

Chapter 8

Help Me Put on This Jetpack: Propelling Learner Agency at Learnlife Barcelona

Devin Carberry

K-12

Program design

positive relationships

Self-Confidence

self-management

Self-Determination Theory

The ability of learners to successfully exercise agency depends on four key elements: positive relationships, self-confidence, self-management, and program design. Psychological safety and unconditional positive regard are the bedrock of the positive relationships that enable learners to progressively take more agency. Self-confidence paired with self-management skills enable learners to feel competent drivers of their own learning. Program design, based on voice, choice and self-determination, further creates the opportunities for learners to practice agency. This chapter examines the practical application of these four elements in the Learnlife Barcelona Urban Hub's full-time program, which serves learners aged 12-19.

Introduction

In 2016, Learnlife set out to create the school model of the future. We analysed over a hundred innovative schools, spoke with thought leaders the world over, and surveyed thousands of people about what their dream school would be like. Over the course of a year and a half, we used this data to design our model – one predicated on cultivating lifelong, self-determined learners. In 2017, Learnlife launched its first full-time cohort of seven learners, aged 14-20, who would take the reins of their own learning – deepening their passions, discovering new ones, and working on projects relevant to their lives. We believed that learner agency was a matter of giving learners the freedom to choose what, when, and how they learned. Of course, lofty visions rarely withstand the stress test of real-life learners.

Challenges to learner agency surfaced such as the defaulting to control models instead of empowerment-based ones, low self-efficacy, choice paralysis, and lack of trust. Through this experience, we have learned that learner agency is buttressed by four elements: positive relationships, self-confidence, self-management skills, and program design.

Positive relationships

Learning happens best when we have strong relationships and when we feel safe (Gibson & Harris, 2019a). At Learnlife, we enable learners to take initiative and risks, and feel supported along their journey. We do this by training our learning guides^[1] in positive relationship building, pastoral care programs, learner-driven feedback, and protocols to enhance psychological safety.

Fifteen-year-old A exemplifies how positive relationships are the gateway to successful learner agency. In my first conversation with A., he explained that he was coding artificial intelligence to track cloud patterns for indications of changing weather. Everyone expected that A. would excel at Learnlife – producing projects at a level that we had not yet seen in our short history. Three months later, A. had produced very little. He revelled in helping others and was cheery and participatory. Yet, he eschewed doing his own work, resisting attempts to develop his project management skills. Why did A flounder when given agency?

Fast forward twelve months. A. runs a coding club and is paid to run an afterschool maker program. He has been contracted by a psychiatrist to help organize her files using machine learning. Before he was reluctant to talk about his future, but now he is actively creating a pathway towards university. Furthermore, he now completes the projects he proposes. Recently, he designed an electric bass guitar, 3D printed the body, and installed all the electronic components. A is on fire! So, what changed?

A needed unconditional positive regard from the people in his life. He needed to know that it was safe to be vulnerable and was valued for more than what he contributed. Through the power of positive relationship, A. eventually gave us permission to point to the behavioural patterns stunting his progress. He began practicing more self-care and seeing his self-worth as independent of what he could do for others.

How we build positive relationships at Learnlife

Intake

When learners join Learnlife, relationship-building starts with the intake process. Our “getting to know you” conversations aim to understand learners at a deep level, covering prior school experiences, the people with whom they are closest, their challenges with learning, and vision for their future. Unconditional positive regard and empathy are paramount (Jenkins, 2015). If a learner shares that he or she has been expelled, struggled socially, or has a screen addiction, we don't judge, but rather empathize with the situation and explore how we can best support the learner. Similarly, we interview parents so we have an even greater understanding of the learner. We've had several parents cry during these interviews because they said no-one had ever shown so much care for their child. The interviews are also an opportunity for the learners and their parents to get to know Learnlife before enrolling in the programs.

Psychological safety

Learners take agency when they feel safe (Delizonna, 2017). If they don't feel valued or don't speak up for fear of retaliation, they are less likely to take initiative, think creatively, or take risks. A positive relationship is inherently a safe relationship. So, how do we encourage psychological safety?

Feedback

One of the most vulnerable and, thus, unsafe feeling moments for learners is when they are evaluated. This is why Learnlife has chosen to focus on learner-led, constructive feedback instead of top-down evaluations. To promote psychological safety, all learners participate in a workshop on feedback, during which learners role play what it sounds like to provide clear, actionable feedback. We provide sentence starters for learners who are not sure how to phrase their feedback constructively. For example, a learner might start with “One opportunity I see for your next step is...”. This feedback is non-judgemental and actionable.

