Stages of Learning

The following descriptions of the Stages of Learning have been taken from the VCAA website. (http://vels.vcaaw.vic.edu.au/stages/yrs5to8/index.html)

Workshop facilitators can copy off the appropriate stage/s to suit their participants.

Years Prep to 4 – Laying the foundations <anchor link>
Years 5 to 8 – Building breadth and depth <anchor link>
Years 9 to 10 – Developing pathways <anchor link>

Years Prep to 4 – Laying the foundations

In these years the curriculum focuses on developing the fundamental knowledge, skills and behaviours in literacy and numeracy and other areas including physical and social capacities which underpin all future learning.

Laying the foundations

Beginning school is a major upheaval in children's lives, especially those who have spent the majority of their lives at home. The foundation knowledge, skills and behaviours that children must develop in Levels 1 and 2 to become successful learners at school are:

- English (Reading, Writing, Speaking and listening)
- Mathematics
- The Arts (Creating and making)
- Interpersonal Development (with an emphasis on socialisation)
- Health and Physical Education (Movement and physical activity).

Without the knowledge, behaviours and skills that are learned in these domains, children will be restricted in their capacity to succeed in the other domains as they progress through schooling. At Level 3 students begin to respond to information, ideas and beliefs from contexts beyond their immediate experience. Consistent with this development, additional standards across a range of domains in the three strands are introduced.

Domains without standards in Levels 1, 2 and 3 are nevertheless important areas of learning for children. Teachers are encouraged to provide experiences for children in each of these areas, either by teaching relevant subject matter independently or by integrating it with those domains that have measurement standards.

The first challenge at school is for children to socialise and to become engaged behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively. Engagement is a state that remains critical to success throughout schooling. Engagement moves from a minimal level of engagement where children conform, motivated by extrinsic demands, to a higher level of behavioural engagement where their motivation is more intrinsic. The latter includes resilient behaviour that is the capacity to overcome stress and adversity. Resilient children achieve more highly at school and better manage the ups and downs in life. Schools play a significant role in helping children to develop resilience.
Being socially engaged is also critical to the development of cognitive skills. Children build their ability to reason from a context or environment. The environment provides the practices, assumptions and values upon which reasoning is constructed. It follows that if children fail to socialise in a way where they understand the norms and values of a classroom, they will have difficulty understanding the reasoning that flows from those norms and values, and they will be subsequently hindered in their capacity to transfer that skill to more formal applications.

While behaviour is significantly determined by habits, it is also sometimes reactive, being influenced by emotional states and cognitive processes. Emotional engagement may be defined in terms of general wellbeing at school; for example, happiness, safety, calmness and empowerment, as opposed to sadness, worry, helplessness and stress. A key emotional skill that should be developed early and maintained throughout schooling is impulse control. Teachers can help children to develop impulse control by teaching them to recognise the feelings in themselves and others, by implementing behaviour management approaches that encourage children to regulate emotions, and by helping children to reflect on their behaviours.

Another key theme is that knowledge is constructed. We build our brains through experience, both real and perceived. Learning is cumulative, and consequently, the ability to transfer learning is a key skill. Children begin schooling with knowledge and skills. Much of this will be true and accurate, but some of it will not, even though it is believed to be true. One of the fundamental skills successful learners must develop is to reflect on learning, to link new knowledge to existing knowledge, to establish what is true and accurate, important and useful, and to challenge what is untrue and inaccurate. Giving children opportunities to be reflective improves the quality of learning, since learning with understanding is more likely to promote transfer than memory.
Years 5 to 8 – Building breadth and depth

In these years students progress beyond the foundations and their literacy and numeracy becomes more developed. An expanded curriculum program provides the basis for in depth learning within all domains in the three learning strands.

Breadth and depth
During Years 5 to 8 most young people experience the move from primary to secondary school. In this sense, the middle years of schooling tend to cover two distinct phases, Years 5 to 6 and Years 7 to 8. During Years 5 to 6 some young people will experience the onset of adolescence (begin puberty) while others will remain in late childhood. Differences in emotional, behavioural and cognitive development among students may be vast.

Between ten years of age and puberty, the brain destroys its weakest connections preserving only those that experience has shown to be useful. During the late childhood and teenage years, functions that carry the most messages strengthen, and the weaker ones are cut out. This process is most predominant in the area critical to controlling planning, working memory, organisation, anticipating consequences, controlling impulses and mood modulation.

Young people increasingly differentiate themselves in terms of their peers, physical attributes and competence. They begin to associate achievement less with effort, and more with skill and cognitive ability. While they may give the appearance of being engaged by novelty, to hold their interest through to achievement, young people increasingly require content that is perceived as valuable, is consistent with personal goals, and/or leads to an important outcome. In other words, during Years 5 to 8 young people increasingly come to view content as a choice, rather than an imperative.

