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### Where is the White Space for Learning?

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Steve Hall bio: Teacher in secondary, middle and primary schools in England for 35 years; primary school Headteacher for 18 years. Moved into Higher Education seeking new challenges as Senior Lecturer in Education at Staffordshire University in January 2010. Senior Fellow of Higher Education Authority. The concept of White Space had already started to take shape within my own teaching and consultancy work by the time I met Jori during his extended study visit to Staffordshire University from Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland in January 2015.

Jori Leskela bio: Teacher in Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Finland for 25 years. Started as a lecturer, subsequently worked as a principal lecturer and head of (IME) study programme and finally, after PhD (Ed), started my third career and became teacher educator in Tampere University of Applied Sciences. I met Steve during my teacher exchange visit in Staffordshire University in the Spring 2015. From our first discussions I have enjoyed discussing and working with him. It seems we have similar mindset and thinking and in the way we both process abstract phenomena.

## Where is the White Space for Learning?

How often do teachers limit their pupils' learning by over-planning teaching sessions or over-filling the curriculum? The concept of White Space for learning is an approach that deliberately builds space into learning activities for learners to think, imagine and shape their own ideas and their own learning.

As teachers, Headteacher, university lecturers and learning practitioners, the authors have separately been exploring different ways of empowering students to take greater responsibility for their own learning for a number of years. In developing a transitional model from dependent to independent to interdependent learning for pupils within a school specifically designed for collaborative learning, a different approach to teaching and learning was clearly needed. The pedagogy one of the authors developed at the time adopted David Hargreaves' (2005) model for Personalising Learning to maximise the design of physical learning spaces within the new school building, which in turn were informed by Mary Featherston's 'Inside Out' model and by staff exchange visits between schools in Staffordshire, England and Victoria, Australia.

The authors' shared interests in current research and thinking, focuses on the conditions that are necessary to make learning more self-organised and self-directed; a pedagogy that is relevant to the ILETC conference theme of Transitions. Informed by the work of Laurie Thomas and Sheila Harri-Augstein (1985) on self-organised learning and subsequently by Sugata Mitra (2012), this paper explores the transition from dependent to independent to interdependent learner in which there is a 'less is more' approach to teaching and learning. The model is similar to that of Samaroo, Cooper and Green's (2013) concept of Pedandragogy: A way forward to self-engaged learning.

The authors believe this can be accelerated and amplified through the introduction of White Space for Learning, a condition that considers the significance of physical, mental and emotional space to maximise the effectiveness of learning. Such an approach starts with the question... 'Where is the White Space?'

Keywords: white-space, learning, interdependent, pedandragogy, personalising

## Where is the White Space for Learning?

*'Space and time are the framework within which the mind is constrained to construct its experience of reality.'*  
Immanuel Kant

### Introduction

Kurt Hahn, the founder of the Outward Bound School, famously stated 'We are all better than we know; if only we can come to learn this, then we may never again settle for anything less.' The purpose of education is to become 'better', to improve and to achieve; however the way in which learners are educated quite often restricts or limits learning and achievement of the individual. This may be because there is so little time and space for us to stop and consider what we need to know, understand and be able to do in order that we can become 'the best that we can be.'



This article raises the issue of White Space as a concept or a condition that enables individuals to bring out the best in themselves. It starts by simply asking the question 'Where is the White Space for Learning?'

More than ever in human history, the world is driven by a need for efficiency, productivity and profit or gain. Every second counts in the eternal drive for greater efficiency, greater productivity and profitability and this transfers to people in the form of a fast moving, highly stressful society and working environment in which there is no time or space to spare for 'non-productive' activities. The point that we miss however is that productivity is not maximised by filling time with activity but by allowing space for creativity, innovation and learning from what we have already done.



Enlightened organisations such as Apple and Lego build in time and space for their employees to step back from their activities to think, to imagine and to use that time to reflect on how they can be more effective and productive. Similarly such companies develop an ethos and culture within their organisations such that leaders are encouraged to trust and empower their employees with the crucial act of decision-making about how they might be more creative and even more productive. This introduction of mental white space into working conditions and environments for everyone, can lead to

employees recognising the differences between either working within their comfort zone or, indeed within their 'discomfort' zone and understanding which is more productive for them at the time.

