How to develop independent learners

Practical ideas and strategies for creating a more independent learning environment

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The Teaching Compendium

A series of short reads; think of it as a library of ideas, strategies, activities and tips for teaching. Putting theory into practice.

- Embedding literacy in subject teaching
- How to use Bloom's Taxonomy in the classroom
- Planning brilliant lessons
- How to excel when being observed
- Your differentiation masterclass
- **How to develop independent learners**
- Raising achievement in your classroom
- Time-saving tips for teachers
- Helping students to revise – a teacher's guide
- Practical strategies for active learning
- Getting the most out of gifted students
- Exciting end-of-term activities

Contents

Introduction

Introduction

The ideas in this e-book offer practical guidance to developing habits that, once embedded, will enable students to respond proactively and positively to any challenge they might face. By creating learners who are in control of their own education, we also create young adults who will continue to be independent thinkers in their lives beyond the classroom.

Being able to think and act independently remains one of the most important skills that a student can learn. We live in a culture that is rooted in individualism – where independence is central to our ethical and social world view. Failure to prepare students for the demands of a world where teachers will not be available to provide all the answers is to do them a great disservice.

While spoon-feeding styles of teaching can sometimes offer the most direct route to ensuring that all students are making demonstrable progress, it is possible to teach in a way that allows room for independence without sacrificing those all-important results. But to create a more independent learning environment we must first start by adjusting the mindsets of everyone in the classroom – students and teachers alike.
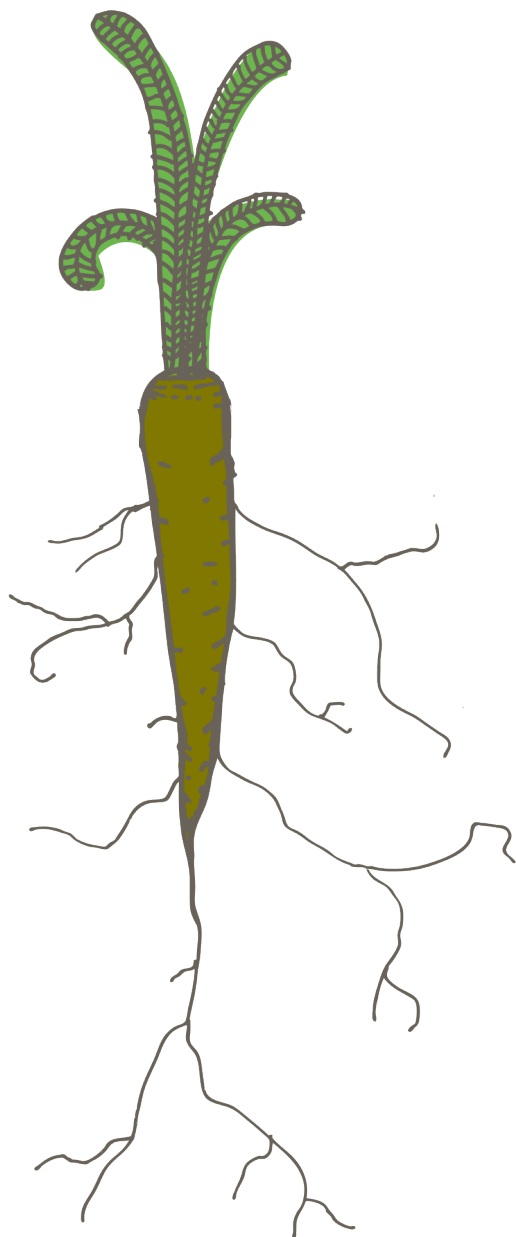
Section one – Changing mindsets

1. Learning from failure

One of the major obstacles preventing students from becoming more independent is a fear of failure. To encourage a more independent approach, we must help students to see failure as an opportunity to learn, rather than something to be avoided at all costs.

Begin by talking to your class about the benefits of failure, using real-life examples, such as cooking or playing sport. You may want to refer to some of your own experiences of failure and explain how they helped you to learn.

