LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: How can 'Independent Study' time be made more productive for students so that it enhances their achievement?

LSIS Research

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Background

Newham College of Further Education operates in a London borough that is defined by its cultural diversity and economic status. The borough is ranked as the third most densely populated and the poorest London borough on the Income Scale Index, and the local authority with the second highest level of unemployment in London. Residents in the area speak more than 200 different languages and dialects and, a large number are also low skilled. One fifth (20%) lack any form of qualifications. The borough also has the lowest level of qualified residents of all London boroughs at L1 and L2, and grades in GCSE English and mathematics trail behind the London average of 58%.

The college operates an 'open access' policy which literally guarantees places in regard to admissions onto programmes of learning. All learners admitted are initially assessed at the point of admission before enrolling onto chosen courses. The college has several priorities as part of its mission statement, one of which is: *'adults seeking through their own motivation and choice to progress or up-skill to levels 2 and 3 with a strong emphasis on full levels 2 and 3'.* The college has established procedures in place for adults requiring on-course support with literacy, numeracy and ESOL. This could well include learners enrolled on Level 2 and Level 3 courses who are often diagnosed with Entry 3/Level 1literacy skills to have support mechanisms within their learning programmes aimed at enabling them to succeed and progress within the college onto Vocational areas, Access programmes and HE provision.

My study involved 23 learners pursuing a Level 3 BTEC Health and Social Care course. I wanted to explore how I might promote the learners' independent learning skills outside the classroom in ways that would meet and enhance their differentiated needs. This included an emphasis on independent learning in the classroom which involved planning comprehensive schemes of work, differentiated lesson planning, setting assignments and giving timely feedback. Writers on the topic (e.g. Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) advocate that for learning to be effective, learners need to take full ownership of their learning and teachers need to acknowledge different styles of learning.
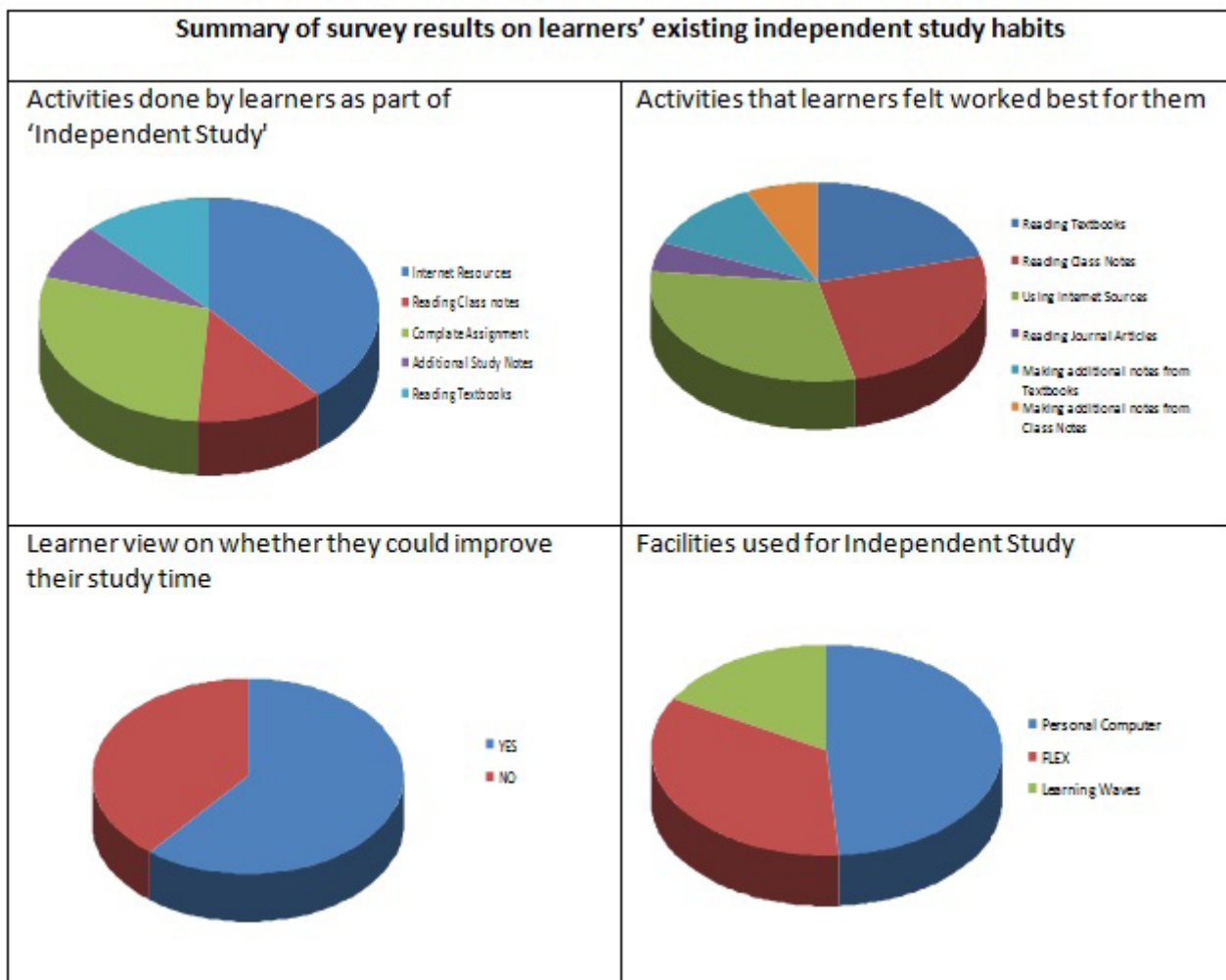
Starting point

