Interpretations of independent learning in further education

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Independent learning and independent learning strategies are at present significant topics in educational research. The bulk of this research deals with independent learning in junior and higher education with little based upon the further education sector. The focus of this article is the interpretation of independent learning by 16- to 19-year-old students at a further education tertiary college. This article reports the interpretations of students of independent learning and offers explanations and reasons for these interpretations that exist in academic and vocational students. The research used a case study methodology employing a mixture of questionnaires and interviews. Data collected from staff interviews were used to structure a student focus group, whilst data collected from the student questionnaire were used to structure the staff questionnaire in both cases allowing feedback and the cross analysis of data between staff and students.

The concept and defining of independent learning

Independent learning is not a new concept, nor is it a concept where there is universal agreement on its meaning. In its broadest and most accessible/known context, independent learning was defined by the Open University (Moore, 1984) as: ‘working with increasingly less structured teaching materials and with less reliance on traditional kinds of tutor support’ (p. 27).

Whilst the Open University context is one which most academics will be familiar with, its definition of independent learning allows for great variety in the interpretation and of practices. Race (2002) discusses examples of what independent learning can be in practice, thus suggesting that independent learning is essentially a concept in which, over time, an individual is empowered to learn themselves.

A comprehensive audit of terms used to describe ‘independent learning’ was undertaken by Kesten (1987): ‘Autonomous learning, independent study, self-directed learning, student initiated learning, project orientation, discovery and inquiry, teaching for thinking, learning to learn, self instruction and life long learning’ (p. 9).

By identifying numerous terms synonymous with independent learning, Kesten (1987) presents the problem of defining the term ‘independent’. Confusion exists...
due to the number of terms and the possible interpretations of these terms. It follows that an individual may define one of the above terms as independent learning and considers another term to mean something else. The permutations that exist as a result of the above allow multiple variations in meaning and interpretation.

The Nuffield Group (1975) identified many pedagogic practices under the heading of ‘Towards independence in learning’ in which autonomy is discussed. Lewis (1978) discriminates between the method and the experience of independent learning: ‘To approve “autonomy” as an ideal for students is one thing: to commend “autonomous” methods of learning is another—however “autonomy” is defined’ (p.152).

Thus whatever autonomy is, there are many different ways it can be achieved. Candy (1987) and Dearden (1972) examined methods as a tool for fostering autonomy and found exposure, or lack of exposure to autonomous methods, may foster or encourage autonomy. Holec (1979) defines autonomy as: ‘The capacity or ability to take charge of one’s learning’ (p. 3).

In Holec’s terms ‘autonomy’ is the ability to learn in a logical and appropriate manner suitable to the topic matter. In other words the individual must recognize the need to organize their learning around what they want to learn. Little (1994) takes a wider look at learner behaviour to allow the differences that exist in the learning process: ‘The capacity for autonomy will be displayed in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts’ (p. 4).

Little (1994) identifies the learning process as being important in allowing individual autonomy by highlighting the ability of the learner to transfer their learning to other contexts. If the learner can transfer their individual autonomy to a new context, then autonomy is not confined to a particular environment, or one in which it has been learnt. Therefore the learner’s autonomy could be positively, or negatively, nurtured by other classes/environments (Cornwall, 1992).

Taking the literal meaning of ‘independent’ and ‘learning’ from Hanks (1996) and applying the context of the educational environment, gave Kesten (1987) the definition of independent learning as:

That learning in which the learner, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decisions necessary to meet the learner’s own needs. These decisions ought to be made within the bounds of social acceptability and by self-directed, self-motivated, willing learners. (Kesten, 1987, p. 5)

Williamson (1995) in his review of literature on independent learning states: ‘Regardless of the terminology used, mostly researchers perceive differences in the level of responsibility students should accept’ (p. 78).

This recognition of the variety of terms used to describe independent learning highlights the complexity in defining such a term. Similar to Little (1994), Williamson (1995) recognizes that the variables involved in any one learning environment, with any one individual, are vast. The only common element is student responsibility. If this is so, any definition of independent learning must make explicit or implicit reference to the responsibility of the student to allow any
comparative measures to be made. This then moves the discussion onto defining and measuring responsibility. However, asking any individual to define ‘responsibility’ or ‘their responsibilities’ involves a degree of personal interpretation. As personal interpretation can vary greatly, it is enough to recognize the need to adopt some personal responsibility to be an independent learner.

With many terms being synonymous with independent learning, it is hardly surprising that recent publications have lengthy discussions regarding the definition of independent learning. Souto and Turner (2000) identify one of the key issues facing anyone trying to introduce Independent Learning into the curriculum:

> Although there still appears to be some confusion as to their meaning, i.e., they may still mean different things to different people in different institutions employing different practices, generally speaking these terms are nevertheless interrelated and refer to, on the one hand, a trend towards encouraging more independent modes of study on the part of the learner (learner autonomy) and on the other hand, the provision of materials and resources which are aimed at facilitating this independence (self-access centres).
> (Souto & Turner, 2000, p. 385)

Within the context of the study and due to the variety of teaching and learning strategies at the college, it is important to have a definition by which all staff and students agree on the meaning and interpretation of independent learning. Without such a definition, as Souto and Turner (2000) highlight, misconceptions or misinterpretations will result. This in turn will then prevent reliable comparisons being made.