Alternatively, you can use the following case studies to contextualise the benefits of failure:

- Thomas Edison failed again and again in his attempts to make the first light bulb. Each failed experiment taught him something that contributed to his final success.
- J K Rowling's manuscript for the first Harry Potter book was turned down by twelve publishers before finally being accepted by Bloomsbury.

Be sure to praise students for trying even when they make mistakes and praise them further when they demonstrate that they have learnt from what they have done wrong in the past.

2. Praising persistence

Effort and persistence can help any student to make great progress regardless of their starting point. While it is important to praise any examples of independent behaviour, you will really reinforce the importance of trying hard by praising the effort that a student makes above the final product of their work.

As a result, students will be more likely to keep trying when they encounter difficulties. They will also believe that with enough effort they can always make progress, no matter what they are faced with.

3. Minimise teacher talk

In every lesson, there will be moments when the teacher needs to stand at the front of the room and address the whole class. Although sometimes necessary, these periods of teacher talk should be kept to a minimum, allowing for other forms of engagement that require greater levels of independence.

Here are three alternatives to extended teacher talk:

- Hand out the information that you would have talked students through. Ask students to work in pairs to analyse the information and to produce three headlines or a summary paragraph explaining what it is about.
- Time yourself as you talk, allowing no more than five minutes to give students the big picture. Once you have finished speaking, ask students to predict what the rest of the lesson will be about and to discuss their predictions with a partner.
- Instead of introducing the topic through talk, throw students straight into a task, explaining that the purpose is to challenge them and to help them to predict what might be coming next.

4. What it means to be independent

It is important to discuss with your class what it means to be independent in the classroom. While you might have a clear idea about what independence looks like, your students are likely to be less certain.

Through a class discussion, devise a set of characteristics that define someone as independent and identify specific examples of classroom behaviour that demonstrate these characteristics. This may involve drawing attention to examples already being exhibited in the work or actions of students in the class.

Once you have come up with a suitable set of ideas, divide the class into groups and assign each group a characteristic and an example. Working together, students should create a poster to be included in a wall display entitled: "What does it mean to be independent in our classroom?"

You can refer to this display throughout the year, using it to give students ideas on how to be more independent and encouraging them to take inspiration from the things they see there.

5. Reflecting on independence

Self-reflection is an important part of making progress in any field. At the end of a lesson, it can be useful to ask students to write a paragraph that reflects on the level of independence they have exhibited during the course of that lesson. Do this several times and encourage students to collect their reflections at the back of their books, so that they can see the progress they have made over time.

A more structured approach is to give students a set of categories and ask them to rate their independence out of five for each category. They can then identify one category to improve in.

Categories could include: problem-solving, dealing with set-backs, trying things out, seeking challenges, managing workload, etc.

A third alternative is use an independence chart: a graph labelled with dates along one axis and "levels of independence" along the other. Each student should aim to progress to a higher level of independence by a given date.

At the end of each lesson, invite students to reflect on what they have done and to plot their level of independence on the chart. Repeating this over several lessons will help students to visualise the progress they are making towards becoming more independent.
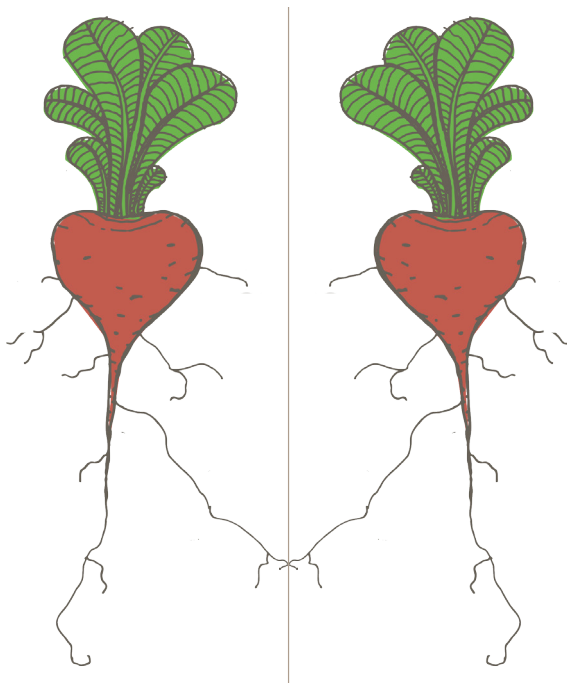
Section two – Teaching tools

