

Enhancing our knowledge of students' independent learning techniques via qualitative techniques

Presentation notes

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[No notes.]

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Independent learning has been discussed by many academically such as Knowles (1975), Zimmerman (1986), Kersten 1987. However, numerous studies have found important differences between high and low achieving students in relation to goal setting, monitoring, use of study strategies, and self-efficacy (Difrancesca et al. 2016, Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990, 2008). Whatever the strategy taken it is clear students need to have some level of independent learning to achieve in their degree. We ended up with this definition: "Independent learning is a method or learning process where learners have ownership, control, and a desire to develop their own learning. They learn by their own actions, and direct, regulate and assess their own learning. The independent learner can set goals, make choices and decisions about how to meet their learning needs, take responsibility for constructing and carrying out their own learning, and monitor their progress towards achieving their learning goals. They can reflect, seek out and action the feedback." (Adapted from [Independent Learning | SpringerLink](#))

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This qualitative research was part of a wider study with the following methodology. Here you can see stage 3 - six focus groups were conducted with students, two with staff. Focus group questions were based on three themes.

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The focus group themes included settling questions, general IL questions, and consideration for resources from the six student focus groups and for the two staff groups.

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Staff focus group composition included one professor, two Teaching Excellence Fellows, a reader, three lecturers and three course leaders. The disciplines covered information management, journalism, fashion, architecture, marketing and law. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim, and inductive thematic analyses were conducted as per Braun and Clark (2006), with six themes emanating as shown in the slide.

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For staff focus groups, the main finding was that, for staff, IL meant that students needed to be able to work on their own to some extent. One member of staff recognised that there is a spectrum of independent learning in students; they noted there is a "spectrum, I think that takes place where you've got different levels of independent learning for some people". However, it was also pointed out that students need a foundation to be independent: "I think they need a foundation. They need a knowledge foundation that will help them do that". Many staff highlighted that there are a number of resources to help with IL - maybe too many, which causes the main issue of information overload. It was highlighted that the skillsets for students "change year on year", and that "we put in extra things [to support direct entrants], and we try to sort of share resources, so that they're not / we're not duplicating".

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Staff were aware of many resources, but barriers to IL are many, both physical and technical:

- Assessment - In stage one, pass/fail only, or hand-over the assessment to the students (cannot be done for the whole degree)

- Module - A module of some description; a six-week programme (e.g. how to write essays, how to do referencing, etc.). Students had to do a small essay etc., which was micro-credential and could teach professional skills. Issues included that it was seen as boring, and that there are a number of touchpoints in place already (e.g. Head of Year sessions).
- Explain what is expected - This is university, and it is different from work or school.
- Ethos - Lifelong learning, set values and an ideology for learning and teaching - but we need a cultural shift. We need to stop being reactive: "What kind of set of values and interests somebody comes with, that enables them to be motivated enough to develop independence in learning in the many different aspects that we ask them to do".
- End of year feedback and not SEQs - With a focus on "what do you need refresher training on, to be independent?" Build a teaching and learning plan for each school - forward, rather than back.
- Measurement tools - To identify what independence a student has.

Staff are looking for students who "come in and who are going to make a great contribution to whatever profession, as it is a bit sad that we're doing a kind of remedial".

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There were six student focus groups. The disciplines covered information management, marketing, journalism, fashion, architecture, law and nursing. Six themes emanated from the transcripts, as shown in the slide.

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The main findings from the student focus groups were:

- The majority of students identified RGU as having a supportive learning environment, with many resources available.
- Students use a number of strategies and professional services, both specialist to their course and ad hoc.
- Students did not really recognise the meaning behind IL.

- The students highlighted more functional activities rather than IL definitions, with time taken over stipulated hours being mentioned, and taking control being highlighted.
- They noted that "We learn as we do and I think that's really good - to be able, to just sit in the class and listen passively."

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When being asked "have you been an independent learner whilst at RGU?", some students noted a love-hate relationship with changes in technology that have enhanced the speed at which they can do things. However, they noted barriers, highlighting that, if they don't know what IL is, "it makes it a bit tricky for me to be an IL if I don't know the expectations". They noted that, for the topic of IL to move forward, we need to motivate students to work that way, developing creativity and curiosity, and having resources at their fingertips helps with this.

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A handful of recommendations are highlighted here.

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