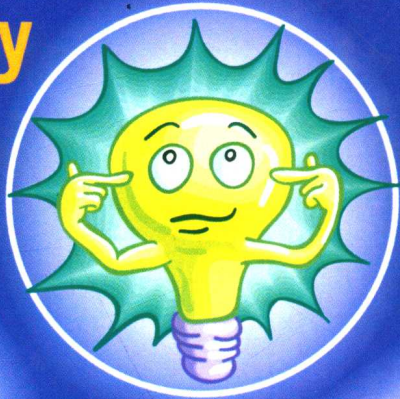


Learning for Themselves

Pathways for thinking and
independent learning in
the primary
classroom



A David Fulton Book

JENI WILSON & KATH MURDOCH

Learning for Themselves

Pathways to independence
in the classroom

JENI WILSON & KATH MURDOCH

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We hope you enjoy implementing the ideas in your own classroom. But our biggest hope is that these frameworks will inspire you to be independent and innovative and to create your own structures with and for your students.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, Margaret and my parents-in-law, Margaret and George, whose collective wisdom and compassion has taught me much about nurturing independence in children. (KM)

For my boys, Ethan, Madison and Stephen, as always. (JW)

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Introduction

If I am always the one to think of where to go next

*If where we go is always the decision of the curriculum or my curiosity
and not theirs*

If motivation is mine

*If I always decide on the topic to be studied, the title of the story,
the problem to be worked on*

*If I am always the one who has reviewed their work and decided what
they need*

How will they ever know how to begin?

From *The Things We Steal from Children* by Dr John Edwards
and Sandra Russell (1999)

Ask most teachers what they believe to be a key goal of their work and they will often reply that it is to help students become effective, independent learners. In contrast to traditional classroom practices where students were dependent on the teacher to make decisions about their learning, classrooms are increasingly viewed as places in which students 'learn to learn'. As we grow in our understanding of effective pedagogy, we are also recognising the need for more small group and one-on-one teaching opportunities. For this to happen effectively, we must develop students' capacity to work independently and manage themselves as learners. This awareness leads to students who are more conscious of what they do and do not understand, who are able to set goals, identify their needs and monitor their learning. Being able to manage their own learning, thinking and behaviour is critical in the development of individuals who can successfully navigate their way through a world of rapidly changing knowledge and the demands for new and transferable skills.

We believe that students will only develop the skills and behaviours for effective, independent learning if they are given opportunities to be independent. This requires teachers to have a repertoire of effective strategies and structures – but it also requires teachers who view students as increasingly capable of managing their learning and who are willing to share the power of teaching and learning with their students. Sharing power is also about being explicit and transparent about our purposes. It involves direct and clear instruction about how to ‘do learning’. Through clear explanation and reflection, issues such as how to stay motivated, how to organise resources, how to solve problems, how to set and work towards manageable goals become part of the accepted discourse in the classroom. Classrooms that foster independence are places where there is much shared discussion about thinking and learning.

Another key to fostering independence in the classroom is to recognise the *differences* among individuals and to develop ways to cater for these differences. Often referred to as a ‘differentiated’ approach, classrooms in which students are regularly given choices about what and how they will learn, and are involved in setting goals and assessing their own learning, are classrooms in which independent learning is more likely to emerge.

Independence is not about creating a ‘teacher free’ context. On the contrary – the teacher plays a critical role in guiding, supporting and critiquing students as they work through these tasks.

There are many ways in which teachers provide opportunities for effective student learning. These include: teacher modelling and demonstration, whole class and small group experiences, and the use of specific teaching procedures and strategies. Effective teachers use a wide range of approaches to meet the needs of their students. The specific emphasis of this book is the provision of frameworks for independent learning. The following principles underpin these frameworks and provide a rationale for why it is so important to nurture opportunities for students to learn for themselves.