However, this is not exclusive to the world of business and commerce. Productivity is also seen as a measured output of education where similar principles and practices of 'fitting more in' currently apply. We fill our curricula and our teaching with content and information to raise standards and boost results but what time and space do we leave for thinking, processing, creativity and innovation in learning? Likewise what time and space do we leave in our own lives to stand, sit or lean back to allow time and space to think and make sense of what we see, hear, feel and do? We all need space for this in our lives and indeed time just to relax for our health and well-being so that we can remain 'productive' and of value to society by being the best that we can be.



## **What is White Space as a concept?**

The term 'white space' has been used within as part of the design and development process of websites and other marketing material for some years now. It has become good practice that webpages are not overfilled and cluttered with text and information but that physical white space is left to make the website feel more attractive, more creative, more accessible and more meaningful. We have taken this use of white space in web design as a conceptual framework to explore the meaning and value of White Space in leadership, learning and life. We see White Space as being essential to the process of combining physical space with mental and emotional harmony and with personal time so that we can be the most productive, effective and the best that we can be.

This has implications for all aspects of our working and resting lives. We would maintain that White Space can have a significant impact on leadership, learning, creativity and innovation but defining it is more of a challenge. It is easier to think of White Space in terms of the impact it can have when it is present and therefore it can be more easily defined in terms of the effect of its absence; but what is it?

For us we see White Space as a condition or set of conditions that are necessary for personal and professional growth. It is to do with the physical environment around you; about being in a place or space in which you feel at ease and yet inspired and positive about yourself. It is about having time and space for thinking so that your mind is not so cluttered that you feel overwhelmed and over-stressed with everything it is trying to deal with or process such that you are not able to focus properly. It is about your emotional state and well-being and what you feel, know and believe about yourself and what you are doing.

We would therefore maintain that White Space is to do with having the optimum conditions, in terms of physical environment, mental stimulus and emotional stability that are necessary for a person of any age, not to just survive, but to be able to thrive, achieve and grow as a person rather to merely be productive and effective.

*Our initial definition of White Space:-*

*White Space is a condition or a set of conditions, which are a function of time and space and which impact on your physical environment and your mental and emotional states such that your thinking and feelings are liberated from unnecessary restrictions or limitations.*

White Space is a personalised condition; each individual needs more or less time and space to function, thrive and grow within any situation. At times an individual will function more effectively within their own 'comfort zone', yet at other times they thrive on the challenge of operating in a zone and state of discomfort. The important issue is that they recognise the difference and can make decisions to effect change when needed.

For example, there will be places where you feel a sense of being 'at home' or 'in the right place'. Sometimes that feeling can hit you the moment you walk into a house, a shop, a garden; you instantly sense being somewhere special. Similarly there are times when you have freed yourself of the clutter of things you need to think about at home or at work. For some people this is what being on holiday is all about but at such times that your mind is free to be much more creative, find solutions to problems and to visualise a way forward.

Both of these conditions impact on your emotional health and well-being and vice versa; how you feel about your surroundings and what you need to think about are affected by your emotional state. Your level of emotional intelligence helps you to manage your emotions but it needs time and space to be at its best. How and what you think, know and believe about yourself and your capacity to be in control of your emotions are a critical part of your ability to function, to survive and to thrive both personally and professionally.

To gain a conceptual understanding of White Space and to appreciate its power in practical terms, feelings need to be taken into account. For example, we have found that it is necessary to explore your feelings when you do and do not have access to White Space as illustrated below...

We would recommend therefore that you consider two different scenarios...

Firstly, take a moment to consider...

an occasion when you were especially restricted, limited, uncomfortable, organised and controlled by others.....

Revisit the situation in your mind and try to remember how you felt at the time...

We would maintain that at such times you would have been restricted by a lack of White Space and this will have therefore affected your creativity, your productivity and your effectiveness as a person but above all it is likely to have made you feel frustrated, irritable, resentful and disempowered by someone else.

Now think about...

a time when you have felt particularly liberated, empowered, imaginative, creative...

Relive that scenario in your mind and again consider your thoughts and feelings at the time. It is likely that at such times you have either been given or have allowed yourself, sufficient White Space to be the best that you can be.

