



# Personal Learning

## Overview

What makes learning work for you? Think about something you have learned recently, whether it is a skill, or perhaps some knowledge you have constructed around a particular topic.

How did this learning happen? Was it because someone told you that there was an “A” in it for you (whatever that means)? Was it because you were incentivised by money, a promotion, or maybe just a pat on the back?

[It turns out that](#) what motivates us best is not these external carrots and sticks, but actually what is inside us. A sense of purpose and the autonomy to build our lives around it; these are the true levers of learning.

But in practice, how can this be possible? How can education be fluid enough to support learners to pursue their unique direction in life? Personal learning is not just “possible”, but actually the most practical way to meet the challenges of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.



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- What is personal learning?
- Why is personal learning important?
- How to foster personal learning
- How does personal learning happen at Learnlife?

## What is personal learning?

Personal learning is often confused with *personalised* learning so we should deal with that first. Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different, and it matters.

Imagine you are studying a course of mathematics online, which is powered by artificial intelligence. The algorithm detects you struggling with quadratic equations and offers you more learning resources to help, that's personalised learning.

Personalised learning exists even in the offline, low-tech learning environment, where educators can customise the learning experience to support a learner's pace, for example.

The crucial thing here is that in these scenarios, the *system* is in control, not the learner. The choice; to speed up, slow down, offer resource A or B, these are all options that exist within the parameters of a predesigned structure. A personalised licence plate on your car can spell most things, but only with 7 letters and numbers, and no rude words allowed. There are firm parameters.

But a person is not predictable, and does not fit neatly into a predesigned structure, regardless of what traditional education systems have tried to do for decades. The passion a learner uncovers, the activities that spark something in them, the way their learning evolves and the changes that might occur based on a million variables from the influences around them: a person is unique.

Personal learning is directed and driven by the learner. What do you want to learn, who do you want to support you (if anyone), how do you want to learn it, when do you want...ok you get the idea. This might send administrators of traditional institutions into a cold sweat at the thought of how one might structure such an environment, but [as we have written before](#), structure doesn't have to mean rigidity, but rather organisation and coherence. There's a world of difference there.

In personal learning, the learning guide and environment are just resources, suggesting, supporting, responding, stepping forward or back when needed. The structure of learning is defined by the learner, working collaboratively with peers, learning guides, technology, community, and anything else that is needed.



## Why is personal learning important?

As a society, our whole ideology of “growing up” is about taking responsibility for ourselves, but yet in most learning environments, we rarely offer opportunities to do so beyond the tokenistic. We expect learners to somehow develop agency over their own lives whilst simultaneously scaffolding their schedules, what they do and when, whether they work in groups or individually, what a “good” piece of work looks like and all the rest of it.

Frankly, personal learning isn't just important, but vital. Vital in a world where we have to think on our feet, and know we can rely on ourselves. Vital in a world of climate change, economic instability and technology that is changing everything around us in a way we cannot even predict 10 years into the future. In such a world, which is already here incidentally, why would we want anything but a learning paradigm that supports the next generation to be the best versions of themselves?

Personal learning puts you in the driving seat.

Feel like taking a moment to reflect on your own before the next step in your project? Do what you need to, because you are trusted and empowered.

While filing away in the maker studio, did you become more fascinated with the mathematics behind that curve in the chair you made, than by the tools that were used to create it? Let's dive into that.

Made something amazing in the kitchen today and think others would buy it? Let's work out costs and pricing, and explore what drives and informs each of them.

The learning itself is in everything we do, and the best thing about that is that it is so much more effective when we get there ourselves. Through play, tinkering, reflection, discussion, curiosity, passion or purpose, if you are at the wheel, you will always arrive exactly where you should be.

The result? Learners who know themselves. Learners who take responsibility for their development, and know how to use a wide range of resources to support it. Learners who grow, mature, embrace so-called “failure” when it helps them find the true path. This is the real world which traditional education claims to prepare learners for, but yet seems instead to try to shelter them from it.

Personal learning means that learning is lifelong, life wide and will develop skills and awareness which can be called on when you need them.