Principles of independent learning

- All students can learn – but each student will be motivated to learn in different ways.
- Each student has unique learning preferences. Students do not all learn in the same way.
- When students are given choice, responsibility and ownership, they are more engaged, motivated and productive.
- Students learn at different rates. Either rushing or delaying students' progress can reduce engagement and impact negatively on learning outcomes.
- When students are given more responsibility for their learning, they are often in a better position to develop essential skills in thinking, research, communication and self-management.
- Not all students need to be 'doing the same thing' at the same time. Classrooms are, increasingly, places where small groups and individuals are pursuing a diversity of tasks.
- When students feel valued for who they are and what they bring to the learning environment, they are more likely to engage confidently in the learning process.
- When students achieve success because they can manage and enjoy the tasks, their confidence to tackle other independent tasks is increased.
- When the stress of comparative assessment is reduced, students are more likely to take risks in their learning and feel comfortable to set themselves goals.
- The appropriate level of challenge is important for motivation. The teacher's role in determining and monitoring this is important for facilitating learning during independent tasks. (In other words, independent learning is not just a matter of providing great tasks and hoping for the best.)
- Teachers have a vital role in nurturing independent learners. Importantly teachers must take responsibility for helping to define content and skills for students to work towards.

Summary of independent learning tasks

Pathway	Curriculum area	Focus question	Task
Learning preferences	Society & environment	<i>How do natural disasters affect us?</i>	Three level ladder
Learning preferences	Society & environment	<i>Why do people immigrate to the UK?</i>	It all adds up
Learning preferences	Society & environment	<i>What are wetlands? Why are they important?</i>	The artist's choice
Thinking dispositions	Society & environment	<i>How did Charlotte's Web make me think?</i>	Thinking in different ways
Thinking	Society & environment	<i>How can we live more sustainably?</i>	Thinking graphically
Inquiry	Society & environment	<i>What makes your community special?</i>	Resource detective
Inquiry	Society & environment	<i>How has the UK changed?</i>	Now I understand
Personal challenges	Society & environment	<i>How can we use water more wisely?</i>	Personal, local, global
Personal challenges	Society & environment	<i>What makes a good leader?</i>	A self-assessment matrix
Inquiry	Society & environment	<i>What does it mean to take on a challenge?</i>	Voices of the people
Learning preferences	Health & wellbeing	<i>How can we keep ourselves safe at home and at school?</i>	Choose it, make it!
Learning preferences	Health & wellbeing	<i>How can I help someone?</i>	Think, do, feel
Learning preferences	Health & wellbeing	<i>How do we entertain ourselves?</i>	What's your style?
Thinking	Health & wellbeing	<i>What is a safe risk?</i>	The coloured thinking hats
Thinking	Health & wellbeing	<i>How do I learn?</i>	The thinking gears
Thinking	Health & wellbeing	<i>How does advertising affect us?</i>	The six thinking hats
Thinking	Health & wellbeing	<i>How do I make decisions?</i>	Tic tac toe
Thinking	Health & wellbeing	<i>What do I think about thinking?</i>	Mix and match
Thinking	Health & wellbeing	<i>What did I learn this term?</i>	Thinking over it
Personal challenges	Health & wellbeing	<i>How can I keep myself healthy?</i>	Targetted learning
Personal challenges	Health & wellbeing	<i>How can we form respectful relationships?</i>	Challenge climb
Inquiry	Health & wellbeing	<i>How can we create a healthy community?</i>	Question matrix
Learning preferences	Science & technology	<i>How do we measure weather?</i>	See, hear, do
Thinking	Science & technology	<i>What makes a good structure?</i>	Bloom's activity choices
Thinking	Science & technology	<i>What can we change?</i>	The thinker's keys
Inquiry	Science & technology	<i>What can I learn about spiders?</i>	Data chart
Inquiry	Science & technology	<i>How do animals survive in their environment?</i>	Must do, can do
Personal challenges	Science & technology	<i>How can I make a toy with moving parts?</i>	Think, plan, do
Learning preferences	Science & technology	<i>How are plants and animals the same? How are they different?</i>	Choose your own adventure
Thinking	Science & technology	<i>What is an inventor?</i>	Using the thinker's keys
Inquiry			My passion project
Personal challenges			Personal best project

Making it happen in the classroom

When we adults think of children there is a simple truth that we ignore: childhood is not preparation for life; childhood is life. A child isn't getting ready to live; a child is living. No child will miss the zest and joy of living unless these are denied by adults who have convinced themselves that childhood is a period of preparation. How much heartache we would save ourselves if we would recognise children as partners with adults in the process of living, rather than always viewing them as apprentices. How much we could teach each other; we have the experience and they have the freshness. How full both our lives could be.

