What is independent learning and what are the benefits for students?

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How is independent learning viewed by teachers?

'Independent Learning' is often linked with other approaches to learning such as 'personalisation', 'student-centred learning' and 'ownership' of learning. Discussion of independent learning frequently arises in the context of important issues such as student-teacher roles and relationships, and the role of information and communications technology (ICT) in learning.

The aim of this literature review was to identify reliable, robust and relevant research to provide a detailed picture of independent learning and its possible impact on students. The review found a number of different terms to describe independent learning, the most common reflecting the idea of 'self-regulated learning'. The review highlighted some evidence of benefits to students particularly in the form of improved motivation and better management of their learning. The authors of the review emphasised that independent learning does not merely involve students working alone and stressed the important role teachers can play in enabling and supporting independent learning.

The review suggested that successful independent learning depends on a number of external and internal factors. External factors involve the creation of a strong relationship between teachers and students and the establishment of an 'enabling environment' in which ICT can be an important element. Internal factors are the skills that individual students have to acquire. These include cognitive skills such as focusing of memory and attention and problem-solving, metacognitive skills associated with an understanding of how learning occurs, and affective skills related to feelings and emotions.

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What were the benefits of independent learning for students?

The review found some evidence of the benefits of independent learning, including:
- improved academic performance;

- increased motivation and confidence;
- greater student awareness of their limitations and their ability to manage them;
- enabling teachers to provide differentiated tasks for students; and
- fostering social inclusion by countering alienation.

The authors found widespread evidence of improved academic performance but acknowledged that this could not always be related solely to independent learning approaches. One example from the UK they refer to is from Thomas Telford School, the first comprehensive school in which 100% of students gained A–C grades in at least five GCSEs. The school claimed that one of the reasons for this success was the development of independent learning skills across the school. A study from the Netherlands suggested that: *Students in self-regulated learning environments are more motivated to learn, report more enjoyment of the material and are more actively involved in their learning than those who study in more restrictive environments.*

Other research examined the effects of a number of interventions aimed at improving the education of African Caribbean boys in London boroughs. It found that the teaching and development of study skills, such as revision techniques, essay writing and problem solving, was important, particularly when integrated with strategies aimed at countering alienation.

Supporting students in self-regulation, providing feedback and helping them highlight progress was found to be especially important among remedial readers and other students with special educational needs.

Studies in the review found that using independent learning approaches enabled teachers to organise a wider range of activities in their classrooms and to focus more on teaching and learning than on organization or behaviour. For example it enabled teachers to work with specific groups while other groups worked independently.

Two studies suggested that students who are independent learners work to higher standards, are more motivated and have higher self-esteem than other children. The students develop skills that help them further their own learning by using their own ideas to form opinions; solving problems and using a range of strategies in their learning.

What were the key elements of independent learning?

The review authors suggested that the key ingredient in independent learning was the shift of responsibility for the learning process from the teacher to the student. This involved students acquiring an understanding of their learning, being motivated to learn and collaborating with teachers to structure their learning environment. They found a consensus in the literature that independent learning did not merely involve students working alone; teachers have a key part to play in enabling and supporting independent learning though, for example, structuring group work.

Whilst offering a number of models for self-learning the review authors conceptualised independent learning in terms of processes of self-regulation. These were organised around four or more phases for students to complete including: planning, self-monitoring, controlling the pace and direction of the work and evaluation. Evaluation included students' feelings of pleasure or otherwise. Self-motivation was also identified as necessary for successful independent learning.

'External' elements which supported independent learning included the development of a strong relationship between teachers and students, and the establishment of an 'enabling environment'. Research in the review described an 'enabling environment' as one which included an appropriate 'physical environment', a flexible approach to time that teachers gave students to work on specific tasks and a shared willingness to undertake independent learning on the part of students. Appropriate resources were also necessary and it was important that teachers were knowledgeable about the work being done.

An essential element of independent learning identified in the review was positive relationships between teachers and students, based on trust.   A mutual responsibility for learning, which drew in students' experiences in their family and local community, was also necessary.

The skills which the review found to be necessary for successful engagement in independent learning are covered in the next section.

What skills did students need?
The review identified a number of skills that students needed to acquire in order to engage successfully in independent learning:

- Cognitive skills: such as being able to construct informal rules for solving problems; classify objects according to given criteria; form hypotheses; and reason logically. The review authors suggested that these skills were important for creating 'learner readiness'. An early years study cited in the review concluded that by the age of seven, with the right assistance, students are generally able to hold an internal dialogue using 'thinking language'.
- Metacognitive skills: the review found evidence that Year 6 students were able to describe *how* they learn, and to identify key activities essential for learning such as listening, remembering, applying previously learnt knowledge and using formal strategies. One group of students specifically referred to the 'look, cover, write, check' strategy. Other studies highlighted the importance of students being able to reflect on what they had done, monitor their progress and use self-assessment in order to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Affective skills: these skills are related to managing feelings. Studies in the review identified motivation as the most important affective attribute in relation to independent learning. One study suggested that another important affective skill, which is related to motivation, is 'delay of gratification'. This refers to the ability to wait for achievement outcomes.

