

The Use of Independent Study Courses To Teach Lifelong Learning Skills

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Abstract

Pressures on faculty members at research universities which detract from conventional classroom teaching and the need to better prepare students for lifelong learning necessitate some fundamental changes in the way we teach. Independent study, while currently an optional part of most college degree programs, is often misunderstood and misapplied. This article provides some food for thought for faculty who may wish to rethink the role of independent study in college curricula.

Introduction

According to one survey of 35,000 faculty members at 392 colleges, only 27% felt students were well prepared academically.¹ College professors say students did not get the fundamentals in high school.² High school teachers blame teachers in grades 1-8, elementary and junior high teachers lament about the lack of parental support for learning. Employers blame education in general and society suffers the consequences of a poorly educated workforce in competing in a global economy.

Explanations for the decline in educational quality are many and varied. Television, affluence, poor parenting, low educational standards, fundamental changes in the work ethic, low teacher salaries, lack of a national purpose, cost of education, hopelessness, family deterioration, etc. Clearly each of these contribute to the problem. Some are manageable. For example, research has repeatedly shown parental involvement with learning at home and in schools plays a critical role in the academic success of children.³ Others are more difficult to resolve. Education will perhaps

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never compensate a math teacher at the same level as private industry.

An Environment for Change

The time is right to consider some fundamental changes in how we teach. The model we have been using may not be appropriate for the current environment except in isolated circumstances. First, it assumes a highly motivated, knowledge-acquisitive student. Students, particularly at the college level, often seem to lack this essential prerequisite. Second, it assumes teachers are single-mindedly dedicated to the transfer of knowledge. In today's university, the pressures to garner research money, publish in academic journals, and participate in university governance, significantly detract from the business of teaching.

The only thing that does exist, and in a much more palatable form than 25 years ago, is a body of knowledge. This body of knowledge has increased several fold. At the same time, the form in which it is stored has vastly improved. The university library of today is a computerized storehouse of books, periodicals, video and audio tapes, film, and artifacts. Computers, CD ROM's, microfiche, and intra and interlibrary communications networks have made access to this information easy and efficient. Many would argue that a highly motivated individual could simply use these vast resources to learn on their own. Therein lies both the problem and a potential solution.

Somewhere along the way, we began to think it is possible to learn without expending any effort. It may have started with programmed instruction, language tapes you listened to while asleep, or even innovative children's TV programming such as Sesame Street. The old techniques of memorization and recitation, spelling bees, sentence dia-

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gramming, and manual arithmetic were deemphasized. The study of popular music lyrics was substituted for Shakespeare because it was more fun. Students learned to pick up a copy of condensed notes instead of reading the entire book. At the same time, resources were reallocated to an ever broadening range of extracurricular activities- often at the expense of the academic side of campus life. In many ways we have been successful at removing some of the drudgery and this has perhaps led us to believe learning could be made even easier. We have sunk millions into high tech classrooms, computer laboratories, and audio visual aids. Textbook publishers use their entire graphics toolkit to attract and hold attention. Charisma is "in" and substance is "out" as students give the highest marks to the most entertaining faculty. The search goes on. Universities are presently spending hundreds of thousands on "hypermedia" technology which allows a professor to use a PC to access a videodisc, cassette deck, VCR, scanner, and piano keyboard to prepare and deliver a lecture with all the entertainment features we have come to expect.

In spite of the glitz and glamour of higher education, the model is in trouble. The cost of a 4 year degree continues to escalate while the quality of education continues to deteriorate. At large research universities, faculty are primarily rewarded for bringing in enough grant and contract money to pay their own salary. Promotion may depend on grant awards or publishing a specified number of articles in selected, esoteric journals. In some fields, articles describing research results are read only by other academicians who are also seeking some way to "contribute to the body of literature in the field" and, in so doing, contribute to the prestige of the university. At the same time, top university administrators are often preoccupied with fund raising, athletics, politics, or adding another monument to the physical plant. Quality teaching is given a lot of lip service but many students have little contact with tenured professors. Students complain about not being able to obtain faculty help to plan a course schedule, choose a major, or discuss a difficult assignment. Many classes are not available when needed requiring an extra semester or two to earn the degree and classes may be as large as 1,000 and taught by videotape or by a teaching assistant with poor English speaking skills.⁴ Some university professors and administrators are sending their children to small, liberal arts institutions which still see education as the primary business. Parents, employers, and, increasingly, students are beginning to demand a better education. Educators are recognizing the need to make some fundamental changes in the way we do business.