In looking at the literature on independent learning it becomes apparent that different terms are used to mean the same thing, but are often used in different contexts. Independent learning aims to teach our students to learn for themselves and in turn empower them in their learning whatever the context. This is achieved by the acceptance of responsibility (see Williamson, 1995) by the student and can be seen by the involvement of the student in their studies. The definition therefore highlights the positive participation of the individual in order to reach the individual’s needs. It also allows for the differentiation between individuals based upon their own views and interpretations.

In accepting any definitions of independent learning, difficulties arise in its application to the different education sectors. What is evident from the literature (1969–2002) is the absence of detailed case studies within the Further Education (FE) sector. Whilst the literature upon the early key stages (see Treffinger & Barton, 1988; Macfarlane, 1993; Elliot et al., 1999; Hendy & Whitebread, 2000) and HE (see Rogers, 1969; Jones & Jones, 1996; Chan, 2001) is widespread, little work has been reported that attempts to understand the interpretations and perceptions of the 16–19 age group. Rather research has focused upon developing life skills (FEDA/Wilde & Hardaker, 1997) and autonomy (Laevers, 2000).

It is the purpose of this paper to look at the interpretations of 16- to 19-year-old students in their understanding of the meaning of independent learning, hence no definition is offered at this stage. Significantly the research findings highlight a need for clarity in defining and the use of independent learning within the FE context.
This paper will start by considering the methods/methodology employed in gathering the data in addressing the research, followed by the presentation of the results and the discussion of the results. The conclusion summarizes the findings and identifies areas for possible further research.

Methodology
The scale and scope of the research is limited to Selby College, 16- to 19-year-old full time students enrolled upon daytime A level or vocational courses. This was due to the commissioning of the research, and thus a case study methodology was adopted.

Within the case study methodology a questionnaire was conducted with 181 students aged 16–19 enrolled upon either an academic (A level) or vocational (Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education: AVCE) programme of study at Selby College. The above follows a similar strategy to Hendy and Whitebread (2000), Souto and Turner (2000), Chan (2000), Elliot et al. (1999) and Hall et al. (1993) who also conducted research into independent learning. However, it should be noted that whilst care was taken using a series of pilot questionnaires (as suggested by Sarantakos, 1994), limitations to this method of data collection need to be considered. The wider application of findings is limited due firstly to the methodological approach, and secondly to the possibility of misinterpretation of questions (Denscombe, 1998).

The students sampled were those who were present on the day of their tutorial with their Guidance and Support Tutor (GST). Gender was not considered within the sample, nor was the age (beyond being 16–19 years old). Only their course of study and year of study were requested.

The questionnaire utilized questions reflecting the need to ascertain a quantitative representation of the views held by students, but also to maintain flexibility in allowing discussion of feelings towards independent learning. The questionnaire was organized into two sections: (i) contained 10 multiple-choice questions, whereas section (ii) contained five open-ended questions.

Responses to the questionnaire were analysed using a combination of spreadsheets and the constant comparison method of category generation derived from Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Results
In this section, the findings from the student questionnaire are presented. The purpose of this is to establish the perceptions of independent learning held by students.

Two hundred questionnaires were distributed in February 2002 via guidance and support tutors’ (GSTs) to 16- to 19-year-old full time students. Of the 200 questionnaires, 181 were returned completed, a percentage return of 91% (90.5). At this point in time the college had 539 full time 16- to 19-year-old students studying on either A levels or a vocational course. The 181 questionnaires returned represent
34% (33.58) of the college’s total 16- to 19-year-old population (a 51% representation of academic students and a 22% representation of the vocational).

Table 1 presents the cumulative frequency distribution of responses by academic and vocational students to Section 1 of the questionnaires. Using Chi square it was established that no significant difference existed between academic and vocational students to Section 1 of the questionnaire (at the 0.001 level of significance with four degrees of freedom).

Section 2 of the student questionnaire sought to develop the student’s views from Section 1 through the use of open-ended questions. The primary goal of which was to allow students to voice their perceptions and interpretations on independent learning through a series of questions.

Question 2.1 asked ‘Have you ever taken part in what you consider to be an independent learning activity?’ with the option of either yes or no.

Table 2 shows the frequency responses to Question 2.1: ‘Have you ever taken part in what you consider to be an independent learning activity?’.

Table 1. Student responses to section one of the questionnaire (combined vocational and academic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Frequency of responses</th>
<th>Cumulative frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Student responses with regards to participation in an independent learning activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you ever taken part in what you consider to be an independent learning activity?</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic students</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the academic population surveyed</td>
<td>(83%)</td>
<td>(17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational students</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the vocational population surveyed</td>
<td>(62%)</td>
<td>(38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of total:</td>
<td>(75%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 2.2 asked students to consider an independent learning activity that they had taken part in and to outline what they had gained from the experience. Six categories were generated from the responses to the question. See table 3.

Question 2.3 provided some useful insights into the extent and impact of resources on students’ independent learning experiences. The question posed asked students: ‘To what extent do resources have an impact on your independent learning experience?’ Eight categories were generated from the responses to this question. See table 4.

Question 2.4 asked students how they would describe what their role is in independent learning. The responses proved to be far more varied in the number of different responses, but showed three areas of distinct majority. Again eight categories were generated from the responses. See table 5.