For both scenarios, compare your emotional state at the times... can you reach the stage during your reflections at which you become aware of how your feelings were affected? If so you are starting to understand how White Space and its presence or absence can affect you.

Whilst the importance of White Space is relevant in all aspects of our lives, in this article we will concentrate specifically on White Space for learning. We will explain why we believe it is important and we will attempt to illustrate in particular where and when it is essential to design White Space into our learning.

## White Space for Learning

Although we have offered a general definition of White Space, we are aware that the word 'space' suggests many concepts – in the world of learning and personal development, the term 'space' could mean 'room for growth'.

In the world of education, we see White Space as being about deliberately and strategically leaving,

- 'room for thinking',
- 'room for creativity',
- 'room for learning'.
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How often do teachers limit their pupils' or students' learning by over-planning teaching sessions or over-filling the curriculum? The concept of White Space for learning is that it deliberately builds and designs space into learning activities for learners to think, imagine and shape their own ideas and their own learning.

### Why is White Space for Learning important and what is its meaning in this context?

In reality, White Space only takes on relevance and meaning when we can define and articulate the bigger picture or context to which it adds value; in this context it is learning or to be more specific, effective learning. We accept that it is unrealistic to define in detail what constitutes effective learning for every possible context and for every learner, so we propose a framework of six elements that can be shaped and defined according to the individual context for learning.

Six elements of Effective Learning :-

**Learning is Authentic and Reflective** - learning is meaningful, interesting and compelling and has a purpose to which the learner can subscribe; learning draws from and builds on previous learning which when shared with others is inter-reflective and becomes deeper and more profound,

**Learning is Connected and Collaborative** - explicit links can be made to learning in other situations and contexts, to other learners and to other times and places; learning is deepened, enhanced and extended by the learner interacting with other learners and demonstrating inter-dependence,

**Learning has Personal Meaningfulness and Relevance** - learning is appropriate to the learner's identity, self-awareness and self-efficacy and to the time and place in which learning takes place,

**Learning is Learner Centred** – learning draws on the learner's imagination, innovation, interest and invention; learning is initiated by the learner's own interests and passions,

**Learning is Structured and Guided by Learning Conversations** – learning is self-organised and self-directed and is framed and scaffolded by the learner's questions, reflections and formative feedback,

**Learning has Valued, Measurable Outcomes** - skills, competences, knowledge, understanding and opportunities for achievement are gained, developed and/or extended by the learning.

*(from Hall & Leskela, 2016); see Appendix 1 for an expanded mindmap version of this model*

The way in which White Space adds value to this model can be summarised in the following diagram.