Learners also co-create rubrics for their projects that allow them to decide how they want to be evaluated. It can be overwhelming to receive feedback about all aspects of a project, especially if the learner has focused on only one or two. For example, a learner working on a short film might only want to concentrate on technical aspects of the film, not its content. Here, the learner feels safe, knows what to expect, and requests feedback.

When learners feel psychologically safe, they participate more, take more risks, and begin to shed concerns about vulnerability. Perhaps this is why B felt comfortable enough to share with us that she was disappointed with herself

because of how a project turned out. This level of honesty and vulnerability also helped B to recognize that her disappointment was affecting other aspects of her learning journey. She had started taking less initiative because she was afraid she'd end up disappointed again. Without a safe space to share, B. might have missed the opportunity to work through this emotional blockage to her agency.

Active listening

When we listen with an agenda in mind, learners know, and are less likely to share. If we want learners to take agency, they need to trust that we will listen to their ideas and struggles and do this without judgement (Bodie et al., 2015, p. 155). To help learning guides support learners during difficult times (such as Spain's Covid-19 lockdown), we organized several training sessions in order to role play our weekly well-being check-ins. During the role plays, in which one person played a guide and the other a learner, we noticed that whenever a "learner" presented a difficulty, we promptly wanted to solve it. Role playing potential scenarios that learners may encounter enables the guide to respond more effectively and empathically. If we begin by actively listening to learners while they recount their difficulties, a learner is more likely to share and be open to collaboratively finding solutions.

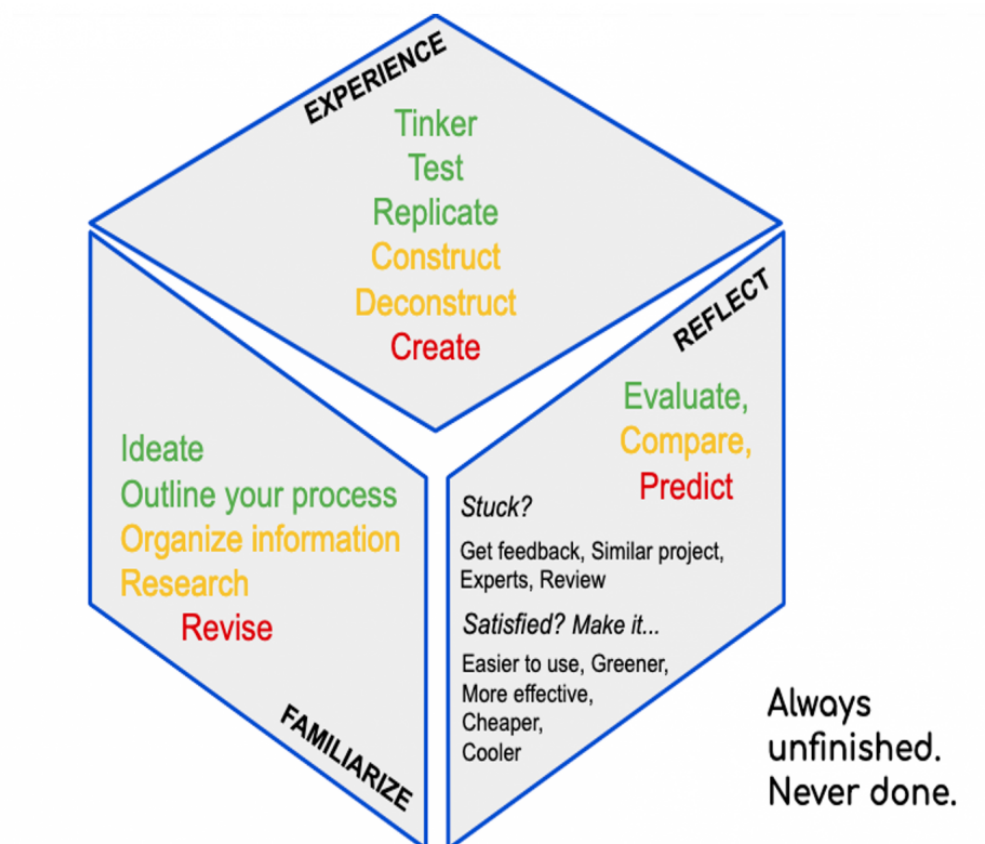
Guides not managers

Learning guides do just that, they guide. For all of us, it has been a struggle not to act as managers – assigning tasks, setting deadlines, checking progress. The shift from control to empowerment is not easy. We noticed early on that some learners tended to tense up during check-ins. They did not like having someone monitor their progress and compare it to the goals that had been set (even if they were the ones who set those goals). So, we shifted the focus from outputs to the process and experience of learning.

