

Independent Learning

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A key skill in both education and the workplace is the ability to be an 'independent learner'. However, it can be difficult to define and even more difficult to implement! There are myriad discussion forums on what constitutes an independent learner and how to become one. The rhetoric can be confusing so hopefully this short article will help clarify a few things.

So what is independent learning?

Having studied this concept as part of my post graduate degree I have come to define independent learning in education as ***the ability to analyse work set and devise appropriate strategies to complete the work effectively.***

Independent learning is essentially a skill (or more accurately a series of skills) which students must develop over the course of their educational career. The ability to analyse (skill) and develop appropriate strategies (skill) should not be underestimated. These are difficult and require significant amounts of support. Indeed, the great paradox of independent learning is that it has to be taught! It also should be taught from an early age where the support given needs to be significant. However, anyone at any age can learn the skills to become an independent learner.

How does one become an independent learner?

To become an independent learner takes time and dedication. Motivation is key, but so is making independent learning part of the routine of learning. Some simple but effective ways you can help your son at home are as follows:

- 1. Ensure there is an appropriate working environment** – routine helps a great deal. Set a time for learning to take place each evening. Note that I have called this 'learning', not 'prep'. It is important that the mentality of simply completing prep as quickly as possible is discouraged. If there is dedicated learning time it can encourage your son to spend longer on their prep, adding detail and going beyond the minimum required.
- 2. Take an interest in what your son has been learning, and encourage discussion.** Ask open questions and encourage debate. This can help stimulate enquiry and help with motivating your son to take an interest in learning more about a particular topic.
- 3. Ensure that your son is aware of the help and support that is available to help complete their work.** Independent learning is not the same as individual learning (i.e. doing everything on your own). It is about knowing what support is available and making use of it. This could be asking their parents or teacher, working collaboratively with friends, knowing which websites to visit, where to go in the library or how to access academic journal

articles etc.

4. Celebrate success, but also celebrate the lessons learnt when things don't go so well! I

firmly believe that we learn more from our failures than our successes, and learning how to learn from our mistakes is very powerful. Celebrating this helps to remove the taboo – yes there will always be disappointment when things have not gone so well, but the most important thing is learning from this so that the same mistakes are not repeated. In order to do this, encourage your son to engage with feedback on their work, to make corrections and to discuss how to improve with their teacher, or with you!

Independent learning and examinations

It might appear that your son is magically becoming an independent learner in the run-up to examinations! This may well be the case but for many students this time is spent rather ineffectively. There are a number of different revision techniques and strategies, many of which are discussed in Wellbeing lessons and through seminars at the College. There is also information on MyDulwich on effective revision. One of the most important facets of an independent learner is knowing where to find help and what the most appropriate learning techniques are both for them and the situation. Do encourage your son to explore the range of different revision techniques available and discuss which might be most appropriate for them and for the subject they are revising. Also, try to encourage revision to be an interactive process. Working in groups, teaching someone what they have learnt and revisiting material on a number of occasions after differing periods of time are just some of the ways to promote effective, independent learning when revising. However, most importantly an independent learner will take responsibility for their learning and not look for excuses if things go wrong. It's all an (independent) learning curve!