Question 2.5 sought to develop 2.4 further by asking students to say what the role of staff is in independent learning. Whilst Question 2.4 responses were fairly narrow in their breadth of responses, Question 2.5, when coded, shows an even narrower

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
<th>Brief description of category</th>
<th>Example: brief examples of category responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge (63%)</td>
<td>The imparting of knowledge; subject based, generic, skills, methods and awareness</td>
<td>Student 24: Being given tasks which we have to find our own information—I am able to understand the information more Student 26: gained information I did not know before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study (4%)</td>
<td>Type of learning; directed, undirected, (un)supported</td>
<td>Student 93: Working on my own with no distractions Student 82: The ability to produce a high standard of work with little teacher/student interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time (6%)</td>
<td>Looks at the influence of time on the individual when learning independently</td>
<td>Student 98: How to arrange my own time and become self-motivated to do so Student 148: I learned to pace myself and to do this independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (26%)</td>
<td>This is a subjective category using the individual’s own criteria—non-generic</td>
<td>Student 124: I gained more confidence in my own ability and gained inspiration to do further independent learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No written response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (1%)</td>
<td>Any response not falling into the above categories</td>
<td>Student 154: Preparation for university</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unlike Questions 2.4 and 2.5, Question 2.6 sought to gain student perceptions of independent learning as a whole. The question posed was: ‘What do you consider to be involved in learning independently? Explain why you think this’. Nine categories were generated from the responses. See table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
<th>Brief description of category</th>
<th>Example: brief examples of category responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Impact (41%)                | This category looks at any direct reference to positive impacts upon learning | Student 16: They help me and are of benefit to my learning  
Student 50: The resources you use play a big part in your learning because they are what you learn from |
| Type of resource (identified [if any]) (7%) | Was included to allow representation of the frequency a particular type of resource is mentioned | Student 38: Books and notes are very useful, but sometimes I require a computer |
| Information (9%)            | This category looks at representing what has been gained within a context | Student 24: They help because this is where I will information from  
Student 72: Resources can limit the amount of information—this then in turn limits the learning experience—the amount of information gained |
| Study (19%)                 | Unlike impact and information, this category represents answers that refer to learning as a tool/method | Student 80: You cannot learn without resources  
Student 130: The resources helped me to understand a particular topic that I didn’t understand |
| Personal (1%)               | This is a subjective category using the individual’s own criteria—non-generic. | Student 113: To provide myself with the information I require to do my work |
| Resource (evaluation) (23%) | Specific reference to a ‘resource’ followed by a personal evaluation of that resource | Student 175: You are capable of better independent learning when you have sufficient good resources |
| No response                 | No written response          |                                             |
| Miscellaneous (1%)          | Any response not falling into the above categories | Student 20: couldn’t find a book that was appropriate |

perception of what the staff role is in independent learning. Eight codes were derived from the responses. See table 6.
The questionnaire results will be discussed, using seven main themes:

- **Theme 1**: defining what independent learning is.
- **Theme 2**: student perceptions on opportunities for independent learning.
- **Theme 3**: motivational issues.
- **Theme 4**: the learning environment.
- **Theme 5**: positive, or negative perceptions?
- **Theme 6**: student experiences of independent learning.
- **Theme 7**: student opinions on independent learning.

### Table 5. The categories generated from the responses to Question 2.4 and example student responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
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<th>Example: brief examples of category responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Motivation (18%)            | This category deals with the individual’s interests and how they feel they are motivated | **Student 2**: Motivation and determination  
**Student 52**: It is up to you to work yourself  
**Student 55**: Self-motivated and taking control |
| Outcomes (7%)               | End products/ownership of the outcome | **Student 115**: Doing as much as possible to get a good mark  
**Student 145**: To take up independent learning to widen your knowledge in subjects therefore increase your success |
| Personal (19%)              | Category which is subjective based upon the individual’s own criteria | **Student 3**: To search for my own goals, to try and find where I want to be and what I want to accomplish |
| Study (36%)                 | This category looks at the way in which studying is used to learn—particularly the ‘activity’ involved | **Student 6**: Research done for myself  
**Student 26**: To take responsibility in how to do my learning—studying by myself |
| Resources (2%)              | This category represents the perception of the role of resources within the context of the student’s role | **Student 70**: Using knowledge and resources that I have to do work |
| Management (9%)             | Links to the management of time, progression and learning | **Student 71**: To manage my own progression and learning out of lessons |
| No response                 | No written response              |                                             |
| Miscellaneous (9%)          | Any response not falling into the above categories | **Student 76**: Very important |

### Discussion

The questionnaire results will be discussed, using seven main themes:
Theme 1: defining what independent learning is

Sixty per cent of students thought that the statement ‘When you take control of your own learning by taking responsibility’ (Questionnaire Section 1, Question 1.1) describes what they thought independent learning is. Significantly no other choice allowed the student to express explicitly ‘responsibility’ and to a lesser extent ‘control’. This definition was taken from Chan’s (2001) study on autonomy and the learners’ perspectives. He concluded from the responses of HE students questioned that this was the preferred meaning of learner autonomy (independent learning; see Kesten 1987). In reaching this conclusion he discusses the work of Pierson (1996), Holec (1981) and Little (1994). He also discusses Ho and Crookall (1995) and their work on autonomy and the effect of past experiences. This is particularly significant as the choices available, for Question 1, all refer implicitly to prior experience in their wording; the research on which the definitions were based utilizing students’ past experiences, or desired experiences.