We use several tools to do this. The first is the Learning Process Framework^[2] which helps learners understand the experiential learning cycle (Figure 1). Learners move between three, mutually reinforcing phases: familiarization, experience, and reflection.

Figure 1

Learning process framework



For each phase, we have developed a series of questions learners can ask themselves to better understand how they are learning. Rather than focus on what they are doing, this tool asks learners where they are in the process and what they have learned. We also developed a deck of cards for when learners feel stuck. During check-ins, we ask if they are stuck or if they are learning. If they are learning, we talk about the learning process framework. If they are stuck, we put cards down that represent different types of stuck – physiological needs, emotional needs, relationship challenges, and/or not knowing what to do next. On the back side of the cards are suggestions for how to get unstuck. Before flipping to the back, however, we first ask learners for their ideas. For example, if a learner reports being unable to concentrate because she or he is hungry, we first ask them what might be solutions to that problem. Often, they just say “eat something,” but if it is a recurring phenomenon we might encourage them to think deeper about how often and when this happens, and what solutions they have already tried. If they don’t know, we flip the card and there are options like: “Make sure to always have a snack in your cubby,” “Ask Devin for something to eat (I always have snacks)”, for example. In this way, we move from a managerial to a guiding relationship. In the process, the learners develop important self-awareness and metacognition skills that grow their capacity for self-determined learning.

Twelve-year old C. is an apt example of the transformation that can happen when we shift from managers to guides. When he joined us, C had a “too cool for school” attitude. He expected us to chastise and punish him like his previous teachers. He constantly tested us. When an activity required everyone to stand up, he would sit down. When everyone was working on a collaborative task, he’d goof around. In the last six months, C has transformed. He takes responsibility for his learning – designing his own schedule and documenting his process. He is excited to finish tasks he starts and actually complains when others are not doing their part and demonstrates higher levels of leadership and self-management. For this transformation to happen, C needed to believe that we had confidence in him. He saw that he could make mistakes and that we would ask about his process instead of punishing him. It was then that he began to take charge of his learning.

Agency implies believing in yourself

Self-confidence

It is difficult to have agency if you don't believe in yourself (Mercer, 2012, p. 43). Many of our learners arrive with low self-confidence because test scores or teachers have questioned their intelligence or neglected their strengths. At Learnlife, we have replaced grades with constructive feedback, and we have replaced exams with 360° presentations at which we celebrate learners' growth. All aspects of our programs aim to help learners cultivate a positive, strengths-based self-narrative.

Upon joining, D could not get out of bed in the morning because she was so depressed. We were lucky if we saw her once a week. During her intake interview, we asked her about her goals. She shared that no one had ever asked her that. Just asking helped her to see possibilities where previously she had seen none. On the days D came in, we didn't pressure her to engage in the same way as other learners. Rather we listened to what D needed in that moment and did everything we could to boost her self-esteem. If taking ten photos was all D felt capable of doing that day, that was okay. We would give her positive feedback, and encouraged her to share them with her peers, who also did the same. D felt guilty about her sporadic attendance, so we sat down and looked at the data with her. Were there any patterns, we asked? She realized that she always missed Monday mornings, and realized that if she felt like she did not have enough time to get ready and to eat breakfast, then she would not come that day. We co-created new schedules for her taking these parameters into account. It empowered her to feel in control of her life again, and slowly her attendance improved.

Through listening to D's concerns and encouraging her to advocate for her needs, she eventually gained the confidence to tell her dad that she wanted to see a therapist, even taking initiative to make the call herself. With her therapist's collaboration, we were able to clear some of D's emotional blockages and enhance her self-esteem. After two years with us, she planned a solo trip to the south of Spain and independently planned the logistics and itinerary, helping her to see herself as capable and self-empowered. D. also committed to taking her next step: photography school. She started the following autumn.

Like D, many learners arrive with low self-confidence. We employ a variety of strategies to bolster their self-efficacy. Day one of each new cohort begins with a "Strengths Olympics". Through a series of fun challenges, learners discover their strengths and broaden their understanding of the word "strength". For example, we invite learners to find a partner and sit back-to-back. Each learner receives an image of an animal hybrid – an ostrich-alligator, for example – and describes the image to their partner who must draw it based solely on the oral description. In our debrief of the experience, we reflect on the variety of skills needed for this timed activity: listening, questioning, describing, visualizing, spatial reasoning, drawing, and speed. This is only one of nearly a dozen "Olympic" events testing everything from dexterity to physical strength, from creativity to fashion sensibility. In this way, we shift from traditional models placing a premium on rote memorization to one that recognizes a broad spectrum of abilities.