Progress toward a Solution

It is unrealistic to suggest that many of these trends be reversed. However, it is possible to help individuals prepare for an environment in which the quality of education depends more on independent learning skills than the classical teacher-student relationship. This is not a novel idea. A 1984 British report recommended courses be designed and taught so that students can become progressively independ-

ent as learners.⁵ In other words, we must teach people how to learn independent of teachers, educational institutions, and the formal classroom. The "student" could then apply these learning skills in a variety of situations throughout their lifetime. This is not a recommendation to abandon traditional teaching methods such as the lecture/discussion. In many situations, a well-written and delivered lecture is very effective.⁶

Most university curricula already contain a number of independent study courses. These courses are valued for their role in fostering thinking independent of the strictures of a formal course or the day-to-day guidance of a faculty member. Dressel & Thompson⁷ went so far as to say, "... no student should receive a baccalaureate degree until he has demonstrated the ability to plan and carry out at least one modest independent study project."

The intuitive appeal of this statement is still strong today but educators often view independent study as an alternative way to teach instead of as a process to be learned. Educators must recognize that the ability to learn independent of the traditional classroom is a skill that will facilitate learning to take place throughout one's professional life.

Independent Study Defined

But what should be the exact nature of independent study in the university setting? Simply defined it is a self-directed learning activity.⁸ (Alexander, et. al., 1967). Howard⁹ observes that it includes "learning activities planned jointly by teachers and students and carried out by students with a minimum of faculty direction." Baskin and Keeton¹⁰ state it

"refers to study which, with teacher's assistance, increasing responsibility and freedom are accorded the students to define and choose learning objectives; to select their own learning methods, and to obtain competent evaluation of their achievements."

Implications for Teaching

(1) Much of what is labeled in the literature as independent study is not independent in the sense that the student has some degree of control over what is studied. The amount of individual control over learning and the extent of assistance from teachers constitute important variables in the definition of independent study. The extreme view is that independent study is "a process in which individuals take the initiative without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating outcomes."¹¹ The more common view is that independent study consists of the individualized, self-directed investigation of a topic chosen by the student in as autonomous a manner as the student is able to employ at a particular time.¹²

If the only change from conventional, lecture style instruction is that the student is relieved from attending class and left to pursue the course outline on their own, we have merely introduced a requirement for personal discipline. The student is not choosing a topic of study nor setting goals for learning.

(2) Little evidence exists that independent learners de-

sire complete isolation from others or complete absence of direction. In fact, adults usually say they prefer more, rather than less, help in their independent learning efforts.¹³ The National Conference on Independent Scholarship recommends that independent scholars should "aggressively explore the many resources and organizations that could facilitate and strengthen their work."¹⁴

Independent study then is not simply one person working alone and without direction in order to solve a problem or produce a solution to which they can claim 100% ownership. In fact, self-sufficiency is not characteristic among successful independent adult learners. Research has shown successful independent learners to rely heavily on a network of peers, experts, fellow learners, and organizations.¹⁵

(3) We have long adhered to the notion that knowledge should be segmented into courses and these courses offered in a relatively autonomous way. Doing so has made it difficult for students to connect theories and concepts in one discipline with those in another.¹⁶ Teachers are disappointed when students fail to make interconnections between courses taken in different departments, colleges, or in different years. We have likely failed to give them the opportunity to make interconnections or we have failed to teach them the process whereby they can make these interconnections on their own. Independent study strategies which encourage students to bring concepts and theory from several related fields to bear on a problem provide an opportunity to ameliorate this situation.

(4) One goal of independent study is to transform the student from a passive to an active learner. To be successful in achieving this goal, education must play an active role in promoting individual responsibility for learning.¹⁷ An experiment at George Washington University in which a class is taught by 2 undergraduates with limited faculty supervision places the students in firm control of their learning.¹⁸ There are no lectures and students take an active role in each class. The experiment appears to be a success and will be a part of the offering again next year. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro has had similar results.¹⁹

Independent study is not a substitute for organized, directed instruction. (See for example Trump and Baynham, 1961) Unlike the apprenticeship system, which is a substitute for learning a trade or profession in a school, totally independent study cannot substitute for the group interaction, peer review, and teacher supervision necessary to achieve competence.

