

Independent learning

The information on these pages has been developed as part of the Teaching International Students project





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1. Introduction

Many students have trouble making the transition to the more independent learning required at university compared with their previous study. University study requires students to take responsibility for their own learning, to be more self-directed, to make decisions about what they will focus on and how much time they will spend on learning both inside and outside the classroom.

This transition may be especially difficult for international students who may be used to more support and direction and even 'parent-like' relationships with their teachers at university. It will be useful for them (and all students) to know precisely how they are responsible for their learning in their new setting. This will require them to understand that they need to play a more active role in their own learning and will require greater self-motivation and organisation and greater self-awareness (metacognition) of their learning needs and behaviours.

2. The main issues: getting started

2.1 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), quotes Forster (1972) 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'.

This definition clearly places the responsibility for learning in higher education on students, aided by teaching staff and defined by the limits and objectives of the programme.

2.2 Differences across disciplines

Many international students may be surprised at how much work they are required to do 'on their own' outside of class and, in the absence of specific direction, may not be aware of their own responsibilities. They sometimes complain about the lack of direction generally in their courses. They may be surprised by the low contact hours in many courses, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences. They may even interpret this as a lack of 'value for money' or a lack of interest and support from teachers or their department. It can be useful to spell out in course documents how many hours of work outside of the classroom are expected for each module or unit, and what precisely students are expected to do during this time.

Contact hours and the level of autonomy required (or possible) vary considerably across discipline areas. In the Sciences, for example, there is often less scope to choose assignment or research topics, and students

may be required to work on tasks and topics set for them right up to doctoral level, where students work in teams under the explicit direction of their supervisor. In the Humanities and Social Sciences, however, there can be much more autonomy in choosing learning and assignment tasks and topics even from the first year of study.

2.3 Differences across cultures

The extent to which independent learning is culturally situated has been hotly debated in the literature. Some describe learners from particular cultures as passive and dependent learners (discussed in Kingston & Forland, 2008). Conversely, others are more positive, such as in a study on self-directed learning by Gieve and Clark (2005) in which Chinese students expressed as much appreciation of the benefits of autonomous learning as their EU counterparts. Interestingly, the current system-wide reform of education in China has as its top priority the development of 'autonomous' learners (which is perhaps a more accurate term to use) and is clearly an indication of the importance placed on this attribute for effective learning.

It is important, however, to avoid making assumptions about individual students, especially where their home contexts are diverse and undergoing rapid change. International students are likely to be unsure about what is required in their new learning contexts and may at least initially seem to want to know the 'correct' methods and answers during this period of uncertainty, but they may be perfectly capable of 'independence' and autonomy.

The apparently culturally determined dispositions of students in Gieve and Clark's study were found to be 'flexible' in the right (new) conditions. This resource will explore what these 'right conditions' might be; looking at the actions practitioners might take to enhance students' independent learning.

2.4 What are the challenges in encouraging more '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 visited 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.

Recognising this and using Forster's (1972) definition of independent learning, it 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. Considered 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 emphasise 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).

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.

3. Possible solutions: suggestions for action

3.1 Setting the foundations for independent learning

- Talk to your students about their previous learning and teaching experiences.
- Find out their expectations of the course – how are they expecting to be taught, assessed and how do they expect to facilitate their own learning.
- Talk about your expectations (as a teacher, organiser and facilitator) and the requirements of the course
- Reach a shared understanding of these expectations (see sections on lectures, supervision).
- Talk about independent learning in the context of communities of learners and provide opportunities for developing study communities (through group work, tutor-organised study buddies, online discussion boards).
- The transition for students into new ways of learning can be supported by providing early formative assessment and plenty of opportunities for students to explore their learning with peers and teachers.

3.2 Ongoing support – evidence suggests that effective and inspiring teachers:

- Take time to develop a 'meta-awareness' of other cultures (Ryan & Louie, 2007).
- Give an overview of the subject matter so that learners have a framework within which to build their knowledge. Consideration given to internationalising the curriculum will pay dividends as an accessible curriculum will be more easily engaged with by students looking to become autonomous learners.
- Recommend multi-media resources for independent study including texts, audio, internet and video. In the case study linked from the download page for this section, Andrew Cree from Teesside University describes how to build screen-capture movies of teaching slides to allow students multi-media access to his teaching outside class; the additional audio track seemed to benefit students and resulted in reduced failure rates.
- Find ways to motivate students using culturally inclusive pedagogy. 'Motivating International Students' by Dolan & Macias (2009) has several suggestions for motivating students in the classroom e.g. being welcoming, responsive and explicit. Whilst not necessarily directly affecting students' skills in independent learning, the connections made between teachers and students in the classroom can motivate students to learn outside the classroom.
- Encourage and build confidence especially in the early stages by providing opportunities for students to bring questions and observations to class which have arisen from their independent reading.
- Remind students of the various support systems available to them especially a few weeks after induction when this useful information may have been forgotten.

