

From 'Hand Holding' to 'Leading a horse to water...'

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'Independent learning', 'autonomous learners', 'taking responsibility for one's own learning'. These phrases often appear in advertising material for learning skills services in Higher Education Institutions, suggesting that the goal of the service is to promote this 'autonomy' in learning. Typically, learning support is delivered in the following ways in our HEIs:

- Individual tutorials on learning skills topics such as essay writing or time management
- Workshops on various learning skills topics which run throughout the term and are open to students from all academic disciplines
- E-learning, either via online learning resources or feedback on essays, given by a learning skills professional
- Writing Centres located in the relevant disciplines staffed by either post-graduates studying in the discipline or academic staff
- Peer mentoring where students support each other in the development of their learning skills
- Embedded learning workshops where the workshop is part of an academic programme
- Workshops requested by academic staff for students within their academic departments
- Blended learning where teaching is delivered via a combination of face to face and on-line resources

The merits and de-merits of these learning skills mechanisms continue to be hotly debated amongst students, learning skills professionals and academics alike. But which are the ones that are most likely to help students attain the status of an 'independent learner'? Indeed what does an independent learner look like or do? Are they capable of identifying their learning needs with no guidance at all? And if so, does it follow that they will be able to select the skills support mechanism to match those needs?

Individual learning skills tutorials are often criticised for promoting *dependence* rather than *independence* where the learner becomes over-reliant on the learning skills professional for advice. However, because these tutorials involve a dialogue about the student's individual needs, they can promote the thinking that needs to be done about the learning activities that 'develop the autonomous learner' (Boud, Brockett and Hiemstra quoted in O'Doherty 2006). At the other end of the spectrum, accessing on-line learning materials is often presented as a good example of independent learning, but to what degree is this a suitable option for learners who want to interact and ask questions about their learning needs?

Bearing in mind that e-learning skills modules are becoming increasingly popular in our HEIs, now may be the time to pause and reflect on their usefulness for our students and the opportunities they bring in terms of

encouraging 'autonomy' in learning. There will be opportunities to share our experiences on how certain cohorts of students have responded to different learning skills support mechanisms and the importance of 'scaffolding' when promoting 'independent learning'. We will also challenge the concept of 'independent learning' itself, taking Knight's idea that 'Independent learning implies going it alone, unaided' (quoted in O' Doherty 2006) as our starting point.

Presenters

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References

O'Doherty, M. (2006) *Definitions of Independent Learning* [online]. Available at www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learnhigherareas/independent learning [Accessed 12 February 2009]