Modes of Learning

(Adapted from **"Leadership Development and Personal Effectiveness"** Written and produced by John West-Burnham and Jill Ireson for NCTL)

Understanding Learning

For many educators, the concept of learning is implicit and assumed. In some usages it implies what the learner does in response to teaching – "If you don't pay attention to me you won't learn this". A common usage equates learning with memorisation – "I want you to learn this for a test tomorrow".

The paucity of our understanding of learning is reflected often in the lack of any shared or common agreement among educationalists, let alone learners, as to what the process actually involves. What follows is an attempt to develop a model of learning which provides the basis for meaningful dialogue about the learning process and its related outcomes.

Diagrammatic Representation: Modes of Learning

	Shallow **What?**	**Deep** **How?**	**Profound** **Why?**
Means	Memorisation	Reflection	Intuition
Outcomes	Information	Knowledge	Wisdom
Evidence	Replication	Understanding	Meaning
Motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic	Authentic
Attitudes	Compliance	Interpretation	Creativity
Relationships	Dependence	Interdependence	Independence
	Single Loop	**Double Loop**	**Triple Loop**

It is important to stress at the outset that this model is not intended to be hierarchical; rather, it is descriptive of the characteristics of different modes of learning. In some contexts, **shallow learning** is entirely appropriate – my knowledge of how my car's engine works is shallow, but I hope that the mechanic's is deep if not profound. Equally, it is important not to impose academic values on this model; profound learning is about the more arcane branches of philosophy but it is also about the qualities of a counsellor, the skills of a joiner and the moral insights of a child. In many important respects, **shallow learning** is synonymous with the prevailing patterns of schooling – it is based on the memorisation and replication of information. While it does not preclude **deep and profound learning**, training does limit and inhibit the potential to move beyond the shallow.

The argument against maintaining shallow learning as the predominant mode:

Shallow learning has been adequate for a world that operated on high levels of compliance and dependence in the workplace and society. If it is true that the world is becoming a far more complex place, then it may be that the dominant mode of learning will have to change. Shallow learning may have been an acceptable foundation for life in a relatively simple world with fewer choices and greater hegemony, but it is clearly inadequate in a world of complex choices and limited consensus. Perhaps the most negative aspect of shallow learning is the emphasis that it places on extrinsic motivation, compliance and dependence.

The argument for deep learning

Deep learning, by contrast, creates understanding – what happens when generic information becomes personal knowledge, which can then be transferred between contexts and over time. Experience is understood through reflection and the motivation to learn is intrinsic. Deep learning allows personal interpretation and creates a sense of confidence through interdependent learning.

Profound learning

Profound learning works on a different level of significance altogether. Shallow learning results in the ability to apply a formulated response to a problem, if it is presented in the right way. Deep learning allows a range of responses to be formulated, tested and applied. Profound learning leads to the problem and solution being redefined. Profound learning is about the creation of personal meaning and so enhances wisdom and so creativity. Experience is processed intuitively. The motivation to learn is moral and the outcome of profound learning is the ability and willingness to challenge orthodoxy. Such learning is sustained through interdependent engagement in problem-solving and thinking.

Single-loop learning is shallow: it is about what, rather than 'how' and 'why'. It is for replication. Crucially, deep learners know how to create knowledge; they are reflective about what they learn and how they learn. It is **double-loop learning** that occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of underlying norms, policies and objectives. **Triple-loop learning** is not only knowing about the what and the how, but why; it involves a fundamental reconceptualisation of what makes us unique as persons, so developing the ability to formulate strategies that are valid and fundamental to our way of being.