John A Taylor (1991)

This book offers teachers a varied selection of frameworks intended to allow students *choice* and *voice* within a structure for responsible, independent learning. The frameworks provided do not, in themselves, teach students how to work independently. But in conjunction with the right kind of classroom culture and organisation they help build student capacity for independence.

The chapters are organised under four broad areas: thinking, learning preferences, inquiry and personal challenges. The learning task proformas presented within each chapter are designed to support students in working independently through an activity or sequence of activities. Most tasks have been designed using content drawn from commonly addressed topics in primary school curriculums and they vary in their degree of challenge. At the beginning of each chapter, a table is provided to indicate the approximate level for which each task is designed. Most can be adjusted to suit older or younger age groups. Many of these tasks were developed to provide a more differentiated avenue for learning once students had explored a topic together for a while.

It is anticipated that teachers will be able to use these tasks as part of a broader unit of work that explores similar or related content. Some of them have also been used as the basis for homework tasks.

The learning tasks consist of two proformas: one that provides a focus question and one that does not. These modified proformas offer opportunities for teachers and students to use and adapt the structures to create their own learning tasks to suit their particular teaching and learning goals. All learning task proformas are provided in the Appendix.

The learning tasks are designed for individual students or small group use. They are structured to allow students to decide what they will attempt to do, how they might go about it and, often, how they will present their learning. By providing students with these choices, we help them come to understand more about themselves as learners. In general, the tasks share several common features:

- students can make **choices** about what they will do
- there are **guidelines and parameters** to help students make wise choices and to help them manage their learning
- suggested activities are **open-ended** and allow for multiple outcomes
- frameworks are generally ‘**integrative**’ in nature, working across the curriculum
- there is a focus on **higher order thinking**
- most tasks are accompanied by some form of **self-assessment**
- tasks are designed to develop **skills** as well as **understandings**.

In using these learning tasks with students, it is very important that teachers do not simply ‘hand them out’ and expect students to be able to manage them without support and guidance. We suggest teachers:

- **model** an example to the students (for example, enlarge a task to A3 size and show students how it could be approached, or model it on a board)
- discuss possible **assessment criteria** that could accompany the task so students are aware of your expectations
- hold regular, small group **conferences** so you can keep track of how students are approaching the task and the degree to which they are coping with its demands (there are proformas to accompany such conferences in the support materials section in the Appendix)
- **identify** the skills and processes the students will need to complete the tasks and ensure that they are adequately supported in the development of those skills.

Effective implementation of these ‘independent’ learning tasks requires some examination of three core elements: the skills and qualities of independent learners; the beliefs, behaviours and skills of teachers; and the nature of the tasks themselves. These aspects are discussed as follows.

What is an independent learner?

Working independently involves thinking, feeling, and doing. Independent learners know and feel they can make responsible choices and decisions and they get the job done.

As self-motivators, independent learners:

- are eager and curious
- are proactive and willing to take risks
- are able to set goals and initiate tasks with less direction
- know that positive thinking is useful
- are likely to produce work beyond expectations, particularly when self initiated
- enjoy a challenge.

As self-managers, independent learners:

- are thoughtful and deliberate in their actions
- persevere despite distractions
- avoid procrastination, and need minimal reminders and prompts to reach their goals
- draw upon a range of ways of thinking to get complex tasks completed
- make plans and set goals using a range of systems to develop routines and organise themselves, their materials and their time
- attempt to sort through problems first before consulting others.

As self-appraisers, independent learners:

- are self aware and can articulate their needs and strengths as a learner
- take time to reflect on effective learning strategies
- use their own judgements to choose appropriate strategies and actions
- use positive self talk and other ways to motivate and praise themselves
- do not constantly seek approval or guidance from others
- can adapt more readily to change in routines and expectations
- ask questions to clarify their understanding of given tasks and readily act upon feedback.

What skills do independent learners have?

Questioning

Independent learners ask a range of questions to find out more, make connections, clarify, challenge, improve their understandings, and to identify 'big issues'. Their questions go well beyond the managerial, for example: What do I need to do? How do I do...? They test opinions, question ideas, the learning process and their own progress.