It is interesting to note that only 22%, or less than a quarter of students, chose the definition recognized by the DfEE, Ofsted and QCA: ‘When you are encouraged to think, talk and develop your own learning’.

Less than 2% of students chose the definition by Kesten (1987, p. 3): ‘This is learning, in conjunction with relevant others, which allow the learner to meet the learner’s own needs’. This is surprising as this study considered and utilized the work of several notable pieces of research on the defining of independent learning; Boud (1988), Dressel and Thompson (1973), Knowles (1975), Letteri (1985) and
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Example: brief examples of category responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (10%)</td>
<td>This category deals with the individuals</td>
<td>Student 39: Concentration, motivation, knowledge and perseverance, willing to learn—without enthusiasm you cannot succeed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Personal (17%)              | This category allows for an individual to express what they feel is involved in independent learning | Student 8: To have a preference in the way we are taught and to take responsibility of our learning as this involves us working and thinking for ourselves  
Student 27: Taking your own initiative and to learn on your own |
| Knowledge (14%)             | This category looks at the imparting of knowledge, be it subject-based, generic- or skills-based and what knowledge is involved in learning independently | Student 38: Finding out new things, knowledge to teach yourself new things, need enthusiasm to succeed  
Student 73: Gaining knowledge and understanding to develop knowledge enabling yourself to think and work at your own pace |
| Study (29%)                 | This category looks at the way in which studying is used to learn independently—in particular the support given/provided | Student 58: Research on my own  
Student 59: Researching on your own to complete a task as well as possible |
| Resources (9%)              | This category looks at the resources themselves—allowing the individual to learn independently | Student 80: Time, you must do the work using resources  
Student 85: Self-discipline, organisation, motivation but above all a good range of resources |
| Outcomes (9%)               | This category looks at the impact of learning independently upon the 'product' or outcome of using resources | Student 89: To use your own motivation to enhance the learning experience, working outside of lessons to help understand and form your own opinions |
| Time (7%)                   | This category looks at how time influences the individual when learning independently | Student 98: Having time and being self motivated to do the work  
Student 108: Develop learning skills and to organise your time |
| No response                 | No written response            |                                                |
| Miscellaneous (4%)          | Any response not falling into the above categories | Student 123: Being independent |
Treffinger (1975). However, on closer examination and cross tabulation with multiple-choice Question 2, students chose an option that supports the work of Kesten through his work with Saskatchewan education (2001).

Forty-one per cent of students thought that ‘Sitting an examination/test from which feedback is given’ does not describe independent learning. Whilst students as a group preferred a different definition of independent learning from that proposed by Kesten, they agreed with his research on, and his definition of, what is not independent learning. In contrast, less than 9% of students agree with Chan’s perception of what is not independent learning. This is particularly significant in defining the students’ perceptions of independent learning through positive and negative identification. On cross tabulation it is apparent that the overwhelming majority of students consider independent learning to be defined as Chan’s, whilst Kesten best defines what is not independent learning.

Frequencies generated by the students’ views on defining independent learning appear to be multifaceted. In essence students have strong views on what is independent learning and what is not independent learning. The literature by Kesten (1987) and Chan (2001) on which the first two questions’ responses are based—there was an expectation that students would choose the corresponding choices—i.e., the definition, and what is not an independent learning activity as defined by the same researcher. It is interesting to note that only nine students chose the definition of what is and what is not independent learning from the same researcher, with most combining more than one researcher’s findings. Forty-one students combined the definition of Chan’s (2001) with that of Kesten’s (1987); this was by far the greatest frequency. This could be interpreted as students using different criteria to define what is, and is not, independent learning. Alternatively this could indicate that student perceptions of independent learning have been shaped by their experiences.

Table 8 shows the students’ preferred combination of statements for Questions 1 and 2.

**Theme 2: student perceptions on opportunities for independent learning**

When students were asked what activities gave most independence for their learning, 52% of students reported that ‘research’ gave most independence, whilst only 3% of students felt that ‘class-based activities’ gave most independence.

Taking a more traditional, and possibly controversial view, the small percentage of students choosing ‘class-based activities’ as giving the most independence was not surprising considering traditional pedagogic practice: ‘chalk and talk’. Petty (1997),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement describing independent learning</th>
<th>Statement describing what is not independent learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you take control of your learning by taking responsibility; Chan (2001)</td>
<td>Sitting an examination/test from which feedback is given; Kesten (1987)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in discussing how to make use of independent learning, points out: ‘Students get bored if your tasks are exclusively solitary, and “book-and-biro”’ (p. 29).

Shenkman (1986) approaches the issue from a slightly different viewpoint: ‘The popularity of this method seems to be based upon tradition or lack of a substantially different alternative’ (p. 112). She then discusses this in conjunction with the work of Simpson (1984), who found independent learning from text to be inadequate in many colleges. Shenkman then links this to the conceptualization process of learning: ‘Traditional study methods may be limited in their conceptualization and direction for teaching underlying cognitive strategies for expository test reading and learning’ (p. 112).