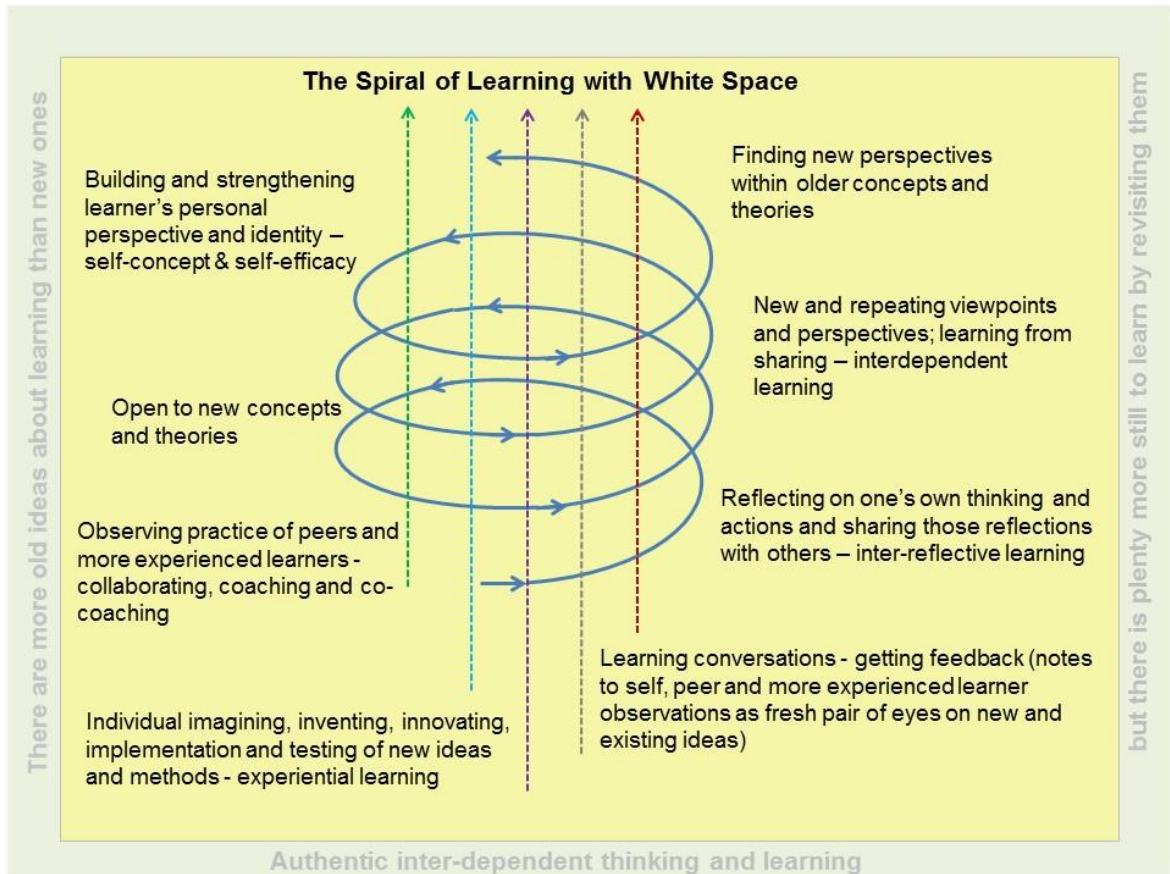


Figure 1: The Spiral of Learning with White Space (Hall & Leskela 2016)

White Space is a means of revisiting what we have already learned and being open to looking at that learning again, sometimes with the additional benefit of seeing it through another pair of eyes. It facilitates:-

- reflective learning conversations with self and others,
- inter-reflective thinking (letting your mindset, perceptions and assumptions be vulnerable and open, to be bumped and challenged by another kind of thinking from other learning practitioners having different kinds of mindset, perceptions and assumptions),
- collaborative, inter-dependent learning (moving beyond being an independent learner),
- authentic learning (letting theory and practice meet and interact while you are learning)

White Space can be enhanced by learning conversations; inter-reflections with a fellow learning practitioner acting as a coach, co-coach or critical friend provoking deeper reflection and new learning.

White Space for Learning is therefore important as a fundamental tool to facilitating more effective and productive learning in which the learner takes greater responsibility for their own learning and ultimately full ownership of their own learning as learning practitioners<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Learning practitioners, as defined by Laurie Thomas and Sheila Hari Augstein in their book, Learning Conversations.

## Where and when can White Space make a difference in learning?

There are many ways in which we can use White Space effectively during teaching and learning. Our initial thoughts might provoke you to consider your own list for your own circumstances of teaching and learning. We have successfully used White Space as a strategic tool in many ways, including...

- **White Space** in planning documents for developing ideas,
- planned time to **make connections** to other learning, for thinking and 'mulling over thoughts,
- **unstructured time** for follow-up and follow-through,
- spaces to project **learners' thoughts and ideas** into the mix and to encourage the asking of 'silly' questions,
- **pauses** in speaking to provide time for processing information and reflecting on its meaning,
- **blank pages** for doodles,
- **places** to go to think and reflect, to 'mull over' thoughts and ideas (self-talk),
- coaching and co-coaching questions (**learning conversations**) to test ideas and understanding through dialogue and self-reflection.

Learning is a process that can be considered as a series of steps or stages. An illustrative model is suggested in Christine Johnston's book, 'Let Me Learn' (1998) and is shown in Appendix 3. The model that Christine promotes, suggests that stages in learning include mulling, connecting, rehearsing, assessing, reflecting and revisiting and implies a need for time and space for the overall process of thinking and learning to be effective. However, the need for thinking, reflecting and processing applies to too many contexts to give a definitive, universal answer to the question, 'Where and when can White Space make a difference in learning?'