- Provide un-assessed opportunities to test out students' independent learning with tasks set between classes.
- When appropriate, create situations where students can control aspects of classroom learning such as selecting a reading for critical analysis for the next class so that they can practise freedom of choice and objective-setting with peers.
- Gradually move over time from a role as teacher to that of a learning facilitator and teacher (Scharle & Szabó, 2000) as students become more confident independent learners.

3.3 Tools for independent learning and self-organisation include:

- E-portfolios (collections of multimedia including text, images, audio, blogs) can be assembled by international students to demonstrate their learning over time (see Hill, 2009).
- Peer-mentoring schemes (UKCISA has a useful guide to setting up schemes, 2008).
- Study skills sessions (goal setting, time management, working to deadlines, self-appraisal, reading).
- Ongoing training in using online information. Crucial to independent learning are the skills and knowledge of effectively using online information. However, some international students find identifying databases and extracting resources difficult (Hughes, 2005). Ongoing support should be available both in the classroom and the library to help students use strategic approaches to finding the information they need, and in the right quantities by defining the scope of their searches.

3.4 Conclusions

The above suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive – you may read these knowing that some will not work in particular local contexts or that others may already have been used for decades to great effect in your department. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) and Kingston and Forland (2008) argue that, by whatever methods, focusing on independent learning should encourage lifelong learning. It should also contribute to a 'cultural synergy' where cultures are equally valued in the classroom, and the benefits for learning are reaped by all.

4. Useful resources to recommend to students

Burnapp, D. (2009). *Getting Ahead as an International Student*. London: Open University Press.

Marshall, L. & Rowland, F. (1998) *A Guide to learning independently*. London: Open University Press.

University of Southampton / UKCISA online resource '[Prepare for Success](#)'

5. What is the evidence?

Candy, P. (1991) *Self-direction for lifelong learning: a comprehensive guide to theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Dolan, M. & Macias, I. (2009) [Motivating international students: A practical guide to aspects of learning and teaching](#). The Handbook for Economics Lecturers. Economics Network.

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Gieve, S. & Clark, R. (2005) 'The Chinese approach to learning': Cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme. *System*, 33 (2), 261-276.

Hill, R. (2009) Case study: Capturing and Enhancing the Experiences of International Students using ePortfolios. Engineering Subject Centre.

Hughes, H. (2005) [Actions and Reactions: Exploring International Students' Use of Online Information Resources](#). *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, 36 (4), 169-179.

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

Kingston, E. & Forland, H. (2008) Bridging the Gap in Expectations Between International Students and Academic Staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12 (2), 204-221.

Knowles, M. (1990) *The adult learner: a neglected species* (4th ed.) London: Gulf Publishing.

Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Peelo, M. & Luxon, T. (2007) Designing embedded courses to support international students' cultural and academic adjustment in the UK. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31 (1), 65 – 76.

Ryan, J. & Louie, K. (2007) False dichotomy?: 'Western' and 'Eastern' concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 39 (4), 404-417.

Scharle, A. & Szabó, A. (2000) *Learner Autonomy. A guide to developing learner responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trahar, S. (2007) [Teaching and Learning: the International Higher Education Landscape – Some Theories and Working Practices](#). ESCalate Discussion Paper.

UKCISA (2008) [Mentoring schemes for international students: a practical guide](#).

Welikala, T. & Watkins, C. (2008) *Improving Intercultural Learning Experiences in Higher Education. Responding to cultural scripts for learning*. London: Institute of Education.

6. Related resources

[Learning Issues: Encouraging independent learning from the University of Nottingham](#)

[Learn Higher: Independent Learning - Resources for Staff](#)

Contact us

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York
YO10 5BR

+44 (0)1904 717500
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk

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