INDEPENDENT LEARNING AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

“The greatest gifts you can give your children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence.”
- Denis Waitley, American Author
The question often arises – Are Independent learners “Intellectual Robinson Crusoe’s “ or “Empty vessels”?

Many learners spend a considerable time acquiring information and learning new skills. The rapidity of change, the continuous creation of new knowledge, and an ever-widening access to information make such acquisitions necessary. Much of this learning takes place at the learner's initiative, even if available through formal settings. A common label given to such activity is self-directed learning. In essence, self-directed learning is seen as any study form in which individuals have primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and even evaluating the effort. Most people, when asked, will proclaim a preference for assuming such responsibility whenever possible.

Research, scholarship, and interest in self-directed learning have exploded around the world in recent years. Related books, articles, monographs, conferences, and symposia abound. In addition, numerous new programs, practices, and resources for facilitating self-directed learning have been created. These include such features as learning contracts, self-help books, support groups, Open University programs, electronic networking, and computer-assisted learning. This article extracts some meaning from all this information.
WHAT IS ‘INDEPENDENT LEARNING’?
As is the case with many terms commonly used in higher education learning, such as “critical thinking”, ‘independent learning’ can mean different things to different people, in different disciplines and in different cultures. Therefore, it is important that this pivotal concept is explained to students so that they know what is required of them within their new context and discipline.

Philip Candy, in the now classic text ‘Self-direction for lifelong learning’ (1991, p 13), quotes Forster (1972, p ii) to define independent learning/study:
1. ‘Independent study is a process, a method and a philosophy of education: in which a student acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation;
2. It includes freedom of choice in determining those objectives, within the limits of a given project or program and with the aid of a faculty adviser;
3. It requires freedom of process to carry out the objectives;
4. It places increased educational responsibility on the student for the achieving of objectives and for the value of the goals’.

REASONS FOR INDEPENDENT LEARNING
Good learners have to be creative.

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BACKGROUND
LEARNER SELF-LEARNING AND LEARNER INDEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT (Benson & Voller 1997)

1. Situations in which the students study alone – the Robinson Crusoe Model
2. A set of skills which can be learnt and applied in self directed learning with external guidance.
3. An inborn capacity suppressed by institutions.
4. The exercise of learner’s responsibility for their own learning.
5. The right of learners to direct their own learning.

CRITICAL THEORIES OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING

THREE ASPECTS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED.

1. INSTRUMENTAL LEARNING-task oriented problem solving suited to the surrounding environment.
2. DIALOGIC LEARNING-understanding methods of communication between individuals.
3. SELF REFLECTIVE LEARNING-how we come to understand between ourselves and our learning process- key to developing as active learners & researchers at higher education institutions and beyond.

Pemberton (Pemberton et al. 1996, p.2) and Dickinson (1987) identify various different terms in the literature on self-learning, some of which are used synonymously, and some of which have been ascribed a number of separate meanings:

1. Self-instruction: learning without a teacher (Little, 1991, p.3); learning “without the direct control of a teacher” (Dickinson, 1987, p.5).
2. Distance learning: a way of organizing learners which usually only allows them control over access (Lewis, 1995).
3. Individualized instruction: designed to meet the needs of individual learners, but the teacher prepares materials, sets objectives and evaluates the learner’s ability to perform required skills (Logan, 1980). “… a learning process which (as regards goals content, methodology and pacing) is to a particular individual, taking this individual’s characteristics into consideration” (Chaix & O’Neil 1978).
4. Flexible learning: the teacher or department provides materials and activities; the learner has some choice over what to do and when, but there is usually little negotiation about learning goals or evaluation (Page 1992, p.83; Evans 1993).
5. Self-Access learning: learning from materials/facilities that are organised to facilitate learning; self-instruction in using these materials. The term is neutral as to how selfdirected or other-directed the learners are (Dickinson 1987, p.11).
6. Self-direction: a particular attitude to the learning task, where the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of those decisions (Dickinson 1987, p.11); the process or the techniques used in directing one”s own learning (Holec 1980, p.14); the change of consciousness that is the result of such learning (Brookfield 1985).
7. Self-learning: the situation in which learners are totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with learning and the implementation of those decisions. In full self-learning there is no involvement of a “teacher” of an institution, and the learner is also independent of specially prepared materials (Dickinson 1987, p.11).