(5) Independent study should be individualized. That learning should be tailored to individual differences is a commonly held belief among educators at all levels. Independent study is no exception. The student should be taught to direct their learning activity and to rely on the teacher, peers, knowledgeable outside resources, etc. as needed. (Alexander, et. al., 1967)

(6) In addition to these conceptual clarifications of independent study, there are some problems in implementation worthy of mention. Independent study should not be seen solely as a capstone activity to be accomplished as a final requirement for graduation. Early education may be better

at promoting independent learning than universities. During free time at kindergarten, children are free to pursue whatever activity they desire. Some may read, others play with toys, still others draw or engage in some other creative activity. As students move upward in the education process, their day becomes much more regimented, they are taught as equals, and conformity is the rule. (Brown, 1968) By junior high, all semblance of independent learning has been supplanted by lockstep movement through the slate of predetermined learning activities.

While a master's thesis, special research project, or independently derived solution may demonstrate scholarship, each fails to recognize that education for independent learning should occur at all levels. There is no reason to expect the near-graduate to demonstrate independent learning without prior experience. Lehman and Dressel²⁰ provide evidence that the greatest change in attitudes actually takes place during the first year in college. Gruber and Whitman²¹ conclude "self-directed study may be best introduced in the freshman year, not because it leads at once to better performance but because it leads to the most rapid change in educational values."

(7) Independent study should not be thought of as appropriate only for superior students. Hatch & Richards (1967) observe the "widespread faculty belief that only intellectually superior students can profit from self-directed learning" is a part of "prevailing faculty mythology" not supported by research. Heist²², MacKinnon²³, and Gruber and Whitman²⁴ also produced evidence independent study should not be limited to the superior student. Baskin²⁵ added the insight that

"although independent study has been thought of most often as a release of the swift and able learner from bondage to a plodding pace, permitting him to leap ahead with joy, it may equally well be thought of as an emancipation of the slower but still respectable learner from a dizzying pace that leaves him baffled and defeated."

(8) Independent study is not synonymous with correspondence courses or programmed instruction. Both are "independent" of classrooms, group interaction, and professorial guidance but they leave little opportunity for the independent learner to explore areas of their own choosing or to display individual creativity.

(9) Independent study can provide an excellent vehicle for exposing the student to practitioners and thinking outside the institution. The opportunity for exchange of ideas and methods between universities and practitioners is an added advantage of independent study.

(10) Independent study is an excellent way of avoiding some of the anxiety resulting from day-to-day classroom competition. The competition is with the student's goals which are developed in close consultation with their supervising professor.

(11) Independent study has the potential of being much more holistic than traditional lecture/discussion formats. The student acquires knowledge while developing attitudes and personality as it relates to independent learning. In

other words, through independent study the educator is attempting to stimulate affective as well as cognitive development. Learning not only becomes more interesting but also becomes a way of life.

Conclusions

Life-long learning is a necessity in all walks of life. Much of this learning is characterized by independent study. The reading and assimilation of information in professional journals, attendance of short courses, seminars, and company sponsored training programs and lectures, and the acquisition of new equipment and computer skills all require a degree of independence in approach. Instruction in the skill and discipline required to independently engage in these learning activities is appropriately the responsibility of higher education. Many believe the capacity to continue learning throughout life is the single most important contribution a university can make to its students. (see for example, Brown, 1968) Della-Dora and Blanchard (1979) cite research suggesting that "self directed learners have discovered deep personal meaning in the process of learning. When an individual's perceptual field includes a view of self in the process of learning, and that view has meaning, the learner recognizes why (s)he is ... and what s(he) is capable of becoming."

Independent study offers an excellent way to depart from an educational system which educators of late have accused of promoting mediocrity. Actually this criticism is not novel. The following statement is attributed to Frank Aydelotte, President of Swathmore:

Perhaps the most fundamentally wasteful feature of our educational institutions is the lack of a higher standard of intellectual attainment. We are educating more students up to a fair average than any country in the world, but we are wastefully allowing the capacity of the average to prevent us from bringing the best up to the standard they could reach. Our most important task at present is to check this waste.

We could give these more brilliant students greater independence in their work, avoiding the spoon-feeding which makes much of our college instruction of the present day of secondary-school character. Our examinations should be less frequent and more comprehensive, and the task of the student should be to prepare himself for these tests through his own reading and through the instruction offered by the College: he should not be subjected to the petty, detailed, day-by-day restrictions and assignments necessary for his less able fellows.²⁶

It would be remiss not to make the point that independent study is not an easy route to learning. Indeed, many would consider it harder to master a subject independent of day-to-day guidance. All learning requires work - a fact that far too many educators have forgotten as we have striven to make learning more fun or more entertaining. To quote the great teacher of medicine, Dr. William Osler, "... The stupid man among you it will make bright, the bright man brilliant, and the brilliant student steady ... Not only has it been the touch-

stone of progress, but it is the measure of success in every-day life ... and the master-word is work. (Cushing, 1940).

Footnotes

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