Evidence such as teachers' observation, external verification feedback on learners' assignments, teachers' feedback, and grades achieved by individual learners all pointed to the value of supporting and focusing on independent study. Consequently, I carried out an initial survey on the students' existing independent study habits, which involved all 23 learners enrolled on the course. The questionnaire covered the type of activities, resources, what worked best for them and the amount of time they spent each week carrying out independent studies.

The survey revealed that most (16) learners spent less than three hours a week in independent study activities, four spent 3-4 hours whilst three learners spent between 6-7 hours each week. Just over two-thirds (14) used independent study time for completing their assignments. Some used the time for reading class notes (6) and reading textbooks (6) and a few (4) used the time for making additional notes. Most of the learners (20) reported that they relied solely on the Internet and/or some form of ICT related resource to support their independent study and just over half (13) felt this kind of activity helped them best. Around half also felt that reading text books and class notes (9 and 11 respectively) helped them too. Nearly all the students (22) saw that independent study was literally helping them with the course, but 14 out of 23 said that they felt they could improve how they used their independent study time. Most students (20) used a personal computer for independent study, around two-thirds (14) used FLEX (the library) and around one-third (7) used the college's VLE (Learning Waves).

As a result of these findings, it became important for me, as one of their main subject teachers, to employ strategies in the classroom to help learners make better use of independent learning and maximise use of study skills' opportunities in relation to setting personal goals and working toward deadlines with assignments. Geoff Petty (2009, p.357) talks of giving responsibility to students to enable them to:

Summary of survey results on learners' existing independent study habits

Activities done by learners as part of 'Independent Study'
- Internet Resources
- Reading Class notes
- Complete Assignment
- Additional Study Notes
- Reading Textbooks

Activities that learners felt worked best for them
- Reading Textbooks
- Reading Class Notes
- Using Internet Sources
- Reading Journal Articles
- Making additional notes from Textbooks
- Making additional notes from Class Notes

Learner view on whether they could improve their study time
- YES
- NO

Facilities used for Independent Study
- Personal Computer
- FLEX
- Learning Waves

'learn how to find their own resources, how to discover and then correct their own deficiencies and how to monitor their own learning by their own standards'.

Petty makes comparisons with the work of management theorists and the principle of giving employees autonomy which adds to their sense of responsibility and increased motivation such that they become more efficient at their work. Giving learners control over their learning empowers them in the same way. *'To this end, learners themselves need to show commitment to the setting of realistic targets as well as a flexible approach to their learning if the principle is to work'* (Marshall & Rowland, 1998).

Teaching and learning processes

Learners were already working on intensive study plans based on schemes of work devised by the course team. These covered the required topic/subject matter, learning outcomes and activities and functional skills. The priority for me was to boost individual confidence and build on prior learning by ensuring that independent study activities were integrated and appropriately linked to homework. For example, learners were given different aspect of a task based on the topic covered during the lesson to individually research within a given time limit. They would then meet in their study groups, elect a leader, and decide on

the presentation form and style to report back to the main learning group.

