



INDEPENDENT LEARNING at Caterham School

You may remember when soulless dictation or constant repetition was part of the mundane school routine. While these teaching methods may have worked for the minority, what about the rest of us? Charlotte Luxford talks to Kim Wells about a more progressive approach

It's obvious, but everyone is different and therefore our learning styles are bound to be unique too. Caterham School in Surrey is well ahead when it comes to preparing its students for the adult world: Caterham's motto is 'Education for Life' and this is what its pupils get. The role of Director of Learning and Teaching was born in 2004 after recognising the need for each pupil to understand how they learn best and how to think independently and creatively for their future life.

Director Kim Wells has introduced countless initiatives that aren't subject-specific, but can be applied across all areas of learning. He said: "There is an intense pressure on students to produce excellent exam results, but in order to flourish in the modern world they need transferable skills to be able to think independently."

A study skills programme has been introduced, where students cover areas such as lateral thinking and learning styles in the first and second year. The school uses multiple intelligence testing to find a student's preferred

learning style and when it gets closer to GCSE and A Level, half-day courses are introduced on memorising, note-taking, speed reading and exam technique.

Kim has an open door policy and an amazing ability to help all students, covering a broad range of subjects. Study surgeries can uncover all sorts of revelations – some children discover that listening to podcasts on their iPod can help; others, reciting information to a pot plant and some more creative types find using symbols rather than words can help.

The school's study buddy scheme has also become highly successful where sixth formers volunteer 20 minutes a week to help younger students. One pair spoke informal Spanish to each other which helped both tremendously and friendships tend to grow way beyond these sessions. 'Study champions' (extremely gifted students) will help lower sixth students with coursework and sometimes become auxiliary classroom assistants.

"We want to change the direction of learning all the time; the teacher shouldn't always be at the centre of learning and with pupils teaching others, they can associate pieces of information with the individual they are teaching, thereby remembering more of the lesson's content," explained Kim.

Sixth formers are also required to take on an independent research project where students select a topic and present it in a format of their choosing whether it be an extended essay, a short film or a sustained scientific investigation.

If parents are in the least bit unconvinced by these new teaching methods the results speak for themselves: the school is the only one in the country that is both in the top 35 of the Financial Times' A-level results list and top one per cent of 'value added' (this takes into account the child's progression from start to finish, not just the results). The school was also the first independent school in the country to have achieved 'Thinking School's status from Dr Edward De Bono in 2006, which has now been upgraded to 'Training School' status by Dr De Bono himself. Parents aren't left out of the equation; Kim runs training events for parents to bring them up to speed on study skills, the 'Six Thinking Hats', and non-verbal intelligence so that they can fully understand and support pupils' work at home.

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Kim's top tips for effective learning

(1) Teach it: when you learn something difficult or important, explain it to someone else afterwards. We remember 90 per cent of what we say, hear, and do, so having to verbalise the information really does commit it to memory

(2) Listening to music isn't necessarily bad: some children are 'disturbed' by silence. If this is the case, try working with background noise, like hoovering elsewhere in the house or listen to music quietly, preferably at around 60bpm and with no lyrics

(3) Don't work for too long in one go: revision should be pretty intensive, so 20-40 minutes followed by a short break should help limit those "daydream" moments

(4) Work in different places in the house: moving to another location is a form of break, but also our memories work by association so try learning different sub-topics in different locations to help recall in the exam room

(5) Use Post-it notes for key facts: put them in places where you spend time, like on the bathroom mirror. Constantly reviewing key facts will help you remember things, but won't feel like work