Reflection and metacognition

Independent learners take time to think about their work, ideas and thinking. When thinking reflectively, they engage in active, persistent, systematic and careful consideration of ideas for a deeper understanding or to resolve states of doubt, a question, or a perplexing issue. When thinking metacognitively, the more independent learner is able to reflect and draw upon their existing knowledge and on their thought processes (including feelings). They can identify where they are in the learning process or in the process of solving a problem, their content-specific knowledge, and their knowledge about their personal learning or problem-solving strategies. They are aware of what they know, of what needs to be done, what has been done and what might be done in particular learning contexts. They can evaluate their ongoing knowledge and mental processes in progress. They can make judgements about their own thinking processes, knowledge, capacities and limitations.

Organisation

Independent learners develop systems for planning, organising and managing tasks to optimise progress towards their goals. They think about how they will manage their materials, time and themselves to get the job done. They pay attention to process and task completion.

Identifying, gathering and critiquing resources

Independent learners systematically, thoughtfully and selectively gather and appraise beyond the obvious. They check sources and evidence of validity/relevance, will challenge texts, compare information and make connections among ideas.

Risk-taking and resilience

Independent learners are inquisitive and approach new situations without fear of failure. They do not avoid challenges. They enjoy a challenge and do not opt for

the same approach each time. They are confident enough to try something new and design or try creative ways of doing things. They are also comfortable if what they try does not work. They do not get overly 'bogged down' when something is not working and are willing to change their own point of view and way of working. These students cope with change readily and often 'multi-task'. They are flexible, innovative and will consider different solutions. They can 'go with the flow', changing their thinking and actions depending on what is required.

Seeking and accepting feedback

Independent learners are open to new ideas, listen to and take advice, because they understand that this is likely to improve their learning and results. They will seek feedback (from peers, teachers and others) to clarify requirements, improve their performance and assist progress. This is different from continually 'checking in' with the teacher.

How can teachers nurture independence in their students?

Although it may seem contradictory, the tasks, skills and qualities presented in this book are not about creating a 'teacher free' environment where students manage all of their learning and require little or no support from the teacher! Ultimately, our goal is to help students come to understand who they are as learners, their particular strengths and needs, and to develop within them the capacity to learn continuously and actively. We want students who know how to take responsibility for themselves as learners and who delight in that challenge. *All this happens only with the support of a strategic and highly interactive teacher.*

In the classrooms where we see students working most effectively and independently, we find teachers who have, above all else, a strong sense of *purpose* behind all they do. These teachers know why they are doing what they are doing and, importantly, they make that very explicit to their students. Teachers apprentice students into learning by 'letting them in on the secret' – they make transparent the processes and skills needed to achieve a desired outcome. They spotlight *how* the learning is taking place as well as what learning is taking place.

These purposeful and explicit teachers are also keenly aware of the individual differences among their students. They take time to gather data about the needs of individuals and offer tasks that are open-ended enough to cater for that variety. Once they have that real knowledge of individuals, they are better placed to help them realise their potential for independence. Different students, of course, require different levels of support. A teacher who is passionate about helping his or her students become effective learners quickly learns where to place the

'scaffolding' for certain students, and when to remove some of the layers of that scaffold. The support materials provided on the CD-ROM offer many structures that assist teachers in providing the guidance and organisation necessary for the effective implementation of the independent learning tasks.

In the day-to-day practical running of the classroom, teachers can help support independent work by:

- establishing clear rules and routines
- ensuring that students are clear about the requirements of the task, the due date, and checking in with them regularly
- conferencing with individuals or small groups to check progress (there are record sheets in the support materials section in the Appendix)
- discussing time management techniques, effective work habits and rules of courtesy
- checking internet resources for suitability
- running targeted 'skills' workshops to develop students' capacity in certain areas such as note-taking, summarising, organising notes
- regularly checking student record keeping, for example work diaries and completion sheets
- making time for feedback, sharing and celebrating achievements.

Frequently asked questions

How do the independent learning tasks relate to inquiry learning?

Many teachers favour an inquiry approach to the design and implementation of curriculum. Developing the skills and qualities for more independent learning complement this approach – indeed, the inquiry process itself is based on a view of the student as capable of asking and investigating questions of significance. Some of the frameworks in this book draw on the inquiry process (see Chapter 4) while other frameworks may be used by students as part of a broader unit of inquiry or within other curriculum structures. Nurturing independence is critical to success in inquiry learning so these learning tasks support the skills and qualities that characterise the inquiring classroom.