How did teachers promote independent learning?
The review stressed the key role of teachers in assisting students to become independent learners by ensuring that students were actively involved in learning. The research found a number of strategies that supported students' independent learning including:
- scaffolding: this refers to the supportive structure provided by skilled others, in this case teachers, which aids students in their learning. The objective is the gradual transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the student step by step, the teacher responding flexibly to students' responses rather than following a predetermined teaching path;
- providing students with opportunities to self-monitor: the review suggested self-monitoring depends on the two processes of establishing goals and receiving

feedback from others and from oneself. Teachers encouraged students to self-monitor by helping them use internal and external feedback to see whether the strategies they were using were effective for achieving learning goals;

- offering models of behaviour: independent learning was promoted by encouraging students to model the behaviour of their teachers, including, for example, teachers showing students how categorising information made it easier to remember;
- developing communication that included language focused on learning: this helped students become more aware of the steps involved in learning, understand their own learning styles and helped students and teachers share their thinking;
- providing feedback on homework: this was found to improve students' confidence in working independently and to help them develop the reflective aspect of independent learning.

The review concluded that in successful independent learning part of the role of the teacher shifted from an expert transmitting knowledge to that of a 'coach' helping students to acquire the strategies necessary for learning. It suggested a key activity was teachers helping children to create their own representations of learning goals.

A number of studies suggested that ICT played a helpful role in independent learning because:

- offered opportunities for the easy assessment and measurement of self-directed learning;
- increased the speed of access of information; and
- provided a medium for interaction between learners and between learners and their teachers.

The review referred to the General Teaching Council for England's suggestion that teachers should plan classroom activities to encourage creativity and diversity of responses such as offering students the opportunity to present their work in different ways, including video, written and oral presentations.

How did schools promote independent learning?

The review found that promoting independent learning flourished in the context of a whole-school approach, including appropriate guidance and support for head teachers and strategic managers. Aspects of whole-school policy and practice which helped support independent learning included:

- support for teachers: several authors noted that school support for teachers promoting independent learning was a significant factor;
- study support: the review identified study support as an important way in which schools can promote independent learning. Study support involved a range of learning activities taking place outside school hours. Findings indicated that there was a strong connection between independent learning and study support since it enabled students to voluntarily choose their learning activities and set their own learning goals;
- empowering students to use self-regulation: studies from the US found some evidence that whole-school policies which taught students to regulate their own learning behaviour were effective in supporting independent learning. These approaches offered students learning strategies, showed students how to use them, gave students the opportunity to use them and then evaluate them; and

- student voice: the review suggested that that this gave students the opportunity to influence school strategies and therefore gave them some ownership of new approaches to learning.

How was the study carried out?

The review authors conducted a systematic review and synthesised the resulting evidence. The stages of the review comprised:
- development of inclusion and exclusion criteria;
- devising and conducting a search strategy;
- initial screening and quality assurance;
- development of a framework for analytical review;
- review and synthesis of evidence from the literature;
- further quality assurance; and
- iterative refinement of key findings and themes.

The review was based on UK and international literature. Most of the studies in the review were cohort studies (groups selected on the basis of their exposure to a particular intervention and followed up for specific outcomes), case-control studies (groups experiencing the intervention were matched with ones that did not experience it and a retrospective analysis used to look for differences between the two groups), or simple case studies.

What are the implications of the study for practitioners?

In completing this digest the authors began to ask the following questions about the implications for teachers and school leaders:

Teachers:
- Moving from whole-class directive teaching to more of a coaching approach was found to be a key step in fostering independent learning. Perhaps you could start in a small way by adapting a part of one of the topics to convert it into a problem students can tackle for themselves?
- The review emphasised the importance of students' learning cognitive and metacognitive skills, which are features of thinking skills approaches. If you are not familiar with thinking skills activities, are there colleagues you could work with to devise simple activities you can build into your lessons that help students acquire the thinking skills, such as classifying, comparing, suggesting hypotheses?
- The review authors suggest that assessment for learning has a key part to play in developing attitudes to learning that are helpful for students when they monitor their own work. Engaging students in peer and self-review supported this process. Would you find it useful to create opportunities for students to do this, in order to begin the process of prompting students to take responsibility for their own learning?

School leaders:
- A whole-school approach to independent learning would not only help individual teachers, but would begin to create new attitudes to independent learning among students. Would it be helpful to devise a strategy for all classes to follow for some of their lessons? Could you begin with students working initially in pairs and later as individuals?

- The review highlighted the importance of feedback from others (or from oneself) as a key part of students taking responsibility for their own learning. In order to help students become familiar with feedback, would it be helpful to adopt it as a policy for all classes as an addition or alternative to grade marking?
- The review emphasised the key role of teachers in making independent learning work. How familiar are your teachers with the elements of independent learning such as thinking skills, planning and self- evaluation? Are there teachers in your school who are familiar with these skills who could act as coaches for other teachers who are finding their way? Or are there people in the local authority or university who could provide some staff development in this area?

Where can I find out more?

Practitioners may find helpful the following Research for Teachers summaries about students' learning and the strategies that can be used to enhance it:

Raising achievement through group work
Available at:
http://www.tla.ac.uk/site/SiteAssets/RfT1/06RE034%20Raising%20achievement%20through%20group%20work.pdf

Promoting students' persistence in meeting challenges
Available at:
http://www.tla.ac.uk/site/SiteAssets/RfT1/06RE041%20Promoting%20students'%20persistence%20in%20meeting%20challenges.pdf