It is interesting to note that whilst there seems to be an abundance of literature advocating the use of independent learning strategies in the classroom, only Wickett (ERIC Document ED 276845) discusses the work of Tough (1980) who offers a contrasting view: ‘…classroom learning is only the “tip of the iceberg”. Because most learning happens outside of the class sessions, it is possible to foster independence in the learning external to regular class sessions’ (p. 6).

Question 4 further supports the traditional view held by the majority of the literature, with 81% of students feeling that ‘class-based activities’ gave least independence for learning. This, in conjunction with the low percentage of students feeling that ‘class-based activities’ give most independence for learning in Question 3, leads to the conclusion that students do not feel that class-based activities allow for independent learning.

However, such directed learning within the context of Selby College pedagogic practice should be diverse enough to allow independent learning in students’ programmes of study: i.e., the subjects which students are studying should provide breadth and depth to their studying habits. Alternatively as the question posed asked which gave most independence, the relative merits of class-based activities confine learning to a given context and learning environment. This is in itself bound by the teacher and resources available in which you would expect less opportunities for independent learning than if the student was in an open environment with access to a variety of resources.

In contrast to this, Questions 3 and 4 also indicate that students feel that research gives the greatest independence for learning. Whilst the findings from the questionnaire show students’ preference for research as an independent learning strategy, Simpson (1983) points out:

The most common difficulty a student has in learning how to learn is not related to a lack of knowledge or awareness about possible strategies. Rather, the real impediment to independence in learning lies with the student’s inability to regulate or control a particular strategy. (Simpson, 1983, p. 25)

It could therefore be suggested that students perceive the alternative options outlined in the question as being ‘out of their control’. If this is then considered in conjunction with multiple-choice Questions 1 and 2, it then appears that students have clear perceptions of what is independent learning. They see independent learning as taking responsibility, which is least effective when conducted as a
class-based activity and most effective when given the opportunity to research a
topic/theme.

It is apparent from the first four multiple-choice questions that responsibility is a
key feature in students’ perceptions of independent learning; in defining what is and
is not independent learning.

It was interesting, and pleasant, to note that only a small percentage—1%—of
those students surveyed felt that they had no experience of independent
learning, whilst the remaining 99% felt that they had had some experience of
independent learning. The extent of that experience was fairly evenly spread.

On closer analysis, the two students, both Year 1 vocational students, who
reported that they had had no experience of independent learning, both reported in
Question 2.1 that they had never taken part in what they considered to be an
independent learning activity. A possible indication here is that their interpretation
of what independent learning is prohibits a positive response regardless of the
environment. In analysing their questionnaires further, the responses to the
multiple-choice section show three other areas of agreement.

1. Both students consider independent learning to be ‘when you take control of
   your own learning by taking responsibility’.
2. That ‘homework’ gives least independence for learning.
3. That independent learning ‘is of benefit to their studies’.

In Section 2, where students’ views are explored, both students report similar views
on what they thought their role is in independent learning: motivation.

   Motivation and determination to get good grades. (Student 2)
   Motivation to get good grades and to revise. (Student 10)

Both responses are too short to analyse beyond obvious similarities in the use of the
term ‘motivation’ and ‘grades’. This however is important simply by the
implications/significance as outlined by the literature, particularly by Entwistle
(1977) and, from a vocational perspective, Murphy (1999):

   Portfolios are conceived of as ‘candidate-led’, since this can promote candidate
   involvement and responsibility for their own assessment. (p.198)

   This is particularly significant if considered with the student’s chosen definition in
   mind. Whilst two students from a sample of 181 is of no real significance, it is important
to at least recognize that two students felt it important to link motivation with grades.

Theme 3: motivational issues

Question 6 sought to gain student perceptions on what they thought best described
staff attitudes to independent learning. Again whilst no reference is made to where
this should take place, the options available indicate the context.

It was surprising that the responses were spread so evenly across the five possible
responses. Personal expectations and experience would indicate a more narrow or
focused response.
Whilst all possible responses offer positive support, it is interesting to note that the smallest frequency response was for option ‘b’. This is significant if considered in conjunction with Question 2.5: ‘What is the role of the staff in independent learning? Explain why you think this’. Students’ responses to this indicate that whilst motivation is important (23%), ‘support given by the teacher’ (30%) is the preferred view on what the staff’s role is in their independent learning. Examples of this include:

To direct and give a starting point as well as advice and support along the way to ensure you are going about it in the right way. (Student 80)

To guide you in the right direction and make sure you are doing the relevant work correctly. To help you if you have any problems, it would be a waste of your time if you were doing it wrong so staff have to tell you. (Student 144)

Question 7 gave the student an opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences of independent learning and maturity. On first inspection of the frequency responses, it is notable that very few students felt that ‘Older people are able to learn independently effectively’—only 2%. The majority felt that they were ‘more capable of learning independently than two years ago’—41%. Significantly 88% of students felt that with time their ability to independently learn would improve. It could therefore be argued that students perceive independent learning to be a ‘skill’ that is learnt and is developed over time. This line of discussion/argument is taken by FEDA (1997).

Question 8 asked students which statement they agreed with regarding their motivation. On a pedagogical level it was interesting to see that the largest frequency was for the statement: ‘I learn independently best when guided by my lecturer’, acknowledging the value placed on the lecturers’ expertise by the student.