How do we fit this independent work in with everything else we have to cover?

The frameworks in this collection can be used to support existing curriculum content. We have selected examples based on commonly taught 'units' in primary and middle years. This has been a deliberate choice so that teachers can embed

them within existing structures rather than using them in an isolated way. When students develop the skills to work more independently, teachers are able to work more efficiently and effectively on the expected curriculum as well as providing opportunities for students to negotiate aspects of their learning.

Teachers nurture independence when ...	Teachers hinder the development of independence when ...
They spend time investigating the learning interests and preferences of each student.	They favour one kind of learning style in their planning and teaching.
They spend time setting up a classroom environment where students feel comfortable to take risks .	Time spent on classroom environment is considered peripheral to core business.
Students are invited to share what they want to learn about and how they like to learn. Their ideas are used to inform curriculum planning and students are involved in goal setting .	Teachers make all the decisions about curriculum, largely based on levels specified by curriculum documents.
Teachers provide students with real opportunities for choice and decision making .	Teachers offer little or no choice to students about what or how they will learn.
There is regular, sustained dialogue among students. Questions are fostered and teachers are active listeners.	Teachers do most of the talking and questioning.
Learning routines favour small group and one-on-one teaching where students are highly involved.	Most teaching is conducted at the whole class level. Students are often passive recipients.
Students expect that they will work in different groupings for different purposes. Sometimes they choose these groups and sometimes groups are organised for them.	Teachers make all the decisions about who will work with whom.
Individuality is celebrated and students are encouraged to take reasonable risks.	Conformity is sought and reinforced.
Students have opportunities for sustained learning time – teachers show a flexible approach and allow more time when it is needed.	Timetables offer 'bite-sized' learning episodes that hinder a student's capacity to follow alternative pathways or pursue something in depth.
There is a clear and negotiated classroom management plan . Clear protocols for behaviour are consistently followed.	There is no clear behaviour management plan. Students are not involved in making decisions about expected behaviour or consequences.
Materials and resources are shared . Students have access to most resources and do not have to seek permission for everything they use.	Teachers are the 'gatekeeper' of all or most resources.
Students do not have a fixed seat in the room. They move around the room according to the demands of the activity.	Students always sit in the same place, usually specified by the teacher.
Student questions (including self-questioning), reflective thinking and metacognition are essential for students making their own decisions.	Little or no time is allowed for reflective practice.
Students are involved in setting goals and self-assessing .	Teachers determine learning goals for students without consultation. Students are not asked or expected to assess their own learning.

What about classroom management?

Many (but by no means all) management problems are due to poor student engagement. When students are given a 'voice' in their learning, they generally feel more valued and engaged. We have found that when teachers bring more choice and ownership into the way they work with students some management issues are resolved.

At the same time, we recognise that quality management is essential *for* independent learning. The two definitely 'feed' each other. Developing skills for independent learning is more possible in an environment where teachers use a positive, clear and constructive approach to classroom management. The way we manage our classrooms sends important messages to students. Authoritarian environments tell students that they are less capable of decision making and that they are not trusted to make choices. In classrooms that are too 'loose', chaotic and poorly managed, students often lack the important sense of security that routine and clear expectations provide. An effective learning environment relies on establishing shared core rules, routines and a discipline plan. William Glasser (1998) argues that classroom relationships (and, therefore learning) are enhanced when teachers attend to the five basic needs we all have for internal motivation: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun.

What do we do about those children who just can't work independently?

We recognise that, for various reasons, some students present us with challenges that cannot be easily addressed even by the most fair and negotiated class discipline plan. Being a part of a constructive learning community brings with it responsibilities as well as rights. The right to be part of this community may need to be 'earned' by some students through individualised and targetted contracts or behaviour plans. These behaviour plans are one way we can begin to assist students to become more independent in their learning. Individual contracts allow students to have some ownership and control over the management of their behaviour.

Isn't this kind of work more appropriate for older students?

Spend any time in an open-ended, play-based preschool environment and you will quickly reassess the idea that young children cannot be independent! Both within the home and in preschool, children will exhibit an enormous capacity