Autonomous Learning Defined

Learners’ autonomy is defined as the ability of learners to be held responsible for their own learning decisions (Holec as cited in Fenner, 2000). It is viewed as the process where learners are given the opportunity to be responsible for their learning activities that would promote learning beyond the traditional way of processing knowledge.

Promoting Independent Learning In and Out of the Classroom

There are many ways to posit learners’ autonomy which include: self-reports (introspective or retrospective), diaries and evaluation sheets, e-learning, self and peer assessment. Guiding students to set their own learning agenda helps learners develop autonomy. Students making the transition from high-school to university need to be aware that independent learning means working in and out of the classroom independently. By setting up learning teams with different roles to play, teachers are also helping students become autonomous; for example: time-keeper, note-taker, a researcher or a facilitator. This approach helps students work together to achieve a shared outcome and helps in setting up a student centered classroom instead of a teacher centered one. There are many ways that teachers can promote independent learning inside the class. Students could be encouraged to take responsibility of their learning process by giving them the opportunity to make choices. This encourages students to identify their own interests and preferences. Students should consider reflecting on their own choices and evaluate whether they were successful or not. Taking into consideration the clear and consistent expectations of students while designing in-class tasks and activities, ensures that the teacher meets the needs of all learning styles. It is important for teachers to create trust with students in order for them to leave their comfort zone and take the risk of learning independently making use of supportive material. This trust is also built on helping students understand that making mistakes helps them learn and move forward.

Good Practice

Students need to be aware of their abilities and how they can enhance their skills. Specific skills might include:

- completing set tasks/activities without seeking assistance
- skimming and scanning material prior to reading for details
- understanding context clues
- summarising the main points of the task
- using a variety of different sources to complete tasks
- writing, planning, organising, drafting and rewriting essays
- working individually, in pairs and groups
- being resourceful and creative when a task is difficult
- demonstrating organisational skills to meet deadlines
- displaying effective note taking skills

Material: Tried & Recommended


Communicative Activities for EAP. Jenni Guse. Cambridge University Press.


Strategies for Student Peer Review. Maryellen Weimer


Do’s and Don’ts of Independent Learning

- **Do** help students set achievable goals for themselves and find value in the module. Explore with your students what they want to learn and what they should learn. Have the students sign a learning contract. Finally, elicit from your students the relevance of what they have learned.

- **Do** consider asking students to submit self-evaluation forms with one or two of their assignments. For students to become independent learners, they need to be able to evaluate their own progress.

- **Do** make students active participants in the learning process. Students learn by doing, making, writing, designing, creating, solving. Encourage students to suggest approaches or to guess the answer of questions. Students need to learn to smoothly adjust from school (dependent learning) to university (independent learning) or from knowing and remembering to analyzing and researching.

- **Don’t** assign tasks that are too simple or too difficult as this might de-motivate and hence discourage students from being independent learners.

- **Do** give your students the option to select from a wide range of alternatives. Let students select which topics to explore in greater depth. If possible, include optional or alternative reading passages in your lesson plan.

- **Don’t** let your students struggle to figure out what is expected of them. Students need to believe that achievement is possible which means teachers need to provide concrete examples that meet their expectations.

- **Don’t** forget to vary your teaching methods. Use plenty of activities where students can explore and learn new strategies in solving problems. Variety reawakens students’ involvement in the course and their motivation.

- **Do** reduce direction and support gradually as the learner increases in their proficiency level and in their confidence.

- **Don’t** provide your favoured ways of thinking about solving problem. It might be more beneficial if you gave your students a chance to solve their problems first before offering any assistance.

- **Do** encourage the use of CALL material as it is one of the essential resources that students can use to become independent learners.

- **Don’t** forget to check students’ notes or portfolios. Require your learners to keep a written record of their learning.

Self-test

**Do You** promote Independent Learning?

True autonomy (auto-didactic) is the extent to which learners can learn what they want, when they want and how they want. Read through and then answer the questions below to see if you promote independent learning. Award yourself one point for each positive answer.

**Do you:**

- give choices to students?
- encourage group work?
- encourage peer editing?
- build reflection and extension into activities?
- create a self-access facility? (e.g. ALSO)
- connect learning with the real world?
- differentiate resources to meet student needs?

**Coming Up**

**Workshop:** Empowering the Learner and Promoting Learner Autonomy. by Heba Matbouli

6/03/2011 12:00—1:00pm.
English Department—Building D, room #304

Further Reading & Web-links

**Toward a Theory of Independent Learning and Teaching.** Michael Graham Moore.

http://www.bmoskes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/3 Learntch/independent.html

Managing Independent Learning. George Plumleigh

The Empowering Learners Project. Nora Redding

http://astef.org.pl/tdai/n10knko.htm

Yasmine Ahmed

For further support on Learner Autonomy please visit:

http://www.seasite.niu.edu/Tagalog/Teachers_Page/Language_Learning_Articles/what_is_learner_autonomy_and_how.htm

**ALSO** - Advising and Language Support Office

English Department, Building D, ground floor, Office 107.

Comments and queries contact:

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References:


Developing independent learning skills www.teachingexpertise.com