1. Include all necessary information

When creating handouts or presentation slides that relate to a task, help students to be independent by ensuring that you include all the information that they will need to successfully complete the work.

For example, you might include the following:

- Clear, unambiguous outline of what the task entails
- Success criteria
- Timings
- Extension questions or tasks
- Example
- Pictures to supplement the text

Explain the task to your students once, but if they have further questions, invite them to scrutinise the slide or handout for the answers. The purpose here is to make students realise that they often have opportunities to help themselves and do not always need to rely on you for support.

You can extend this approach by presenting students with an outline of the entire lesson and inviting them to work through the tasks at their own pace. While they are doing so, you can circulate to assess work, provide assistance where absolutely necessary or use questioning to challenge students' thinking.

Instruction slips can be used to outline what it is that you want students to do. Create a class set of slips and distribute these at the start of a lesson, explaining that students should read through the instructions on the slip, work out what they need to do, plan how they will do it and then begin.

You may need to start by creating instruction slips for a single task, so that students get used to the approach, before handing out whole-lesson instruction slips in a later lesson.

2. Reusable checklists

Checklists are a great tool for promoting independence because they provide students with the means to make judgements, assess what they have done and deal with various queries without asking the teacher for support.

Here are three examples of checklists you can write, laminate and hand out to students for repeated use:

- A set of questions to ask upon the completion of any piece of work. For example: Have I answered in full sentences? Is my meaning clear?
- A set of literacy-focussed questions such as: Have I checked my spelling? Do my sentences make sense? How good is my selection of vocabulary?
- A set of subject-specific questions. For example, in a maths lesson: Have I shown my working-out? What method have I used to check my work? Are there any answers I am not confident about?

A nice development of this sees you and your students developing a checklist together. By taking this approach, you will be helping your students to think carefully about what constitutes good work in the subject and what needs to be done before a piece of work can be considered complete.

3. Helpful wall displays

Wall displays can be a brilliant aid to independence; they offer an alternative point of reference to help students deal with questions or problems relating to their work.

Directing students to check the wall display when they have a question will encourage them to search for answers independently before they ask for your help. You can model this practice by referring to wall displays during teacher talk or when answering questions. This will provide students with an approach they can copy.

Here are five examples of effective wall displays:

- Literacy-based displays, showing keywords, connectives, sentence starters and so on.
- Fact-based displays, appropriate to your subject or to a specific topic within it.
- Rule-based displays, highlighting rules to be used in problem-solving or when faced with certain types of work, eg, practical work.
- Work-based displays that model examples of good student work.
- Criteria-based displays, demonstrating what students must do to be successful in your subject.

4. Set up a reference corner

To make sure that students always have a place to go when searching for answers, designate an area of your classroom to be the "reference corner".

Within this area you should make available a selection of reference works. This might include general reference books such as dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias, grammar guides and handbooks of equations. You may also choose to add text books or books relating to a topic you are currently studying.

There is the option to include a computer with internet access, if available in your classroom, so that students also have the option to refer to online information.

As with wall displays, you can encourage students to make use of the reference corner by modelling how to use it yourself and by praising individuals who use it well.

5. Open questions

Open questions encourage students to be more independent because they do not presuppose a single, definite answer.

While closed questions can create an atmosphere of students simply waiting to be given the right answer, open questions promote the idea of independent thinking. When there is more than one correct answer, students must develop a response based on what they know and what they predict might also be the case.

You can use open questions to frame your lessons, to introduce different elements of your lesson, in place of lesson objectives, as the stimulus for discussion, when talking one-on-one with students or as the basis for reflective plenary activities.

