was more confident, happy and much more settled ...setting up options and visits.... most students had their parents to help but he did it entirely on his own”*  
(school assistant director of year)

In terms of improved behaviour one school felt that for a particular group of boys, SML had been key to a turn around in their progress. Having been through a number of disciplinary strategies the boys were on the edge of exclusion and were said to lack the ability to focus on any given task. The deputy principle spoke of the school records, which showed a marked improvement in the boys' behaviour, a member of school staff

spoke of a student whose behaviour had improved for a whole year and one student described how his SML experience had positively impacted his behaviour:

Student comment:

*“ I haven't been in trouble for the last two years...my grades have gone up and so has my behaviour”* (student, year 10)

Adult Comments:

*“One boy's behaviour improved for a whole year...in a personal review he identified the learning group as the positive factor in the change of attitude”* (school assistant director of year, working with year 10s)

*“there has been a marked difference...certainly their behaviour has improved, they are not getting sent out of class as often”* (secondary school deputy principle, talking about year 8s)

### Why might SML work less well?

Some students were involved with learning groups which had been facilitated by members of non-teaching school staff. The majority of students involved in these groups reported positive experiences, however one student recalled her disappointment with the programme:

*“I really wanted to do it because I thought it would be a good experience...at the start it was cool but it got like really boring ‘cos we just did the same thing”*

*“he didn’t really do what he said we would do...reaching goals and doing things that would be useful for our futures” (school student, year 9)*

When questioned further this student indicated that she felt the reasons for her poor experience were to do with lack of structure, focus and time and she had no recollection of creating a formal learning agreement. Another student, although more enthusiastic about her experience, also revealed similar issues. She spoke about a lack of activities and an omission of an end session in which their learning goals were reviewed and assessed. These comments came in contrast to those students involved with learning groups with South Downs Learning Centre staff. They talked enthusiastically about the activities they had done, mentioning trips to local businesses, visits from authors and football coaches, final presentations and end events.

Students who participated in school-led learning groups made no mention of such activities and although supportive of SML, the staff agreed that there were times when the learning groups had not gone to plan. Maintaining the structure of SML in schools proved difficult for some and group meetings were sometimes cancelled. Overstretched resources and problems with timetabling were blamed, alongside issues of lacking self-confidence and ongoing training:

*“I don’t feel experienced enough...the person leading the group needs to be confident enough to let the group go in whatever direction it needs to go in...that’s something I need to learn” (school learning group adviser)*

*“there is not the capacity to train more and the [staff] have so many things they have to do, there is a squeeze to do everything they need to do” (deputy principle)*

*“the reality is hard...they [the students] have to miss out on PHSCE and I think that’s really important... but it’s difficult and there’s not the flexibility... I’m always juggling”  
(school learning group adviser)*



## EVALUATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall the student experience of SML has been positive and the enthusiasm and respect for the programme was very apparent. The fresh approach to learning was widely welcomed by school students and their teachers appreciated how it had enabled some young people to reveal personal qualities not previously recognised. The small group structure provided students with the time and attention they needed to fully engage in the process of personalisation and the evidence from this sample suggests that it was successful in developing students' awareness of themselves and the ways in which they learn.

Placing students at the centre of the learning process allowed individuals to focus on the issues that concerned them and helped to create a relaxed and pressure free environment. The positive and flexible atmosphere appears to have been enhanced by the supporting and facilitative role of the Learning Group Adviser and the confidentiality clauses that provided students with a safe learning space in which to explore their needs. SML is designed to allow students the freedom to address their learning needs beyond the confines of the classroom and out into the real world and the effects of this were clear. Making connections between learning and life demands was seen as a strength of the programme and has positive implications for the concerns expressed by employers and government bodies regarding the preparation of young people for future life and work (DTI, 1999; QCA, 2006).

This research demonstrates that some of the desirable skills outlined in the government's 'Personal Learning and Thinking Skills' review (QCA, 2006) were also developed. As with other student-directed approaches (Stephenson, 1981; Swann, 1999; 2007) the students spoke of ways in which they had improved as communicators, listeners and researchers and how they had developed their capacities to work independently and as part of a team. Also evident from the feedback were raised levels of confidence, self-esteem and ambition and for many this continued beyond the learning group and into their daily lives. This evidence supports the belief that encouraging students to actively engage in the learning process leads to an increase in these qualities and a development of what Cunningham (1987) terms 'second-order processing skills'.

There were positive reports that SML had impacted the behaviour and motivation of many students. Links were made between the successes of self-management, peer assessment and collaborative approaches to learning and the ways in which these had provided motivation for improved behaviour and focused learning within the groups. Long-term benefits were also observed and these appear to have stemmed from the process of thinking and acting on future aspirations and from raised levels of confidence and self-esteem.

Notably, few talked of the outcomes of specific goals or of developing more traditional forms of knowledge, however this does not necessarily suggest it did not take place. The relaxed style of programme evaluation and research encouraged the participants to talk about the experiences that were most important to them and they chose to discuss learning in terms of the development of skills, attitudes, processes and qualities. However, they did also talk of the knowledge they had gained from the people around them and of the ways in which it had helped. An aim of SML is to develop knowledge of oneself and of others, as well as more traditional modes (Cunningham, 1999), and there is evidence in this study to suggest that this was achieved.

On the whole the students' experiences of SML was positive but this study did highlight circumstances in which the process might go less well. Instances when structure and processes had broken down were identified in learning groups led by school facilitators, and the outcomes of some of these groups were found to be less successful. In his book, Cunningham (1999, p266) notes the detrimental effects of 'messy, unplanned programmes' and the examples found in this study reaffirm that failure to maintain structure can devalue outcomes.

Despite this, poor practice was found to be rare and the factors which caused problems for school facilitators were outside the South Downs Learning Centre's control. The collective findings were favourable and the conclusions reached in this project reflect that of a study conducted by another student from the University of Brighton. That report concluded:

*“Students who have participated in an SML learning group are able to describe their improved ability to communicate with others, especially adults. They found that after a short period of time disruptive behaviour is a thing of the past and that this is successfully managed by the peer group. The students have a strong sense of self-worth and are aware of their ability to be self-managing once they move on into higher education or work. For younger children the impact of SML is similar, with students as young as eight able to link their experiences with enhanced feelings of self-worth and the ability to acknowledge and manage some behaviour issues. Through SML the [South Downs Learning] Centre has been able to provide support for its learners who were disaffected in the standard school system.*

*Perhaps most importantly the most often cited impression of SML is that it is an enjoyable process. Students are aware that they get treated as equals and that this is what enhances their feelings of self worth”*

*(Little, 2007 pg.13)*

The current interest in personalisation and the development of self-management in young people is born out of a growing consensus that schooling in England is not allowing all students to realise their potential and is not preparing them well enough for the needs of the future. This study suggests that SML has the potential to address these concerns and that it is a valuable concept which could benefit mainstream school children and those being educated otherwise. The South Downs Learning Centre plan ongoing evaluation of their programmes for young people and the premises mentioned in the introduction to this report will provide fresh focus for future researchers.

**Nicola Sankey, March 2008**

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