After the "Strengths Olympics," we work with our learners who have developed negative self-narratives to create positive counter-narratives. One of our 13-year-old learners, E., who had been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder, felt like all the messages he had heard about himself from his community were negative. We helped him flip this perception by asking those same people to describe all of E.'s positive attributes. He was shocked by so much positive regard.

Creating self-confidence by design

At Learnlife, a large part of the day is spent in our learning studios: multimedia, digital fabrication, carpentry, writing, electronics, and several more. Before learners can work on independent projects they must first complete different levels for that studio. Each level is designed according to our learning framework. Learners familiarize themselves with a core skill or concept, then experience it through executing a task and then reflecting on what they learned. For example, one of the task objectives of Level 1 for the Food Lab is that learners conceptually understand emulsions and can create them. To familiarize, they first learn what an emulsion is via prepared video content; next they make a salad dressing that requires an emulsion; then they reflect on how the concept of emulsion could be applied to other types of

dishes. In this way, we are not just teaching learners to execute recipes but to think creatively about food as well as their own projects.

We require these levels because we want learners to develop the creative confidence that enables them to turn their ideas into reality. In our first two years, we invited learners to launch directly into ambitious projects. Most of the time, the learners did not have the core conceptual knowledge nor the technical skill to execute the project, often causing frustration and self-doubt. For instance, one of our learners wanted to create a portable water desalination kit. The project was to last three months. However, there was so much to learn about desalination and product design, that he only managed to put together a couple prototypes to test basic concepts of desalination. As a result, he was dissatisfied with what he had accomplished and abandoned the project.

Through hands-on, interactive challenges supervised by our studio experts, learners grow their creative confidence by learning technical skills needed to successfully launch their own projects. Take for example, 17-year-old F who, due to learning differences, was reading and writing at an early primary level. She avoided most tasks that involved either reading and writing and was often frustrated because Google Voice did not recognize her accent. The Writer's Lab aims to grow learners' confidence as writers and demonstrate its power as a tool for self-expression. As F. worked through the tasks for each level, her view of herself as a writer shifted dramatically. Within a year of joining us, F. wrote four books. The first was about her experience of being adopted. The second about her first year in Spain. The third was a cookbook and the fourth a photobook. The books are showcased on a website of her design.

Self-Management

When a learner develops agency but does not have the skills to reach the desired outcome, the learner often becomes discouraged. Most classroom environments are predictable. They rely on a limited number of similar assignments or tasks with quick turnover and require formulaic outputs. When learners are given the opportunity to design their own learning journey, authentically collaborate, or work on real world projects, they often struggle because they have not previously been given the opportunity to develop the requisite skills to successfully execute these tasks (Gibson & Harris, 2019b).

We once invited learners to create a community building activity. They chose a camping trip. Planning the trip frustrated the learners as they struggled to delegate, ask for help, access the appropriate resources, and manage their time and their emotions. Upon arrival at our destination, it was time to make lunch. The learners had decided upon what to eat (sandwiches), created a budget, and purchased the food. The learning guides were instructed not to intervene but just to ask: "How can we help?" No one moved. Eventually, one of the older learners got frustrated and started bossing people around. He told them to get to work, but it was clear neither he nor they knew what that looked like. About an hour and a half later, with many hints on how to get organized, we were finally eating sandwiches. Why did the sandwich making seem like such an impossible task? The motivation was right: we were all hungry. The agency was there: they had chosen what to eat and purchased it. What was missing were adequately developed self-management skills like communication, emotional regulation, time management, planning, task initiation, and more.

Self-management workshops

All Learnlife learners participate in a weeklong self-management bootcamp and, thereafter, in ongoing workshops. In our experience, learners tend to resist learning self-management skills unless a few things are in place: established positive relationships, a growth mindset, and a concrete understanding of how these skills are beneficial. It is important to emphasize that the capacity to get work done is not something you have or don't have but, rather, it is a skill set that can be learned.