6. Training in thinking techniques

Taking the time to train students in problem-solving and thinking techniques will provide them with a go-to structure that can be applied to difficulties encountered in the classroom or when completing homework.

The techniques you introduce might be as simple as learning to organise thoughts through mind-mapping, lists and diagrams or they could be more complex, like Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats. Methods such as de Bono's have been designed specifically to simplify and improve thinking by providing a routine that can be followed in many situations.

Whichever technique you decide to use, it is essential that you model it several times first. Let your students see how the technique works in practise, in the context of a genuine problem that has been encountered during a lesson.

After a few supported attempts, encourage students to go off and use the procedure independently. You could provide them with laminated cards reminding them of the problem-solving steps they need to follow, or display this information somewhere on the walls of your classroom.
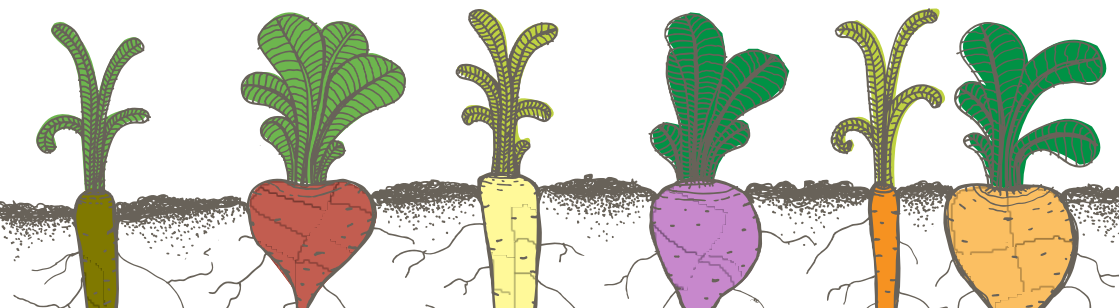
Section three – Activities

1. Marketplace

Divide the class into groups of three or four and assign each group a different area of the topic you are studying. Students should work together to research their topic area, using a range of materials that you have provided. These could include books, magazines, newspaper articles and online materials.

Explain that each group will be marketing their learning to the rest of the class. When students have had time to research, invite groups to set up a "market stall" from which to share what they have learnt.

Groups must decide who will be manning the market stall and who will be walking around the market and learning from the stalls of their peers.

Those who are moving around the market should make notes on what they hear, as they are responsible for communicating information about the other topic areas to the group members who have been busy manning the stall. Conclude the activity by asking students to return to their groups and teach about what they have learnt from the other stalls.

This activity is excellent for information-heavy lessons. It also sees all students taking on leadership roles, as the task will only be successful if everyone contributes. What's more, students are working independently of the teacher, conducting their own research, doing their own teaching and managing their own learning.

2. Envoys

This activity relies on the same set-up as marketplace: students work in groups to research one area of a topic. Once they have had sufficient time to do this, each group should nominate an "envoy", who will move around the room to teach other groups about their topic area.

Allow between three and five minutes for the envoys to teach each group. Once their time with the first group is up, ask the envoys to stand up and move clockwise to the next, taking their notes with them. Repeat until the envoys have returned to their home groups, where their group members will teach them about the rest of the material.

In this activity, the students who take on the role of envoy are being particularly independent, making it a great opportunity to differentiate for more-able students.

3. Students as teachers

The envoy and marketplace techniques see students taking on the role of teachers.

Here are three other ways to use peer-teaching in your classroom:

- Ask a small group of students to lead a starter or plenary activity. Give them some time in the previous lesson to prepare for this.
- Ask one or two students to lead a whole-class discussion connected to the topic. This works especially well towards the end of a unit of work.
- Ask groups to create presentations on different aspects of a subject. Insist that the presentations include interactive elements, so that the presenters are actively teaching the class about the topic.

4. Provide choices

You can promote independence in your classroom by presenting students with a set of appropriate tasks and asking them to complete the task that they believe will be best for them. This is a simple way for students to take charge of their learning.