Only a minority of students placed greatest value on the end achievement of the course—i.e., certification. And more students felt that learning independently was motivated by personal goals or ambitions for the future. Possibly an indication of the ‘Lifelong learning process’ or as FEDA put it ‘Developing skills for life’—i.e., the point of view that the learning does not stop just because the course has finished.

**Theme 4: the learning environment**

Question 9 gave students the opportunity to say which environment is best suited to independent learning. Unlike the other nine multiple-choice questions, this question has a sixth option in which students may state an alternative environment.

The frequency responses to this question show distinct preferences by the students. This can be seen in Tables 1 and 9.

Table 9 shows the frequency responses and percentage values for the responses to the question ‘Which of the following do you feel is best suited for your independent learning?’.

These responses raise several points of interest and significance. Of interest, only one student took the opportunity to state their own preference for the environment best suited for their independent learning. This could be interpreted in two ways.
Firstly, all other students responding to the question genuinely felt that one of the other options provided best suited them. Or, secondly students do not see independent learning happening outside of the college and home environment.

A second point of interest is the low percentage of students seeing the common room and refectory as being best suited to their independent learning. This is interesting due to recent internal changes in the college. The common room is relatively new opening in 2001/2002, and the refectory having been extended in 1999/2000, both changing the structure and seating arrangements, the aim of both changes essentially to provide students with a more ‘recreational’ area and to reinforce the library and OLC as places of study. This has been reinforced by the Head of Learning Resources reporting the improvements in behaviour and use of these facilities. Simply put, the addition of extra space for students ‘outside’ of class has improved the uptake and use of the facilities directed at learning.

The third point of interest is the similarity between the number of students opting for the ‘library’ and the ‘home’. If these are considered together they form the overwhelming majority and account for 80% of the students responding to the questionnaire.

However, whilst the third point of interest indicates a majority, if the home and college context is separated, college environments account for 62% of students’ responses whilst only 37% for the home.

Theme 5: positive or negative perceptions?

The final multiple-choice question (Question 10) asked students what their view of independent learning is. The majority of students acknowledged the positive contribution of independent learning, 63% of students opting for ‘it is of benefit to my studies’. In contrast only 1% of students felt that ‘it was of no benefit’. Eighteen per cent of students sampled thought that independent learning was of benefit to their career, whilst 9% thought it was of limited use. This is significant simply by numbers and it can therefore be said that the majority of students see independent learning as being beneficial (81%).
Findings from Section 2 of the student questionnaire

Question 2.1 asked ‘Have you ever taken part in what you consider to be an independent learning activity?’, with the option of either yes or no.

Table 10 shows the frequency responses to Question 2.1. It is interesting to compare this to the earlier question posed in Section 1 (Question 5, discussed earlier) regarding the students’ experience of independent learning.

A further point of interest is the percentage split within student groups. Both show strong majorities for having taken part in an independent learning activity. This is possibly an indication that Selby College provides opportunities for students to gain experience in independent learning. In cross tabulation with multiple-choice Question 5, 81% of students chose an option which indicated that they had had some experience of independent learning in the college which in conjunction with this question indicates that any experience of independent learning was probably at college, rather than outside of college. This is one possible line of reasoning, which if followed through to its conclusion could indicate, or point towards, a single route to the development of independent learning. In essence students do not see independent learning as a skill/tool outside of the college environment.

A point to note before further analysis; Questions 2.2 and 2.3 were only answered by those students who answered ‘yes’ to Question 2.1, the sample size therefore for Questions 2.2 and 2.3 is 136.

Theme 6: student experiences of independent learning

Question 2.2 asked students to consider an independent learning activity that they had taken part in and to outline what they had gained from the experience. See table 11.

Purely on a frequency basis, the ‘knowledge’ category attracted 63% of all responses for this question. The most popular aspects/sub-categories referred to are; research and increased levels of knowledge/understanding. A response for research was: ‘I was able to develop my knowledge in a particular aspect of one of my chosen subject by using research’ (Student 77). Whereas for increased level of knowledge,
Student 90 commented, ‘I gained a greater knowledge of the subject area and a better understanding of the difficult themes involved’.

Whilst this category was by far the most abundant in the responses of the students, many also refer to personal aspects (16 out of 41, or 39%), which the student associated with that experience: ‘The more knowledge and understanding of the subject I gained, I was more able to use this to my advantage’ (Student 147).

Together the knowledge and personal categories accounted for 89% of all responses, with 4% from the study category, 6% from the time category and 1% from the miscellaneous category.

Question 2.3 provided some useful insights into the extent and impact of resources on students’ independent learning experiences. The question asked students: ‘To what extent do resources have an impact on your independent learning experience?’. See table 12.

Two key points are derived from the responses to this question and their subsequent coding.

1. No students responded to the question by discussing external resources (those not belonging to the college).
2. The category looking at resource evaluation was the second largest category behind resource impact. However, in the resource evaluation category, the access and availability of resources was the dominant evaluative comment (54%), with quantity and quality coming second place each with 14%. These three responses accounted for 82% of all evaluative comments on resources.

Whilst there are key issues emerging from the question, several students make important evaluative comments on resources. However, Student 96 succinctly brings these ideas together in what I believe, and what the coding indicates, to be a fairly accurate representation of the student population sampled as a whole.