The first day of the self-management bootcamp is devoted to building learners' why. We start with a dramatization of two scenarios in which a learner is trying to get ready and out the door in the morning. In the first scenario, the learner has underdeveloped self-management skills. In the second, these skills are highly developed. One learner plays his- or her-self and another learner plays that learner's parent, while yet other learners personify the different self-management

skills. As they play out the first scene, the learners personify the different skills that make it impossible for the learner to get ready. For example, a learner plays her sense of organization and relays chaotic messages about how to get ready, another learner playing her sense of time tells her she has all the time in the world, her emotional regulation tells her to get back in bed, and her working memory can't seem to recall what she needs for her day at Learnlife. The scene restarts a second time with helpful self-management skills that make the learner's life smooth and simple. In the debrief, we ask learners to evaluate which skills they see as their greatest assets and which they would like to improve. We continue growing their why throughout the day, growing their self-awareness by testing their skills through a variety of challenges. We also orchestrate a panel of adults who talk about their difficulties with self-management and how they have overcome them. Lastly, they imagine what their lives would be like, if all of their self-management skills were high functioning.

The days that follow focus on specific skills and introduce self-management. For example, we introduce the skill of attention by offering opportunities to engage in activities like video games or Sudoku, during which we phase in different distractions (such as mobile phones, their friends, and background conversations). After each activity, learners evaluate the impact of each distractor. Then, we introduce the tool of workstations, which are designed to eliminate distractions. Some learners struggle with visual stimuli, so their workstation uses a trifold display to block out visual stimuli. Learners struggling with auditory stimuli use workstations with noise cancelling headphones. Each learner then builds her or his own workstation based on individual needs. It could be as simple as a to-do list and a laptop or as complex as a trifold with noise cancelling headphones, a personal whiteboard for drawing step-by-step instructions, and a writeable clock to chunk time for specific tasks.

While the habit-changing bootcamp felt challenging to many learners, almost all of them reflected on the benefits of improved self-management skills during their 360° presentations. Nineteen-year-old G, for example, shared her realization that self-efficacy is not just about having the right mindset, but that there are also strategies to improve her ability to learn. In the following weeks, these strategies were evident: a quiet space away from her friends; a workstation with a to-do list that included time estimates for each task; and a clock to keep her on track. In contrast to the analogue example of the workstation, we also adopted a project management application that grows learners' self-management skills. Through this app, learners have been able to build skills using calendars, GANTT charts, to-do lists, and a variety of other tools.

Agency by design

Once learners have the relationships, confidence, and skill to take agency, they need the opportunity to do so (Gibson & Harris 2019c). Everything starts with why. Our programs create space for learners to choose where they learn, what they learn and how they learn. We also provide formal and informal avenues for learners to provide feedback and even co-create aspects of the program. As a result, our learners report high levels of agency.

Figure 2

The learning journey: Explorers, creators, and changemakers



Choice

Learners start each cycle with goal setting. This approach gives them the agency to chart their learning journey and choose between workshops, projects, and internships that will help them reach these goals.

At Learnlife, we use building blocks for each program instead of courses. For example, we offer Life Navigation Skills (LNS) for learning literacy and numeracy through the lens of important life skills like creating a budget, passing a driver's test, or writing letters to potential mentors for internships. Each month, we provide a menu of choices for each building block. In the case of LNS, we have mapped out the skills, in consultation with the learners, that we believe are important to be a functioning adult in the world. Before each month-long LNS workshop, we select skills that have not yet been covered, and we invite learners to brainstorm and vote upon topics of interest that would allow them to acquire that skill. For example, for the skill of being able to cook for oneself, learners proposed a Master Chef competition. For each session, they needed to find recipes, create a budget, make calculations using proportional reasoning, make and then sell the dish at lunch. They learned a wide variety of skills and were deeply engaged because they got to do what most teenagers love: eat.

Most of the program building blocks are designed this way. Learners give input on what they would like to learn, and we create a menu of workshops based on those interests. Learners who have demonstrated adequate self-management skills can participate in the self-determined learning building block that they co-create with a learning guide. Learners can also facilitate a building block. One of our most popular workshops at the moment is a learner-facilitated workshop on writing horror stories.

Social learning

In their 360° presentations, learners often report feeling significantly more ownership, more responsibility, and an increased capacity to learn effectively once they have led their own workshop. For this reason, it is now a requirement for learners to lead an own workshop before they can transition to the next program group, e.g., from Explorer to Creator

or from Creator to Changemaker (Figure 2). The learning guides provide ample support in the design and often co-facilitate these workshops when requested.