The amount of direction you provide can vary. You may wish to provide a list of three specific tasks for students to choose from.

For example, on the topic of the Weimar Republic:

> **Choice A:** Create a four-page newspaper pull-out explaining hyperinflation to the German people.

> **Choice B:** Work with a partner to develop three possible responses to the crisis of hyperinflation.

> **Choice C:** Write an essay assessing the relative importance of the various causes of hyperinflation.

Alternatively, you might make the choice more open, by offering a selection of mediums by which students they can respond to a statement or question. These could include: essay, speech, report, poem, cartoon strip or short drama piece.

5. Interviewing

This task involves students interviewing their peers to find out about a topic or to gather prior knowledge or opinions about something.

Start by telling students what you want them to find out about. For example: the reading habits of the class, how much people already know about genetically modified foods or what opinions people have about a documentary that was watched in a previous lesson.

Next, ask students to come up with a set of questions that can be used to find out the information they need. You can ask students to develop questions either on their own or in groups. The number of questions will depend on how long you want the activity to last. I would suggest between five and 10 questions.

When students have decided on their questions, ask them to go around the room and interview their peers. Again, the number of interviews will depend on how long you want the activity to last. Conclude matters by leading a whole-class discussion, in which students share what they have found out, or by asking students to write up their findings.

6. Self-managed discussion

In advance of a lesson, come up with five discussion topics connected to the area of study. These could be general terms, questions or provocative statements. Begin the activity by dividing the class into groups of four. Ask each group to appoint a leader and explain that this person has the following responsibilities:

- To make sure the group stays on task.
- To lead the discussion by asking questions.
- To be ready to give a summary of the discussion to the rest of the class at the end of the activity.

Draw out one of the discussion topics at random and announce it to the class. This will form the basis of the first group discussions.

Allow around three minutes for the discussion and then draw a second topic at random. Communicate this to the class and have groups move on to their new discussion. Repeat once more and then conclude the activity either by asking group leaders to feed back to the whole class or by selecting one of the topics for a whole-class discussion.

The activity promotes independence by encouraging all students to take part in discussion and by inviting students themselves to manage the process.

Section four – Strategies and techniques

1. Give the end away

We often begin lessons by telling students where they are going and what they should expect to know or be able to do by the end of the lesson. But instead of dictating how students will reach this endpoint, why not try asking them to suggest a set of activities that could help to achieve the goals?

Working in pairs or threes, students should develop a possible route by which the whole class can meet the learning objective. Ask the groups to put forward their ideas and then select two or three of the most feasible suggestions for the class to vote on. The suggestion that receives the most votes will form the basis of the lesson.

This activity promotes independence as it asks students to take control of their own learning and to identify ways by which a specific learning goal can be reached.

In order to make this strategy more manageable, you may wish to present students with a collection of possible activities to choose from. Not only will this support students, who may struggle to produce suitable ideas, it will also save you from having to teach an activity you are unprepared for.
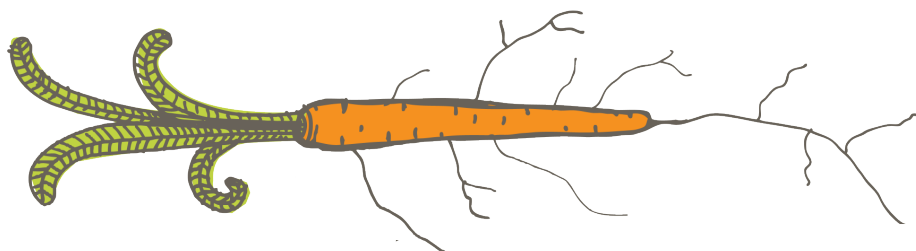
2. Refusing to help

Although it may seem at odds with your role as a teacher, refusing to help students can be a powerful strategy for encouraging independence.