In Years 5 to 8 young people become more complex thinkers. They begin to understand more abstract cognitive processes such as how to apply logical reasoning to both ideas and concrete objects. In other words, they begin learning how to apply many of the practical skills they have mastered in earlier years.

At secondary school students are required to be more independent, flexible and self-regulatory in the process of their learning. They begin to expand their thinking in subjects such as mathematics and scientific method. They also begin to organise their thinking in more formal ways by understanding processes such as research, critical and creative thinking and problem-solving. Consequently, they become capable of distinguishing between the processes and thinking tools specific to particular problems and ideas. They need to develop the competency of reflecting on and evaluating these processes.

However, while early adolescents become capable of thinking abstractly, their brains are still not fully mature. The areas mediating spatial, sensory, and auditory and language functions appear largely developed, but other areas are still maturing. There is also evidence to suggest myelination (or maturation of nerve cells) is still occurring.
Myelination affects the speed at which messages are processed, as well as fine motor skill development.

To compensate for underdevelopment, the adolescent brain relies heavily on an area of the brain called the amygdala, which creates a tendency to react on instincts. Biologically, adolescents do not have the same abilities as adults to control their actions and to make sound decisions.

Remaining focused and modulating moods is a challenge during early adolescence. Assisting students to communicate, participate and work cooperatively, to have self-control, and to resolve conflicts thoughtfully without resorting to avoidance or aggression helps students to excel during this stage of schooling. Learning to manage emotions, predict consequences, develop optimistic thinking habits, and set goals are also skills that improve student achievement and wellbeing.
Years 9 to 10 – Developing pathways

In these years students develop greater independence of mind and interests. They seek deeper connections between their learning and the world around them and explore how learning might be applied in that world. They need to experience learning in work and community settings as well as the classroom. They are beginning to develop preferred areas for their learning.

Developing pathways

By the time students reach Year 9 they are well into adolescence and beginning to see their future as adults. These years are developmentally distinct from Years 7 to 8 in the sense that, when beginning secondary school, children are predominantly in a stage of developmental transition from childhood to adolescence. In Years 9 to 10, however, not only are most students well into adolescence, they are beginning to think of themselves as adults, looking towards their future roles in life. They are experiencing profound physical, social, emotional and intellectual development changes as they move to greater levels of challenge and independence.

Parents and teachers have often become less important models, especially with regard to issues that are of immediate concern. In contrast, peers have become more important as models.

Added responsibility and expectation can be a time of adventure, learning and growth. It can also be a time of fear, loss of confidence and insecurity. It has been noted that the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood are becoming more poorly defined, as adolescents mature physically at younger ages and enter the adult world of work and family at older ages; this has led to less clear roles for both parents and adolescents.

The post-compulsory years of schooling are a key developmental point to improve coping skills. The greatest shift in coping occurs between 14 and 16 years which make it the optimum time for adolescents to contemplate their coping behaviour. Students in this stage often pass the compulsory age of attendance at school. They have a growing interest in the future and, in particular, the pathways they intend to pursue, so they increasingly are aware of the world outside the school. For some this means preparation for work or work-specific training, and for others it means preparation for post-compulsory schooling on the way to a career. In this sense, adolescents are more likely to judge learning activities and experiences in terms of where they will lead, and respond positively to a curriculum that links with, and has meaning for their lives outside as well as in the school.

School is more likely to become a means to an end. Many activities and experiences at school may not trigger curiosity, activate information seeking or develop competence. However, in relation to a broader perspective of the self, it is important to do well in the pursuit of lifestyle choices and/or career goals. This is the last moment in their schooling when we can guarantee students access to the knowledge and skills which all young Australians need as they take their first steps into adult life.
Competent learners begin to use more sophisticated cognitive strategies than in earlier years. For instance, they are aware of, and capable of, reflecting on the differences between mathematic, scientific, literary, historical and artistic methods. They are flexible learners who apply a number of approaches to understanding information in different methods. They value opportunities to explore new ideas in depth, commonly in cooperation with their peers, in an environment where they are encouraged to take intellectual risks.

At this stage, learning is enhanced by opportunities for students to participate in projects they believe to be relevant and important to their lifestyle or career goals that occur over extended periods and are learner directed. These projects encourage deep thinking, a process that gives students an opportunity to apply knowledge and skills flexibly, and to develop a meaningful sense of their application and purpose. To think deeply, students need to relax and consider all of the relevant angles from which an idea might be considered. Students construct a thinking framework that follows a process from conception to application.

As well as developing skills for increasingly sophisticated and specialised learning, students require the skills to effectively participate in their communities and workplaces. Students will have commenced learning these skills previously but require a level of competence for them to participate in projects where they may initiate and apply skills. These skills include: basic fundamental skills (for example, literacy, numeracy, technology); people skills (for example, communication, teamwork, customer service); thinking skills (for example, organising, problem-solving, creating, planning); personal attributes (for example, responsibility including for one's own health and physical wellbeing, flexibility, self-esteem); business skills (for example, innovation and enterprise); and community skills (for example, civics).