

# Sabbatical Study 2018

*To investigate the SOLO  
taxonomy, and how it can be used  
to assist learners to better  
articulate their next learning steps,  
learning strengths and goals.*

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Thanks also to my husband, Rob - who has supported me in my career, and growth in education.

## **Executive Summary**

This idea first originated with me earlier 2017 through the Teacher Only Day professional development with Pam Hook. I needed time to process these ideas and investigate further as I could see the strength of it especially in a small school setting. The opportunity to take a sabbatical was made aware to me and I followed through on this.

## **Purpose**

To investigate and clarify what the SOLO taxonomy is, and how it can be implemented to assist learners to better articulate their next learning steps, and take greater responsibility for their own learning (agency) across the curriculum, especially in the core subjects of Reading, Writing and Mathematics.

## **Background and Rationale**

Being a teaching principal in a small rural school can be a double edged sword - it can offer wonderful opportunities to develop strong relationships with students, families and local people who are very supportive of the local school. However, it can also appear to be the end of the earth, where not much might seem to change over time. Fully aware of this, I needed to get out of the daily grind, challenge thinking patterns, and the feeling that the world is passing me by. To take time to explore good pedagogy, have more than one person to talk to about best practice, and take time to challenge and refresh - physically, mentally and professionally. The decision to investigate SOLO was easily made, with having had a teacher only day with Pam Hook in early 2017 - this taxonomy transcends the digital / paper format, age specific requirements, and meets each student where they are at in terms of mastering a skill or learning area, as well as offering further challenges to explore or deepen their knowledge. After the Teacher only Day, there was little time to go deeper, and to implement aspects of the SOLO taxonomy as fully as I would have liked. Additionally, ERO had asked about identifying progress, and this was also a prompt to deepen my understanding of the SOLO process.

Learners who can articulate their learning journey have stronger pathways for remembering new knowledge, and take greater responsibility for their own learning, motivation and progress.... SOLO offers a way of scaffolding some of the learning discoveries to be made in curriculum as well as social (Key competency) learning contexts. Firstly, I needed to know more about the origins and pedagogical depth behind what SOLO was, as well as see it in action in classes.

## **Methodology**

Biggs and Collis in 1960s developed a scaffold for acquisition of knowledge / information. When digging deeper, I found about what solo was, its origins, and the best practice regarding implementation - fully aware that in schools, practicality was always going to look different. However, to a small school principal in the deep south, this SOLO revolution had come only latterly - John Hattie's University of Auckland Trial in schools in Auckland in the early 2000's was new to me, and the implementation has had a lasting impact that has filtered through the country.

After the theory, came the visits, to well performing schools where achievement levels are high, and they are flagships for providing examples of best practice, and innovation. I found other teachers before me had also visited them for a variety of Professional development learnings.

## **Findings**

As with anything, the topic of study does not sit in a vacuum. - along with implementing aspects of the SOLO taxonomy, over long periods of time, school leaders had intentionally grown the pedagogical depth through long term settled staff, and had in their school journeys embedded practices of collaborative learning, student agency, and school wide language for success which were highly obvious - team culture, creating engaging and rich contexts for deep learning were also very purposefully implemented by the leadership.

One principal shared their thoughts about The Golden Circles by Simon Sinek - being all about the Why - and once that is established, the rest is a matter of developing according to your context.

'Solo is a tool' that meshes along side and helps classroom teachers scaffold depth and complexity into learning opportunities;

While the SOLO structure has four distinct stages, (Unistructural, multistructural, relational & extended abstract), they were summarised, by the teachers using the process as;

"The taxonomy has the stages ... crawling, walking, running ..."

"Or collecting, connecting and creating."

The scaffolds - purposeful graphic organisers, developed with Pam Hook. (Appendix A) identify with the different depths of learning as shown by their symbol, and gradually progress from surface to deep knowledge and understandings. Rubrics are developed alongside the graphic organisers to help the learner assess where they are at, and what their next step is in learning. To master a real awareness of the topic, they can also see what the 'extended abstract' would require, and what is required to achieve this. This scaffold also gives a clear sense of progression - from moving from one 'level' of the rubric to another over a period of targeted learning. These rubrics can be developed in specific areas of a topic, or be broader, depending on the topic being focussed on.

'Where things get hard' can be identified by the student and they can be more aware of where they need particular help when they can see what it is that they are meant to be learning. They develop strength in deciding where they can seek this help from, google, peer, teacher, community.

The SOLO HOT maps (Appendix B), are further tools to help develop the depth of thinking in creating the deep and rich contexts, as well as getting to the basic of elements of the task. It needs to be remembered they are a tool, and cannot, or should not be used in isolation. They must be used in the context where they best meet needs.

## **Implications**

In a small school it is crucial to create a base, where there is depth of learning and pedagogical reasoning behind strategic decisions. Teams can rapidly change, (e.g. the end of 2017 saw 2 out of 3 teachers leave), and this has implications for any programmes. They must stand strong and be embedded in the school structure.

Growing a fundamental and practical list of progressions relevant to the students and context is also an important factor. The better you know the children's needs, the better you are able to cater for them in a multi level context.

SOLO can be integrated across whichever platform best meets the needs of the learners in a sole charge context. The key competencies are one way to embed the thinking, another is across the key learning areas of Reading, Writing and Mathematics.

## **Conclusions**

The SOLO study sabbatical was very beneficial, and acted as a lever to be able to visit schools. To visit and spend time with principals, who explained the administration and leaderships aspects of leading change. To visit and spend time visiting classrooms to observe aspects of SOLO in action, imbedded within programmes. Evident during these visits was the children excitement about their learning. They were developing the skills and progression stages to be able to explain, and know, within themselves that they were trying their hardest, were motivated about their own pathways, and working collaboratively to achieve the best they could. They explained this to me, the visitor in their class. This time spent in the classrooms was the most stimulating aspect of the learning for me.

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# Appendix A



# Appendix B