When we first began with the workshops, learners only led workshops once a day, during the Adelante building block. Now, learners are leading workshops throughout the day from 12-year-olds teaching Russian to 14- to 19-year-olds, to peer-led discussions about toxic relationships, and from Dungeons and Dragons clubs to a workshop about single-variable equations. Nearly every learner has offered a workshop to her or his peers at some point during the year. This opportunity is a way for us to underscore the Learnlife belief that learners are capable of driving their own learning. It shifts the locus of learning from the guide to the learner. Take 16-year-old H, who led a martial arts choreography workshop. H., who normally slouches and hides behind his hair, became energized by the opportunity to share his passion for martial arts – so much so that he even had the courage to throw me over his shoulder (onto a mat, of course). Not only was he a fantastic leader in the workshop – capturing the attention of squirrely 12-year-olds and inspiring learners to stay for extra hours of practice – his leadership has extended into taking other leadership roles. In community meetings, he leads conversations and has advocated for us to reinstate reading time after lunch.

Reciprocal learning is present everywhere by design. In our studios, for example, learners who have completed a level are expected to help learners who are still working on that level. Once they have finished the three levels for that studio, they can opt for further training to become a studio intern, enabling them to use all the equipment and to support other learners' projects.

Twelve-year old J. is an example of how our ethos of choice, voice, and mutual aid enables learners to flourish. When she started with Learnlife, she was sceptical whether she would have increased choice and responsibility and that ultimately, she would drive all aspects of her learning. At first, she was antagonistic, testing whether we meant what we said. But when she realized that she was in charge of her own learning, she dove headlong into different projects, creating her own rubrics, deciding how fast to work or how much to do, and designing her own challenges. She has sped through the studio levels, wanting to go as far as possible. If there are twenty possible tasks learners can choose, but only ten are expected as a minimum, M does all twenty. More recently, she led the aforementioned single-variable equation workshop for her peers.

Conclusion and next steps

Learners exercise agency when they feel safe, when they feel capable, and when they feel connected to those around them. The opportunity to practice agency needs to be theirs to seize, and programs that promote voice and choice help to convert learners into agents of their own learning journeys. The descriptions above tell the stories of what Learnlife has accomplished in the last three years. Woven into the Learnlife DNA is the aforementioned mantra: iterate forward. As such, we are already brewing plans to take learner agency to the next level. For example, the shift to remote learning during the pandemic has highlighted the primacy of learner well-being as a stepping-stone to agency. As a result, we plan to deepen our focus on learner well-being, providing more tools and support to grow self-confidence and resilience. Also, the focus on executive function has largely been imposed upon learners. We are now working with learners to find ways for them to take ownership of this process – cultivating self-awareness of their needs and a strong enough impetus to grow. In addition, Learnlife plans to launch a restorative justice program this year, which will put learners' front and centre as the custodians of community well-being and conflict resolution. Finally, we also want to find ways to make our meetings as an organization more youth-friendly so that learners can begin to participate in decision-making at different levels of the organization. As we attentively and actively listen to our learners, this list is sure to grow.

References

Bodie, G. D., Vickery, A. J., Cannava, K., & Jones, S. M. (2015). The role of "active listening" in informal helping conversations: Impact on perceptions of listener helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness and discloser

emotional improvement. *Western Journal of Communication*, 79(2), 151–173.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2014.943429>

Delizonna, L. (2017, August 24). *High-performing teams need psychological safety. Here's How to create it.* *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2017/08/high-performing-teams-need-psychological-safety-heres-how-to-create-it>

Gibson, B., & Harris, S. (2019a, August 1). Learnlife Alliance | Personal learning and adaptive groupings. *Learnlife*.
<https://learnlife.com/alliance/learning-paradigm/personal-learning-adaptive-groupings>

Gibson, B., & Harris, S. (2019b, September 1). Learnlife Alliance | Learning experiences: Design and delivery. *Learnlife*.
<https://learnlife.com/alliance/learning-paradigm/learning-experiences-design-delivery>

Gibson, B., & Harris, S. (2019c, April 1). Learnlife Alliance | Growing positive relationships. *Learnlife*.
<https://learnlife.com/alliance/learning-paradigm/growing-positive-relationships>

Jenkins, R. (2015, August 24). The power of positive regard. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-power-of-positive-regard/>

Mercer, S. (2012). The complexity of learner agency. *Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 6(2), 41–59.

[1] To replace the term and antiquated role of teachers, we have adopted the term and role 'learning guide'.

[2] The Learning Process Framework is based on a similar framework created by Stonefields School in New Zealand



This content is provided to you freely by EdTech Books.

Access it online or download it at <https://edtechbooks.org/up/learnlife>.