

## **Independent learning and the expert learner**

### **Introduction**

This resource is intended to:

- describe the characteristics of independent learning
- draw parallels and differences between the 'independent' and the 'expert' learner.

### **A definition of independent learning**

One definition of independent learning or 'autonomy' in learning is:

"...the ability to take charge of one's learning" H. Holec, 1981

Independent learning is usually developed throughout a learner's time at school or college to give learners more responsibility for work or learning. It helps learners to make informed choices and to take responsibility for deciding what they need to do in order to learn. To do this and to have the motivation to learn independently, learners need to:

- feel confident about taking and acting upon decisions
- appreciate the value of reflecting on learning
- decide whether learning has been effective or whether they need to try another approach.

If you have explored other parts of **Developing the expert learner**, you may have already noticed that independent learning, with its emphasis on autonomy, reflection and confidence, sits comfortably within the concept of the expert learner.

### **A focus on learning and not teaching**

Independent learning means that learners make decisions about their learning rather than relying on their teachers to do it for them. At first, many learners find this challenging. When they are more familiar with it, they realise that it allows them to focus on their own individual needs and to take account of the way they prefer to learn.

### **Does independent learning mean working on your own?**

Independent learning is not only about 'isolated' or 'unaided' learning, or operating without the help of teachers. It is as much about sharing ideas and problems and working together to resolve those problems. Talking things

**Developing the expert learner**

through and explaining ideas to each other can help learners to clarify issues and understand concepts more fully. The characteristics of independent learning can just as easily be demonstrated by a group working together as by an individual.

**What are independent learning skills?**

Independent learning, also referred to elsewhere as self-directed learning, is about learners:

- setting their own goals and deadlines
- organising themselves and their work
- evaluating their use of time
- evaluating your work as a teacher.

**Tips for creating independent learning**

<b>Tip</b>	<b>Activity</b>
Reflection	Encourage your learners to think about what learning strategies work for them and what progress they are making. Provide pro formas for learners to record this.
Sharing ideas	Create opportunities for group and paired work, and for mutual support. Encourage learners to share stories and strategies, and seek ideas from other people in the group so that the teacher is not the only source of support.
Questions	Develop a learning atmosphere and exercises that encourage learners to ask questions. Use problem solving techniques rather than finding right and wrong answers to closed questions.
Learner voice	Learners tend to become more confident when they know that their views will be taken seriously, so provide opportunities for learners to express their needs and concerns. Help them to feel secure by establishing a clear code of conduct from the start of their learning.
Catch confidence	Provide a framework for recognising and recording progress and achievement. Include constructive comments from peers as well as teacher and learner feedback. Tackle the self-doubt expressed as “I’m no good at that”.
Create opportunities for independent learning	Do not be afraid to leave your students to tackle questions on their own or as part of a group exercise. Leave the room for a defined amount of time if that would help. Create plenty of opportunities for learners to practise their skills outside the classroom.
Learners centre stage	Encourage learners to demonstrate what they have

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Support learners to develop their study skills	learned; this helps to reinforce their learning. Ask them to explain points to others in their group. Help learners to feel safe with this level of exposure by explaining its purpose. If learners find it difficult, invite the more confident ones to share their coping strategies. Build study support into your courses. Identify which literacy, language or numeracy skills learners need in order to cope with learning their subjects.
Progression	Encourage students to identify their goals from the start of their journey with you. Discuss with them the learning that will help them reach those goals. Find out whether they need support with developing their literacy, language, numeracy and speaking skills. Arrange Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) support or visits to possible alternative venues for learning where appropriate.

**Personalisation agenda**

Independent learning and the expert learner are part of the wider personalisation agenda. For more information about personalisation, download the **Background summary** at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk>.

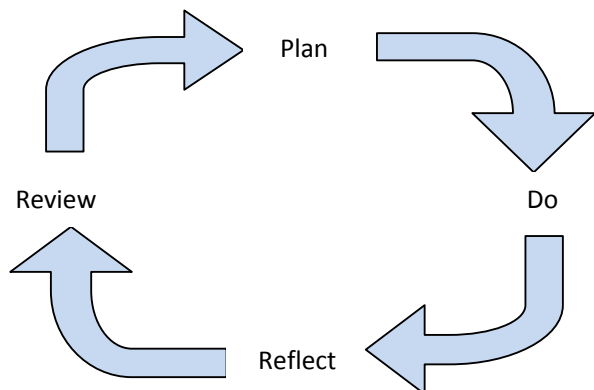
**Links with the concept of the expert learner**

Watch the video clips **Learners as researchers**, where you will see Jess and Danielle demonstrating autonomy, confidence and the ability to reflect on their learning experiences. These characteristics of independent learning are also part of being an expert learner. You can view these clips in the **Learning how to learn** section of the **Developing the expert learner** webpage at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk>.

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**Linking key skills, independent learning and the expert learner**

A process that underpins the acquisition of all key skills is the cycle of Plan – Do – Reflect – Review.



These skills underpin both independent learning and the concept of the expert learner. They encourage learners of any age and stage of development to:

- think about their intentions and purposes
- plan a course of action
- implement the plan
- reflect on their progress towards the plan
- review the plan to suit changing circumstances or to overcome problems
- devise a new plan when the original one has been fulfilled.

In particular, the wider key skill of improving own learning and performance encompasses a range of process skills, interpersonal skills and personal qualities that align closely with the skills and attributes of the expert learner.

<b>Process skills</b>	<b>Interpersonal skills</b>	<b>Personal qualities</b>
Set targets	Communicate own needs	Confidence
Plan learning	Accept constructive feedback	Motivation
Review progress	Negotiate opportunities for learning and support	Persistence

It would therefore be possible to accredit aspects of development of the expert learner using the Improving Own Learning Performance (IOLP) key skills framework at whatever level was appropriate.

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**Developing the expert learner**

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Because accreditation is based on building a portfolio which may be in hard copy or electronically based, you may like to consider SuccessPlanner as a project management tool for your learners. If you go to the Planning toolkit at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk> you will find a completed example that might illustrate the tool's potential.

You will find further opportunities for using other wider key skills such as working with others and problem solving when you plan your initiatives for developing the expert learner.

**References**

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