The amount and quality of the resources on offer are (in my mind) linked directly to the effectiveness of the activity. During independent learning the student must utilize every
resource available. Failure to do so will result in very sub-average results being achieved as a result of the activity.

Question 2.4 asked students how they would describe what their role is in independent learning. The responses proved to be far more varied in the number of different responses, but showing three areas of distinct majority. See table 13.

The students’ responses indicate that there are three key aspects that students see as being ‘their role’ in independent learning: (i) self-motivation/interest; (ii) to study (to learn); and (iii) to take responsibility. These accounted for 40% of all responses.

Table 12. The categories generated from the responses to Question 2.3 and example student responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
<th>Brief description of category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact (41%)</td>
<td>This category looks at any direct reference to positive impacts upon learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of resource (identified [if any]) (7%)</td>
<td>Was included to allow representation of the frequency a particular type of resource is mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information (9%)</td>
<td>This category looks at representing what has been gained within a context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study (19%)</td>
<td>Unlike impact and information, this category represents answers that refer to learning as a tool/method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (1%)</td>
<td>This is a subjective category using the individual’s own criteria—non-generic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource (evaluation) (23%)</td>
<td>Specific reference to a ‘resource’ followed by a personal evaluation of that resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (1%)</td>
<td>Any response not falling into the above categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13. The categories generated from the responses to Question 2.4 and example student responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
<th>Brief description of category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (18%)</td>
<td>This category deals with the individuals’ interests and how they feel they are motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes (7%)</td>
<td>End products/ownership of the outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (19%)</td>
<td>Category which is subjective based upon the individual’s own criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study (36%)</td>
<td>This category looks at the way in which studying is used to learn—particularly the ‘activity’ involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (2%)</td>
<td>This category represents the perception of the role of resources within the context of the student’s role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management (9%)</td>
<td>Links to the management of time, progression and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (9%)</td>
<td>Any response not falling into the above categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is apparent, on cross tabulation, that students associate studying and responsibility with independent learning as seen by their choice of definition (Chan, 2001). Student responses illustrating this include:

To take control of my level of education, what I’m learning and to what extent I’m achieving. (Student 45)

My role is imperative, I feel that I am the major role and very few other people are part of my independent learning—what I don’t learn I don’t learn, therefore as much as I can and set my own agenda. (Student 46)

Whilst neither of the above quotes specifically mentions responsibility, both imply responsibility by emphasizing their control over their learning.

**Theme 7: student opinions on independent learning**

Question 2.5 sought to develop 2.4 further by asking students to say what the role of staff is in independent learning. Whilst Question 2.4 responses were fairly narrow in their breadth of responses, Question 2.5, when coded, shows an even narrower perception of what the staff role is in independent learning. See table 14.

There are two distinct preferences as outlined by the student responses to the question and emphasized by the coding. Students perceive that motivation in the form of encouragement and support through individual help is the role of staff in independent learning. This is echoed in many of the responses to the question. However, the question also asked the student to explain their answer; no student justified their response in this manner.

To offer support and encouragement and motivate students individually. To provide opportunities for development and independent learning. (Student 8)

Guide on what they should learn and how to do it—to suit the individual. (Student 147)

These quotes emphasize the individual nature of the support. Student 80, in contrast, emphasizes the ongoing nature of the role of staff: “To direct and give a starting point as well as advice and support along the way to ensure you are going

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
<th>Brief description of category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (23%)</td>
<td>Form of encouragement given by the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance and advice (22%)</td>
<td>On what to do (future)—where to go next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support (30%)</td>
<td>On what to do (present) feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching (13%)</td>
<td>Skills/methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes (6%)</td>
<td>End products/ownership of the outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (4%)</td>
<td>Any response not falling into the above categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
about it in the right way’. Student 88 expands on this: ‘They should guide, give advice and keep the learner aware of resources, to stimulate thought and ideas’.

The stimulation aspect indicates motivation though teacher input of knowledge of the subject and the availability of resources. Alternatively it is also encouraging to see the following response: ‘Encourage and motivate students to independently learn in their free time’ (Student 149).

Unlike Questions 2.4 and 2.5, Question 2.6 sought to gain student perceptions of independent learning as a whole. The question posed was: ‘What do you consider to be involved in learning independently? Explain why you think this’. See table 15.

Points of interest arising from this include: the largest category was ‘study’, with 29% of students identifying this as being involved in independent learning. Sixty-six of the 73 replies identified research and unsupported study as the elements to learning independently. Student responses to this effect include:

- It should be self-directed and self-motivated study, individually or in a small group. (Student 79)
- Researching things for yourself and taking the responsibility for doing all of your work on time. Understanding that there is limitations to the amount of work you can do, and it is up to you to do it. Working on your own with no support from staff. (Student 144)

The ‘solitary’ element which is being identified by students in this category is also evident in the second largest category, ‘personal’. However these responses emphasize that learning independently involves an element of individuality.