For example, try refusing to help students until they can show you that they have made three attempts to solve their problem on their own. If they are still stuck after this, ask them to talk you through their attempts, so that you can explain how to solve a similar problem in the future, as well as helping with the current one.

Another option is to create a problem-solving checklist and refuse to help students unless they have already worked through the steps on the list. When they ask for your help, respond by asking them to talk you through how they have attempted to meet each item on the checklist. If they cannot do this, ask them to go away and try again before returning for help.

Here is an example of a problem-solving checklist:

- Have I read the question carefully and underlined key words?
- Have I looked back at my work from last lesson to see if the answer can be found there?
- Have I checked the wall displays?
- Have I made use of all the reference materials available to me?

All too often, students will come to you for a solution without even attempting to solve the problem for themselves. This can be down to habits formed over years in classrooms where independent working has not been well-facilitated.

Instead of immediately telling students the answer or doing the thinking work for them, flip the situation around and ask students to tell you.
Here is an example:

> **Student:** Sir, I don't know what I'm supposed to do next.
> **Teacher:** Why don't you tell me what you think you need to do next?
> **Student:** I think I'm meant to write up my findings.
> **Teacher:** Why do you think that?

By responding in this way, we are encouraging the student to think critically, thereby helping them to develop better strategies for dealing with future challenges.

An extension of this technique is to simply respond to a request for help by saying "What do you think the answer is?" This reduces the expectation that answers should always come from the teacher and helps students to feel more confident with putting forwards their own solutions.

3. Play dumb

Playing dumb is another great way to get students to think for themselves. It worked for Socrates and it can work for you.

Here is an example of how this technique works:

>**Student:** Miss, what's the answer to this question?
>**Teacher:** I don't know. What is the question about?
>**Student:** It's about probability.
>**Teacher:** What is probability?

The aim is to encourage students to think actively about the topic, so that they draw on their existing knowledge and start to work out the answers on their own.

This tactic tends to work best when you know the student has sufficient understanding to reach a solution alone, but simply needs to be nudged in the right direction through a little bit of role play on the teacher's part.

4. Making improvements

You can help students to become more independent and more aware of the quality of their work by asking them to make improvements when they believe that they have finished.

Here are three ways by which to go about it:

- If a student tells you that they have finished their work, ask them to imagine they are a school inspector looking for the very best work they can possibly find. They should assess their own work while playing this role and identify what changes need to be made in order to improve things.
- Create an improvements checklist, laminate it and hand it out to everyone in the class. When a student tells you they have finished their work, invite them to go through the checklist and work out what improvements they could make.
- Refuse to accept that any piece of work is finished until at least three revisions have been made to improve it. Indicate that students should highlight their changes and make a note in the margin explaining what they have altered and why.

5. Personal challenge

When a student has finished their work, you can ask them to challenge themselves by inventing their own extension task.

You might do this by presenting the student with a set of keywords (from the top two levels of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, for example) and asking them to make up a question using one of these words.

Alternatively, you can invite a student who has finished their work to convey the same information through a different medium. Explain that the choice of medium is up to them but that they should try to retain the essential meaning of their original piece of work.

6. Speak to a peer

When a student feels that they have completed a task, suggest that they go and share their work with one or two other people in the class. They should ask their peers' opinions about what could be done to develop the work and to make it better. In exchange, they can offer advice of their own.

Once students have elicited some ideas, they can put these into practice. Repeat this technique over time and it will eventually become second nature to your students.

7. Reflective self-assessment

A final method that can be used to encourage independence when students have finished a piece of work involves asking them to self-assess what they have done. Students should write a reflection that outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the decisions they have made and the final product they have created.

This technique helps to promote a positive yet self-critical mindset. Through assessing what they have done and reflecting on its merits, students will come to acknowledge that they are in control of the work they produce.

Three self-assessment methods are:

- Students compare their work to pre-determined success criteria.
- Students identify three things they have done well and one thing they could improve. They then go about making the improvement they have identified.
- Students assess whether or not they have successfully reached the most recent target you have given them. If they find that they have not, they should reflect on how they could have done things differently.