Indeed White Space needs to be considered on an individual basis, as a tool for personalising learning, because in any given situation or context one individual will need more White Space in order to maximise their learning as compared to another learner with differing needs. It is the adjustment of White Space to meet the individual's needs which is the skill that teachers, as facilitators of learning, as well as the learners themselves need to master.

There are some generic situations relating to teaching and learning which might provide a starting point for you to initiate your own list of where and when added value is given to effective learning by creating White Space ...

- for teachers and students to test out what competences students have learned,
- for students to engage and find their motivation (space for their own objectives, space to test their competences by facing real life problems),
- for teachers develop themselves, to benchmark other schools, to share ideas with colleagues "developing soul-mates" in their schools, in other schools even in other countries, to try new things and even fail, learn from failure and try again,
- in student's mind for new understanding, for changing attitudes, for considering different kinds of opinion (from peers, teachers, literature etc),
- for developing leadership capacity and individuals as leaders at various levels,

Whatever model of learning we adopt, it is clear that there is a process in learning that requires elements of time and space if learning is to be more than merely a superficial memorising of facts. We would maintain that in order for an individual to learn with sufficient depth to gain mastery and understanding in any subject focus or discipline, White Space is an essential element.



## How can we use White Space to make teaching and learning more effective?

A great starting place is to apply three principles at the planning stage of teaching and learning – **allow personal paths, postpone defining** and **avoid overfilling**. What we offer below are just some examples of how you might choose to apply these three principles in teaching and learning.

For example, whatever lesson planning proforma or tool you use will require you to fill in spaces on a page with writing and/or images that represent the learning you have planned for your learners. The boxes you might feel compelled to fill with writing will probably include:-

- Learning objectives,
- Previous learning (to build on),
- Learning activities,
- Assessment opportunities.

But what would happen if you only completed half the space provided for each of the above when you are planning on your own or with colleagues? By doing so you could be adopting an approach that **allows personal paths** by leaving White Space in your planning document, until you find out what the learners' perspectives for each of those four aspects of planning might be. For example, is it good practice if only the teacher decides what previous learning should be drawn on when approaching new learning? Similarly, learners will often, if not always, have a view on what learning activities might be relevant, meaningful and authentic to their own context so why not leave White Space for their contributions. Likewise with assessment opportunities – learners' ideas for assessing the extent to which learning has been successfully gained, used and applied are as valid as a teacher's.

From a design point of view, an interesting aspect of planning learning activities is that of learning objectives or intended learning outcomes. There is a school of thought that learning objectives become clearer and more obvious part way through the learning process. Invariably they can change once learners themselves bring their own perspectives into play. An approach which has been used with some success is to **postpone defining** learning objectives/outcomes until part way through a learning activity. By encouraging learners to make their own suggestions as to what learning might be achieved during or after the planned learning activity, before revealing the intended learning outcomes or objectives, you would be offering learners a real and valued voice. Their own input can (and probably will) make a difference and make the learning more effective.

Another very simple but effective 'How?' that teachers might consider is to **avoid overfilling** an information resource (such as Powerpoint or Prezi slides) with text. We are all guilty of cramming in so much information that we want to convey that there is far too much for any person to process in one go. The idea of 'death by Powerpoint' comes to mind and can be easily overcome by leaving White Space on any slide or piece of paper that we present as part of a learning situation. White Space is essential for an individual learner to process the information in front of them, to interact with it in their minds and to make sense of it, including adding their own ideas. Presentations and informative documents are therefore a great place to start introducing White Space into your teaching and learning.

If the intention is to encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning, we would certainly maintain that White Space is essential. For example, you could use White Space to encourage dialogue within a group of learners as a means of creating or facilitating 'communities of practice' within your teaching to promote inter-dependency between like-minded learners.

There are many ways in which White Space might add value to your own model of effective learning for any process you might consider. Our three principles of **allow personal paths, postpone defining** and **avoid overfilling** are the guidance we offer rather than to be prescriptive about how you might use White Space for Learning.

A starting point for How to use White Space, might be to take any model of Effective Learning and to map against it, the process of designing, planning and delivering a course of study. Using a White Space ‘lens’ with our model of Effective Learning, we can consider if and how White Space, might add value to each of the six elements (see below).

