

Developing the independent learning capacities of sixth form students

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I am a teacher at Sir John Lawes School and completed the HertsCam MEd in the summer of 2021. During the MEd course, I was able to design and lead a development project which arose from my concern about sixth form students. I had observed that some of the students in my A-level classes were disengaged. I felt that there was a clear divide between students who flourished and took ownership of their learning and students who didn't and I wanted to do something about this. Discussions about the idea non-positional teacher leadership (Frost, 2014) discussed on the MEd course highlighted for me that any practitioner can develop their leadership capacity. This increased my confidence and my ability to lead change. I was also fortunate to have the support of the HertsCam Network, which has for many years helped teachers to develop practice by leading development work.



Leading the project

I started by exploring my school's culture and the implications for students. The psychologist Bandura (2001) tells us that cultural and social contexts influence students' dispositions and capacities. I also scrutinized the environment of my classroom culture to see whether it was my inexperience which might be the cause. However, I concluded if this was the case, surely all my students would have the same problem, so I focused on the variations between different students and how they are supported at home and in school. Consultations with colleagues suggested that the classroom culture for GCSE students, who are often 'spoon-fed' content, differed drastically from sixth form lessons where students are expected to learn more independently. Research indicates that years of heavily teacher-led student experience creates a barrier to sixth formers being able to learn independently (Stoten, 2014). I wanted to make a difference to this culture of teacher dependency.

I was aware of the need to collaborate with colleagues. I needed to create a climate for change by creating a sense of urgency (Kotter and Cohen, 2002); I invited colleagues to join me to form what has been called 'a participative community', a group of individuals who share a goal and are willing to collaborate to achieve it (Gorodetsky and Barak, 2008).

My reading helped me to identify three key areas which informed the planning of our strategies. The first was *student disposition*; character strengths and disposition can be nurtured (Claxton et al., 2015) by encouraging students to place value on learning rather than performance (Dweck, 2012). Teachers can positively impact on student disposition by treating failure as honourable (Holt, 1990). The second area was *motivation* which can be defined as self-belief (Claxton, 2001). Independent learning depends on intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001) and setting and achieving personal goals enables students to take responsibility for their learning (Cole, 1996). The third focus area was *agency*; the capacity to enact change. Bandura (2001) suggests that the stronger an individual's beliefs in their own abilities, the greater and more persistent their efforts will be. To successfully cultivate learner agency, we have to influence our learners' beliefs about what was possible.

We developed classroom strategies and tools, including a student learning journal (Ollerenshaw, 2007), to help students set and track their goals. This was used alongside mentor meetings which took place during the 2021 Spring Term when Covid-19 related school closures were in place. The mentoring began online and helped students to prepare for the return to school and the mock exams. Reflection is usually assumed to be an internal activity but successful reflection has to be a two-way process (Boud et al., 1985). We also developed the curriculum calendar to give students information about their course schedules; this enabled them to track their learning. Finally, we made a promotional video to share with students, parents and colleagues. It conveyed the principles of the project to the school community at a time when contact had been limited due to the pandemic.

What difference did my project make?

One of the most remarkable changes my development work brought about was a change in my own understanding and beliefs about learning. I arrived at what seemed to me to be a radical realisation that independent learning could be nurtured over time and through persistent and consistent strategies. I realised that this was something which has to be nurtured from a much younger age, perhaps even primary school. I also realised that the wider culture shapes our thinking about independent learning; in the UK there seems to be, amongst many people, a disinclination to trust young people and believe in their capacity to learn independently. Not all cultures are like this; the Japanese proverb 'send the beloved

child on a journey' perhaps reflects a greater commitment to allowing children to develop independence in that country. I think it is vital that parents and teachers entrust young people with opportunities that enable independence to flourish.

Overall, there were many challenges faced in the pursuit of my aim to nurture the disposition, motivation, and agency of sixth form students. In creating change, conflict may be inevitable (Fullan, 2001); I learned that leadership involves challenging the thinking of others and planting seeds for change. I felt that the project was successful and left a legacy that included the learning journal strategy being adapted for a lower year group. Some aspects of the project were built into our Core Enrichment course to support year 12 students on their return to school following the learning from home regime. My project has also been adopted by another school and continues to run as part of their Personal, Social and Health Education curriculum for sixth form students.

Final reflection

This development work has been transformative for me. My feelings towards teaching have become more positive because I feel empowered to speak within my own school and beyond. I found the experience of talking about my project in international networking events very empowering. My understanding about leadership and my capacity to lead has really grown; I came to understand the power of collaboration and working with my colleagues to make a difference collectively. I have also experienced real growth in my pedagogical understanding. The most significant realisation was that we have to learn to trust our students, give them opportunities to learn independently and provide appropriate tools and support.

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