Table 15. The categories generated from the responses to Question 2.6 and example student responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and % of responses</th>
<th>Brief description of category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation (10%)</td>
<td>This category deals with the individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal (17%)</td>
<td>This category allows an individual to express what they feel is involved in independent learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge (14%)</td>
<td>This category looks at the imparting of knowledge, be it subject based, generic or skills based and what knowledge is involved in learning independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study (29%)</td>
<td>This category looks at the way in which studying is used to learn independently—in particular the support given/provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (9%)</td>
<td>This category looks at the resources themselves—allowing the individual to learn independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes (9%)</td>
<td>This category looks at the impact of learning independently upon the ‘product’ or outcome of using resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time (7%)</td>
<td>This category looks at how time influences the individual when learning independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>No written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous (4%)</td>
<td>Any response not falling into the above categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trying to understand the concepts on your own, too many people just want to follow what the teacher says. (Student 156)

Learning on your own—any other means of actively learning by teaching ourselves. (Student 177)

It is interesting to note that whilst the responses show a common thread, in terms of the solitary or individual nature of learning independently, the smallest category, ‘time’, is only represented in 7% of responses. It could be argued, or suggested that this indicates a student calling for more time in which they can access resources (texts or teachers) on an individual basis, or alternatively mean nothing more than a preference.

A final point of interest generated by the student responses is, that whilst no question indicated the environment in which independent learning had taken place, no student response indicated a preference for an external (outside of college) environment where they had independently learnt.

Conclusions

As the opening review of literature indicated, little work has been done to understand the interpretations and perceptions of the 16–19 age group regarding independent learning. The findings from this research have demonstrated that students are open to learning independently and share common interpretations and perceptions of what independent learning is (an interesting outcome considering the list compiled by Kesten, 1987). If a common meaning can be attached to independent learning in all institutions, value can then be added to an individual’s learning (see Entwistle, 1999, for discussion) and in turn remove obstacles to student autonomy (Wilde & Hardaker, 1997).

On the whole, A level students felt that independent learning was when an individual takes control of their own learning by taking responsibility (56%). They felt that this was best achieved by research (56%) and least by class-based activities (86). The largest proportion of A level students felt they are more able to learn independently than two years ago (45%); 25% of this group felt more capable of independent learning with tutor support. They consider the library to be best suited to their independent learning (41%) and that this learning is of benefit to their studies.

The majority of vocational students also felt that independent learning was when an individual takes control of their own learning by taking responsibility (65%). They also agreed with the A level students that this was best achieved by research (45%) and least by class-based activities (72%). Overall they feel more able to independently learn than two years ago (35). However, unlike the A level students, vocational students feel that teacher feedback (30%) was more significant in helping them to learn as a population than teacher support. Similar to the A level students they also thought that the library was best suited to their independent learning (47%) and that this learning is of benefit to their studies (54%).

The student questionnaire results revealed, on analysis, that no significant difference existed between the responses from vocational and A level students (including permutations between year groups).
Key points:

- No significant differences exist in the perceptions and interpretations of independent learning in the full time 16- to 19-year-old population of the college.
- Students have a positive perception of the college with regard to the support and guidance given by staff in developing their independent learning.
- There is no specific mention by students of any involvement of GSTs.
- Students recognize their role in independent learning as being self-motivated and to ‘study’ (to practise their skills and to learn subject content).
- Resources do not figure significantly in students’ perceptions of independent learning, whereas the guidance and support offered by their tutors ranks more highly.
- Students did not highlight, or discuss, any form of independent learning outside of college.
- The majority of students consider that they have taken part in an independent learning activity, from which the main benefit has been an improvement in knowledge.
- Students identify a symbiotic relationship between resources and learning independently, with one having an impact upon the other.
- Students reinforce the multiple-choice question answers by identifying staff as the providers of the opportunity and support to allow them to learn independently whilst they take responsibility to independently learn.

As a result of the above research it can be concluded that 16- to 19-year-old students value guidance and support given by their tutors; significantly they recognize that they have a role to play within developing their own independent learning skills. However, if students are to develop and practice independent learning, the above research demonstrates that the tutor must identify and develop activities which allow time for individual guidance and support in meeting the learner’s goals as well as the learning intentions of the tutor. In simple terms independent learning is best fostered when time and support is given by the tutor to allow learning to take place.

To a large degree the findings of this research go to support the findings in junior and higher education on independent learning. However, a possible area of conflict lies in defining responsibility, both legally and by the individual. The _loco-parentis_ responsibilities of the tutor in FE are somewhat more complex, with some students able to self consent (i.e., those over 18 years of age) whilst others in the same group have to seek parental permission. In introducing such responsibilities, independent learning activities can be limited in their fluency, whereas within HE self consent on the whole is the norm and in junior education parental consent is sought. The above then raises further contentious issues as to the control of learning; when does independent learning become uncontrolled/unfocused without tutor input/direction, what degree of freedom is acceptable? To a small degree most sixth forms and FE institutions allow study periods, an indicator of the need for independent study, but how and who decides this? The above links back to one common thread: what is independent learning? Without a common definition the notion of independent
learning is open to abuse—i.e., what one individual perceives as independent learning may not be acceptable to another. With such conflicts on the notion of what is independent learning, the positive aspects of such learning are sometimes overshadowed by power struggles to control the learning context and environment.

An area for further research could be to monitor changes in perceptions and interpretations of independent learning over the standard two years that students are at college. However, of greater interest and importance would be to investigate further the implications of variances in the interpretation of independent learning through a student’s education: essentially to research the effects of different meanings of independent learning being applied to an individual’s chosen path through education (e.g., from Key Stage 1 through to HE).

References


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