## How to foster personal learning

We are not going to gloss over this: personal learning means completely rethinking our learning environment, and that is not going to happen overnight in the places that most of us went to school.

The balance between fluidity and substance is critical.

The fluid part is the stuff that, to be honest, we really shouldn't be hung up on anyway. Where in the world the learner is and when they are able to engage (we have the technology!) and what they want to focus on (there are learning opportunities in everything!).

We all want learners to develop high competence in literacy and numeracy, and we understand the domains of knowledge and skill that a progressive, just society will need of us, but there are so many ways to meet those aims on our own terms.

Fostering personal learning means, in some sense, letting go of the structures that suit administrative convenience, and asking young people instead to be the architects of their own learning. It also means letting go as learning guides; understanding that answering a learner's question for them is robbing them of the opportunity to claim that deeper sense of discovery for themselves. A learning guide is not a teacher.

The support, however, must be substantive. Personal learning is far from linear, and wellbeing is a top priority. While learners are encouraged to work independently when it is the best approach for them, there is a line between independence and isolation. We must remain present, keep space for connection, make ourselves available to learners, check in and be consistent.

In the middle our learners plot their own paths, free to follow their curiosity but safe in the knowledge that all the support and resources they might need are right where they should be.

## How does personal learning happen at Learnlife?

Learnlife learners have very specific core skills which they need to "unlock" before they can progress to more complex applications of those skills. This is all marked out on burndown charts, where they can keep track of where they are. This is for safety reasons in some areas, such as learning how to use equipment properly before they can use it on their own, but it is not as linear as it sounds.

Skills, you see, are wide open. The way they apply these skills is up to them, and then they are encouraged to find ways to iterate and transfer them. For example, a learner might learn how to use some music production software, and unlock that



skill, but then they are challenged in our *iteration week* to really take it to the next level, where they might make their own unique track.

Content is not the focus in personal learning, because content can be acquired at the touch of a button, and so much of it is obsolete before the year is out. Skills, which AI and machines will not be able to achieve for a long time yet, however, can be built throughout our lives and will be useful forever.

In *transfer week* they might then take that skill and apply it to something else. For example, learners might produce music for a theatre production scene they are involved in, or take the shape of the digital waveforms from their track to produce a piece of art.

All of this is [supported](#) by mentoring sessions, 360-degree feedback and regular reflection on where we are going, and how best to get there. Learning is never finished, open-ended and constantly surprising, and personal learning is the foundation stone in that lifelong learning journey.

## In Summary...

Instead of having a curriculum in which learners achieve the goals set for them by a system, in relative lockstep, there is another way. Instead of trying to have everyone engage in learning at the same time, on terms set for them and not by them, we have an alternative.

Personal learning is freedom to pursue what matters to you, while the learning happens through exploration, passion, purpose and curiosity, just as it should. Personal learning builds agency, ownership, responsibility and lifelong learning skills, which will help learners become active and adaptive citizens in the challenging world ahead of us.

## Our Blogs on Personal Learning

- [Learnhubs - where the magic of personal learning really happens](#)
- [Innovation for Education is a word apart \(spelling is intentional!\)](#)
- [Personal Learning & Lifelong Learning](#)
- [How personal learning can reignite your children's love of learning](#)

## Our Programmes

- [Primary Programmes](#)
- [Secondary Programmes](#)



- [Home Hub](#)
- [Community Programmes](#)

## Further Reading

- [Rethinking Education: Self-Directed Learning Fits the Digital Age | WIRED](#)
- [The Difference Between Pedagogy, Andragogy, And Heutagogy](#)
- [How to Help Students Become Self-Directed](#)
- [Children in Charge: Self-Directed Learning Programs | Edutopia](#)

## Sources

- [Self-directed learning as related to learning strategies, self-regulation, and autonomy in an English language program: A local application with global implications](#)
- [Developing Students' Learning Ability by Dint of Self-Directed Learning](#)
- [Measuring Student Success Skills: A Review of the Literature on Self-Directed Learning](#)
- [Self-directed learning characteristics: making learning personal, empowering and successful](#)