

In the know ...

Learning how to study independently is an important skill that will serve students both now and in their future education endeavours. Andy McHugh looks at how secondary teachers can instil independent study habits.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH



How to teach and encourage independent study skills

There are some students who have such a broad and deep knowledge of some topics that it is difficult to teach them. This "nice problem" stems from the fact that those students study in their own time, independently of the work we give them as teachers.

It adds up. Students who routinely learn outside of the classroom build up a body of knowledge and make connections between these pieces of knowledge. The effect is that they are better equipped to solve problems and to analyse or evaluate with accuracy and fluency. In studying independently, students effectively multiply the amount of time they spend learning, compared with those who rely solely on classroom teaching.

According to multiple studies (which you can find in Meyer's 2010 paper) independent learning benefits students in their acquisition of knowledge, the ability to judge accurately their own competency, it builds confidence and it increases engagement. As Meyer suggests, though, these effects are experienced differently by different groups of students, depending upon their individual contexts.

So, the question is, how should we teach independent learning skills so that all students achieve the maximum benefit? Below are some strategies worth considering.

Create the right conditions

Creating the conditions for developing independent learners is vital. Without particular attention being paid to this, you leave it to chance as to whether students will acquire the skills they need. To do this, you need to understand the barriers that well-meaning students have to overcome, in order to be truly independent.

First, there needs to be an environment where independent learning can actually take place. This means that there should be (a) access to information, (b) a lack of distractions and (c) space to make sense of the information in order to learn it.

For many students, this simply means (a) internet access, (b) leave your mobile phone in a different room and (c) have a desk to sit at to write down what you have learnt.

However, there is more to it than that. Access to information is only possible if students know how to search for it. Lack of distractions is not only from electronic devices, it can be social distractions in their lives. And many students do not even have a desk at home.

We might want students to be truly independent, but some will automatically find it easier, due to social factors beyond both their and our control. This is where building a home-school relationship is important. Parents might not always appreciate the

impact that the home has on their child's education, or might not know what to prioritise in order to help their child.

It is not a teacher's job to tell a parent how to bring up their children, but it can sometimes be helpful to suggest things "that have worked for students in the past" in order to nudge parents towards positive changes they could make.

This is controversial, but my experience has been that parents are grateful to receive such guidance (when it is phrased carefully). Having a good, pre-existing relationship with those parents pays off, as they will more likely trust your advice, rather than see it as an attack on their parenting.

Provide sufficient motivation

Students who are motivated enough to complete independent study do so because they see value in it. This can come down to a number of factors. Perhaps the teacher has explained well how the students stand to benefit from it. Maybe the students themselves have seen first-hand the benefits of doing it. Or there may be other factors such as parenting that could be nudging the students in the right direction. More often than not though, it is a combination.

Ultimately, students need to see that independent study is an essential part of their education, not just an "optional" addition to it.

Unfortunately, many students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not experience these positive influences as often as some of their peers. The disadvantage is then compounded further, as the gap widens between the haves and the have-nots.

Motivating the least advantaged students should, therefore, be where the focus lies for us as teachers. Just as we would scaffold responses to challenging in-class tasks, we should also scaffold our guidance on independent study.

- Step 1: Break down what it means, what it looks like when done properly and then demonstrate visibly a successful outcome. Getting students to buy into the value of independent learning is crucial, as they will be more likely to pay attention to the next step.
- Step 2: Give students a brief taste of independent study, followed by positive but meaningful feedback on their efforts. Remember, students will be more motivated to study independently if they have already experienced success with it in the past, no matter how small the success was. Building small-scale independence into your weekly routine with the students will give them a huge edge by the time the stakes are raised, further on in their school careers. At this point, what is being done is less important than the fact that something is being done at all. Building good routines is essential.
Increase students' attention span

A major reason why students are sometimes poor at independent study is the lack of time-parameters. How long should independent study take? How long should study sessions last? One way to mitigate this is to teach students to work for short intervals, followed by a short break.

The Pomodoro Technique, created by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s, is a good method to use for this. Students will not be as likely to plough on for too long. Conversely, they will not be put off by the prospect of long and arduous study sessions.

Independent study techniques

Promoting some effective independent study techniques with your students should also help.

Low-stakes quizzes: Low-stakes quizzes are one of the most effective study methods you could use. Simply reading your revision notes will not have anywhere near the same impact on learning as students can fool themselves into thinking they have understood and memorised content when they have not. Students can design quizzes on their own, can pair up with each other, or can access paid or even free quizzes online.

Flash cards: Flash cards are one adaptation of these low-stakes quizzes, with many students turning to online platforms such as Quizlet to create or download topic or even course-specific sets. The best thing about using these low-stakes quizzes is that you can accurately track your progress. You can read more on the research evidence for this method via the Chartered College of Teaching (2019).

Flipped learning: Another independent learning technique students should experience is flipped learning. You can implement this in a simple way. Over the course of a scheme of work, tell students what they will be learning about in the following lesson. Then ask them if they can find out one piece of information about the topic, to bring to the next lesson. Invariably, some will find things out and some will not. Reward those who do and have a conversation with those who did not about why they struggled.

Sometimes these students just need a little guidance on where to look, or what type of thing they should do. Others might just be a little lazy and need to see that there really is value in doing it. One way to get students to see the value of doing it is to get them to highlight the information they gained by independent study in the work they later produce.

This is also a good way for you to see at-a-glance who is and who is not doing it. But whatever happens, each lesson, ask everyone to find out something else for the next topic. It gives them all a chance to start over and either begin doing it, or improve how they do it.

Practice exam papers: Practice papers are vital when preparing for exams such as GCSEs and A levels, where vast amounts of knowledge are tested. Part of the reason why some students underperform in exams is that they are not familiar enough with the exam conditions.

Getting students to attempt whole papers, or even individual sections of papers can be invaluable. It highlights gaps in knowledge (almost immediately) and helps students to understand how much time they should spend on different types of question. Exam boards all have specimen and past paper exams available on their websites.

The cost of independent study

Independent study requires students to spend time that they could otherwise be spending doing directed homework tasks. Or going to the park. Or sleeping. Sometimes, therefore, we should bear in mind that if we focus too much on promoting independent learning, it might end up being to the detriment of other things. For some students, it might be one burden too many. About this, we should be mindful.

That being said, I am yet to find students who have suffered from too much independent study. So, with perhaps the odd exception, we should keep promoting it.

Andy McHugh: First published on 1st October 2019

Andy McHugh started teaching in 2006 and blogs about teaching, learning, assessment strategies, ed-tech and workload, among other topics, at www.teachingandlearningguru.com. You can find him on Twitter @guruteaching

Further information & resources

- Independent learning: A literature review and a new project, Meyer, paper presented at the British Educational Research Association annual conference, University of Warwick, September 2010: <http://bit.ly/2W7OKqv>
- The Pomodoro Technique: <https://francescocirillo.com/pages/pomodoro-technique>
- Low-stakes testing, technology and learning, Impact, Chartered College of Teaching, January 2019: <https://impact.chartered.college/article/low-stakes-testing-technology-learning/>

Gerard Walker