My research also considered how learners could get even more value from their independent study time, so that it not only gained their interest, but gave learners an opportunity to take more ownership of their learning. I decided to encourage learners to take part in a peer mentoring programme to assist other learners within the group who needed additional support to complete their work. This provided them with an opportunity for them to discuss in their peer groups related aspects of the topics that posed a problem during the lesson. Follow-up lessons allowed them to present their points of view and come up with solutions and suggestions under guidance from the teacher.

I also set out to maximise the tutorial and review process that was already in place. This meant setting personalised targets – for example, map out study time at the start of each term, proofread written work using buddy support, attend classes regularly and submit work on time – that were more focused, realistic and matched to assignments. Learners had to fully understand how to organise themselves and manage their study time in order to meet deadlines. It was essential they were not just aware of the importance of meeting deadlines, but developed confidence in working towards their learning targets. This was done through a six-weekly review and

feedback system that was used to promote discussions, monitor and evaluate achievement, give feedback on progress and plan future improvements.

Impact

Learners made good, steady progress in the development of their study and presentation skills, research techniques, and participation in class activities over the duration of the study (January - May). Their improved skills were reflected in the grades they achieved with three quarters of the 20 learners who completed the course achieving 4-10 distinctions, and a quarter achieving no less than 3 distinctions. The overall success rate for this group stood at 87% by the end of June.

Learners' research skills had developed to a very good level and this attracted comments from the External Verifier's sampling of individual learners' assignments. Comments noted that learners were producing far better scripts and to a good standard and this had attracted more constructive and positive feedback from teachers.

Interviews with learners from the class showed how they appreciated how the study skills intervention had helped their development in relation to acquisition of the course-based skills, and/or enhanced their progress towards achieving their personal targets. Comments included:

'I did not always like asking for help from the teacher - I was more comfortable using online sources to help me

interpret text to supplement my research work. The independent study skills I acquired on the course helped me to achieve distinctions for most of my assignments'. [Achieved 6 distinctions, 3 merits and 2 passes]

'Independent study helped me to develop my personal skills, particularly communication. I preferred to read textbooks and use the teacher's notes and spent up to 3 hours a day on homework and related independent study activities. My commitment had helped me to secure a place at university to pursue adult nursing'. [Achieved 5 distinctions, 3 merits and 3 passes]

'I maximised the use of independent study time by using the college's VLE site to access materials from previous lessons and spend quality time in the library. I believe that I became a more rounded student, with excellent communication skills, team working skills and very good attendance and punctuality.' [Achieved 6 distinctions, 3 merits and 2 passes]

'Strategies put in place by the teacher and the well planned support on the course had helped me to develop vocabulary, communication and writing skills. The support was "amazing".

I learnt to invest a lot of time on independent studies and spent at least 3 hours a day on course-based assignments. I was extremely excited to acquire a place at university to study events management. [Achieved 6 distinctions, 3 merits and 2 passes]

Clearly, the learners on this course showed that having an emphasis on support strategies and the reinforcement of activities surrounding independent studies can, and do lead to improved learning, and ultimately boost individual successes and the overall standards of achievement.

Conclusion

Working with this group of very committed learners, I was able to promote positive attitudes to independent study by encouraging learners to manage their time and take responsibility and autonomy for their learning targets. I was proactive in my planning and preparation in order to get learners to share in peer group support and mentoring; to take responsibility and autonomy for their learning beyond the classroom. Underpinning all these strategies was getting them to actively participate in the planning and review of their targets, and act on teacher feedback.

Further reading

Jin, L & Cortazzi, M (2006) Changing Practices in Chinese Cultures of Learning. Language, Culture and Curriculum, 19 (1), pp. 5-20

Marshall, L & Rowland F, (1998, 3rd edition) A Guide to Learning Independently. London: Open University Press

Petty, G (2009, 4th edition) Teaching Today: A Practical Guide. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd

Meyer, B., Haywood, N., Sachdev, D., & Faraday, S. (2008) Independent Learning – A Literature Review. Research Report, DCSF-RR051. Learning and Skills Network. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-learning-literature-review

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