8. Semi-self-learning: the stage at which learners are preparing for self-learning (Dickinson 1987:11).


COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING
- The concept of INDEPENDENT LEARNING is highly contested in historical, intellectual, political and educational terms.
- At its most basic level it is the ability to take charge of one’s basic learning (Holec 1981)
- The learners’ control over planning and execution of learning.(Tough and Knowles)
- The self directed learner should not be thought of as an intellectual Robinson Crusoe cast away and shut off in self sufficiency.(Moore 1973)
- No act of learning can be self directed if we understand self direction as meaning the absence of external sources of assistance.(Brookefield 1985)
- Truly autonomous learning can occur only when learners have full knowledge of the possible alternative learning activities.(Chene, 1983)

AIM:
- The aim for the research into independent learning is:
  - Student emphasis on DYNAMIC and INTERACTIVE approach in higher education context.
  - To assess the extent to which a lecturer should develop as a figure of authority or as a teaching resource /a guide.
  - To allow students to become self–reflexive about the learning process.
  - To identify more closely relationship between “learning facilitation” and “knowledge transmission”(Kember & Gow)

FINDINGS:
- Students viewed lecturer primarily as a guide, providing necessary knowledge and inspiration to study.
- They preferred teaching to be a two way process but reinforced the importance of lecturer in the knowledge transferred.
- The learning process was found to be a combination of the following: mainly memorizing; application of the newly learned techniques; the formulation of one’s own opinion.
IMPLICATIONS:

- All teaching methods were found to be reasonably efficient.
- Handouts were the most popular teaching material.
- Students saw themselves and their lecturer as the most important for their learning and not their peers.
- However, students consult each other when facing a problem-limited use of library, popularity of the concerning lecturer varies.
- Effective and inspiring teachers take time to develop a ‘meta-awareness’ of other cultures (Ryan & Louie, 2007).

CHALLENGES IN ENCOURAGING ‘INDEPENDENT LEARNING’

This story from a colleague working in China illustrates some of the misunderstandings (in this case, linguistic) around the concept of independent learning:

'Independent learning' was translated differently on a poster in a school I worked in China. They had borrowed our list of 'good learning behaviours' but had translated independent learning as 'learning on your own and not distracting or talking to others around you!'

This point reinforces the need to be explicit about what precisely students are expected to do and achieve.

Most adult learning theory (e.g. Freire, 1972; Knowles, 1990; Mezirow, 1991) and the concept of independent learning itself should be acknowledged as being predominantly ‘Western’. Trahar (2007) gives a personal and academic account of the implications of this on teaching in an international landscape including the potential for a lack of sensitivity to diversity, cultural inviolability and false universalism.

Recognizing this and using Forster’s (1972) definition of independent learning, independent learning can be seen quite broadly to encompass a variety of situations and contexts where students are interpreting and scaffolding new knowledge and skills independently from those around them. However, this may include situations of group learning where activity may be collaborative and individual learning outcomes similar (or different) but each reached independently. Seen in this light, independent learning does not need to be seen only in terms of learning in ‘isolation’ but also within a community of learners.

Certainly, independent learning is a term used frequently in higher education:

‘Here, they (lecturers) all the time emphasize self-learning and self-directed learning. But how can we learn when there is no direction at all?’ (International Student quoted in Welikala & Watkins, 2008, p 32).

Here, we see how this concept, if not introduced and exemplified can be seen as confusing. No doubt, students accepted on to higher education courses are already successful learners (Forland, 2006) but in order to expand learners’ existing strategies to new contexts mutual effort is required from all participants to learn about and appreciate alternative approaches to learning.
(Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). The following sections identify some strategies practitioners have described as useful in their practice.

SUGGESTIONS:

Self-Directed Learning can be challenging, even for the brightest and most motivated students. As a means of better understanding the processes involved in this mode of study, here are the key components of four stages to independent learning – being ready to learn, setting learning goals, engaging in the learning process, and evaluating learning – and offers some tips for both faculty members and students

1. **Being Ready to Learn**- Various skills and attitudes towards learning are required for successful independent study. This step requires time for analyzing a student’s current situation, study habits, family situation, and support network both at school and at home – and as they continue in the program, progress in degree program and past units taken that will prove useful. Signs of readiness for self-directed learning include being: autonomous, organized, self-disciplined, able to communicate effectively, and able to accept constructive feedback and engage in self-evaluation and self-reflection.