For example:-

Stages in the process of creating and delivering a course of study	Potential impact of White Space on elements of Effective Learning for each stage in process					
	Authentic and Reflective	Connected and Collaborative	Personal meaningfulness and relevance	Learner Centred	Structured/guided by Learning Conversations	Has valued and measurable outcomes
1 Identification of need for course	White Space allows the learner to consider and identify how the course might fulfill a need	White Space that provides time to make connections with previous learning and with other learners is vital				
2 Design ideas for context, content and mode of delivery						
3 & 4 Etc., etc...						

*(see Appendix 2 for a fuller version of this document)*

How you ‘see’ White Space will be affected by your own perception of the concept, the context to which you would apply, use or manage White Space and the model of Effective Learning that you adopt. This is where we hand over to you to answer the question for yourself and to consider your own ideas of how, where and when White Space might add value to your own learning and to the learning of others around you or influenced by you. This is where we give you ‘White Space’.

In this article we have tried to use framing a lot but we are still leaving White Space for you to consider ‘How?’ for yourself.

Use this metaphorical White Space to consider... How might I use and manage White Space...

- ...as an employer?
- ...as an employee?
- ...as a teacher?
- ...as a parent?
- ...as a student?
- ...as a learning practitioner?

We would like to invite you to share your thoughts and ideas by either contacting us directly<sup>2</sup> or by contributing to the White Space blog at <http://whereisthewhitespace.blogspot.fi/>

<sup>2</sup> E-mail Steve Hall at [s.j.hall@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.hall@staffs.ac.uk) or Jori Leskela at [jori.leskela@tamk.fi](mailto:jori.leskela@tamk.fi)

# Appendix 1: Mindmap of the Six Elements of Effective Learning (Hall & Leskela, 2017)

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Appendix 2: Mapping elements of Effective Learning against process stages to identify where and how White Space might add value to learning

Stages in the process of creating and delivering a new course of study	Potential impact of White Space on the six elements of Effective Learning (Hall & Leskela, 2017) for each stage in process					
	Authentic and Reflective	Connected and Collaborative	Personal meaningfulness and relevance	Learner Centred	Structured/guided by Learning Conversations	Has valued and measurable outcomes
Identification of need for course						
Design ideas for context, content and mode of delivery						
Define mode of delivery and design course content						
Deliver course outline; identify intended learning outcomes; specify means of assessment of learning						
Identify course content and protocols for assessment for learning						
Deliver course content and monitor student progress						
Review course content, means of assessment, student understanding						
Assess learning outcomes; review course content, mode of delivery and assessment process						

**Appendix 3: Christine Johnston’s Let Me Learn model for processing learning**

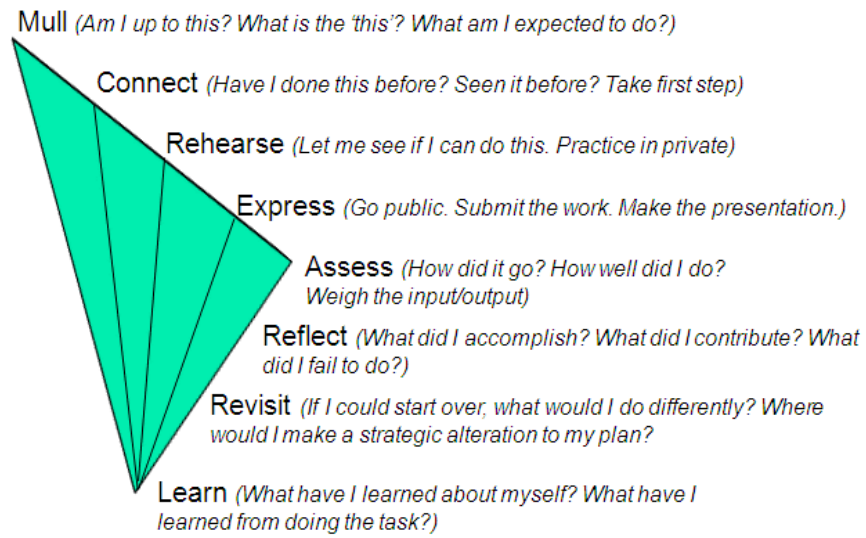


Figure 2: Christine Johnston’s learning process model<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From ‘Let Me Learn’: Christine Johnston (1998)