2. **Setting Learning Goals**- Communication of learning goals between a student and the advising faculty member is critical. Learning contracts are highly recommended tools for successful self-directed learning experiences. Learning contracts generally include:
   - Goals for the unit of study
   - Structure and sequence of activities
   - A timeline for completion of activities
   - Details about resource materials for each goal
   - Details about grading procedures
   - A section for advising faculty member feedback and evaluation as each goal is completed
   - A plan for regular meetings with the advising faculty member and other unit policies, such as work turned in late

Once created, contracts should be assessed by the advising faculty member. What could go wrong? Is there too much or too little work? Is the timeline and evaluation reasonable?

3. **Engaging in the Learning Process**- Students need to understand themselves as learners in order to understand their needs as self-directed learning students. Students should also consider answering the following questions:
   - What are my needs re: instructional methods?
   - Who was my favourite teacher? Why?
   - What did they do that was different from other teachers? Students should reflect on these questions throughout their program and substitute “teacher” with “advising faculty member”
Students also need to understand their approach to studying:

- **Deep approach** involves transforming – to understand ideas for yourself; be able to apply knowledge to new situations and use novel examples to explain a concept; learn more than is required for unit completion – most ideal for self-directed learning.

- **Surface approach** involves reproducing – to cope with unit requirements; learn only what is required to complete unit in good standing; tend to regurgitate examples and explanations used in readings.

- **Strategic approach** involves organizing – to achieve the highest possible grades; learn what is required to pass exams; memorize facts as given in lecture; spend much time practicing from past exams; most concerned with whether material will appear on exam.

Earlier academic work may have encouraged a surface or strategic approach to studying. These approaches will not be sufficient (or even appropriate) for successful independent study. Independent study requires a deep approach to studying, in which students must understand ideas and be able to apply knowledge to new situations. Students need to generate their own connections and be their own motivators.

4. **Evaluating Learning**

- Students must be able to engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation of learning goals and progress in a unit of study.
- Students should regularly consult with the advising faculty member.
- Students should be able to engage in self-validation of achievements, but should have the motivation to seek feedback on progress and ideas from the advising faculty member or other available resources.

Self-evaluation involves asking:

- How do I know I’ve learned?
- Am I flexible in adapting and applying knowledge?
- Do I have confidence in explaining material?
- When do I know I’ve learned enough?
- When is it time for self-reflection and when is it time for consultation with the advising faculty member?
RESPONSIBILITIES

Successful independent study requires certain responsibilities or roles of both students and advising faculty members. The following is a brief list of the more important roles. It is useful for both students and advising faculty members to periodically review this list and communicate as to whether each feels the other is fulfilling their share of the responsibility.

- **Students’ Roles**
  - Do self-assessment of readiness to learn
  - Define learning goals and develop learning contract
  - Do self-assessment and monitoring of learning process
  - Take initiative for all stages of learning process – need to motivate selves
  - Re-evaluate and alter goals as required during unit of study
  - Consult with advising faculty member as required

- **Advising Faculty Members’ Roles**
  - Build a co-operative learning environment
  - Help to motivate and direct the students’ learning experience
  - Facilitate students’ initiatives for learning
  - Be available for consultations as appropriate during learning process
  - Serve as an advisor rather than formal instructor

CONCLUSION

"I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think," said Socrates.

The study -

- Urges students to take responsibility for their learning and not be “empty vessels”
- Confirms the importance of a move from a “unidirectional lecturing format toward a more interactive style” (Kember&Gow)
- Benefits the employers in encouraging students to development relevant skills
- Further research into independent learning can begin by considering key aspects of: personal autonomy; self-management; learner control; autodidaxy (individual learning in society) (Cranton).
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- Dr Heather Forland (Going global2o06) Director of International Development, Kingston University London United Kingdom
- Chagal Guidelines & Teaching Chinese Students: theory into practice by Jin & Cortazzi 2006
- Benson (1996:34)“Autonomization is necessarily a transformation of the learner as a social individual. … Self-learning not only transforms individuals, it also transforms the social situations and structures in which they are participants.
- Pennycook (1994:43); Benson & Voller (1997:9)The notion of self-learning should include the right for learners to opt for traditional teacher-directed methodologies.