

## Developing Independent Learning at A level

I'll start with a confession.

I can see myself in a university library many decades ago, trying to write an essay. It was the second year of my degree so I can't even claim I was a novice undergraduate. The essay is due in next day and I have several books open in front of me, referring to each in turn, scratching out sentences and paragraphs, by now into the third or fourth page of my essay. But, and this is the confession, I was writing without any idea of my answer to the question. I was using writing as a way of stumbling across the answer or, marginally more positively, as a means of marshalling my thoughts so that an answer emerged in time to write the conclusion. I suspect I rarely began an essay knowing what my answer to a question was.

Why was I struggling? I simply did not have in my mind a clear process to follow from question to completed essay. As a result the effectiveness of my work was very hit and miss, extremely dependent on the level of my initial interest in a topic. So this article doesn't have its origins in my mastery of essay writing at A level or university but in my inability to study effectively and independently, a problem I subsequently discovered was experienced by many of the students I taught. And it was those students who finally helped me sort out what was involved in writing essays and studying independently. It was helping students to write better essays that made me analyse what was needed and how best to go about the process of studying a new topic. Better late than never!

Independent learning is in many ways the Holy Grail for teachers at A level. Our aim is that somewhere along their educational continuum students develop the understanding and confidence to study new topics for themselves and reach their own conclusions. What follows describes how students can develop the ability to study a new topic independently and with confidence.

This strategy provides students with a model of how to go about their task. As Dale Banham and Russell Hall have said, 'It was no good bemoaning the lack of independence of our students; we had to do something about it!'

However providing a model for independent learning creates an obvious paradox – that we are teaching students how to be independent! This paradox has caused some people I've discussed this with to recoil, feeling that providing a model is being too prescriptive because it may limit initiative

or creativity. But if the alternative is to leave students to sort it out for themselves – which experience suggest is very difficult for many - well I'll opt for being prescriptive, to start with anyway. There's actually plenty of scope to help students build on the initial model once they've grasped it and experience suggests that the model actually creates the confidence for students who can then develop their own variations on this strategy.

### **A model for independent learning – the enquiry process**

So, let's imagine an A level student starting work on a new topic. The model for working effectively is the enquiry process as follows:

1. Begin with a question, not a topic heading. In the early stages of A level teachers will probably supply the question while prompting students to ask their own questions as the course develops.
2. Create an introductory layer of knowledge, establishing the main events and issues (and, if possible and relevant, any differences in argument amongst historians). Again the teacher will help students with this in the early stages of A level, either by setting tasks which enable students to create this layer of knowledge or through teaching. Strategies such as guided role-plays can be particularly effective for introducing a topic (learning names, key events, possible motives etc) and inspiring interest and curiosity.
3. Students use their introductory layer of knowledge to suggest an initial answer to their question. In grander language they create a hypothesis! This is the vital stage, requiring students to think about possible answers and so avoiding that dispiriting problem of reading and making notes without feeling you're getting any closer to an answer.
4. Students continue reading and working in class with a clear plan of what to read and in what order. Initially students need help in distinguishing between different levels of text, starting with books specifically written for A level, then moving onto more specialist literature.
5. After a set amount of time or reading students sum up the key points relating to the question and revisit their hypothesis, deciding whether it stands up in the light of their work or needs amending. They then draft a more developed answer to the question, thus maintaining a sense of their answer to the question before they begin to write their essay.

6. If there's the opportunity and time, continue by repeating stages 4 and 5 – and use the material collected to suggest answers to other, similar questions.

There is nothing novel about this enquiry model except perhaps its explicit nature. It's particularly aimed at providing a sense of direction through the early formulation of a hypothesis and the revisiting of that hypothesis. In practice the model has a range of benefits:

- It provides a clear structure and so a sense of purpose and direction.
- It starts students thinking about possible answers to the question from the outset which very importantly avoids the feeling of 'I've done all this work and I have no idea of the answer'.
- It reassures students that it is acceptable to know little or nothing at the outset, that uncertainty is a natural and accepted part of studying history, especially when getting to grips with a new topic.
- It provides a positive model for 'changing your mind', otherwise known as 'developing your hypothesis'. Re-thinking is a positive part of the process, not a weakness.
- It provides students with the chance to talk explicitly about the process of learning. Students improve their learning through reflecting on and understanding how they learn, making it easier to transfer effective methods of study from one topic to another.
- The model can encourage collaborative learning with students developing the ability to discuss and challenge ideas constructively. Our examination system greatly undervalues collaborative study whereas this model encourages discussion at several stages e.g. creating questions, formulating hypotheses, reflecting on initial hypotheses and critical reading of an individual's writing.

### **A textbook example of the enquiry process**

This textbook page [ [HERE](#) ] introduces the enquiry process in an A level book on The Wars of the Roses. The aim of this activity is to help students create a hypothesis in answer to the question 'Why was London full of rebels in 1450?' – using information on the next two pages about the rebellion (Cade's rebellion) including references to possible causes of the rebellion. During the rest of the chapter, further diagrams model the process of enquiry while students collect evidence to support or challenge the developing hypothesis. The modelling is detailed so that students have

every opportunity to understand and reflect on the process of enquiry. Without such modelling some, possibly many, students will ignore or miss the process and will risk losing track of the question. One Year 12 student commented:

‘By filling in the table as you read means that you don't forget any of the factors, which is possible if you just read it, and it makes it easier to make comparisons between them; as to how certain a motive it is. By using this structure it means you can answer the enquiry [question] of the chapter.’

In order for students to put this model into practice with increasing autonomy, time is then needed for teacher-student discussion of the model and for students to develop the ability to describe explicitly how they go about the process of historical study. As Dale Banham and Russell Hall argue, ‘learning is primarily a social activity and ... teachers need to pay more attention to the way students describe and interpret learning. This meant beginning to understand learning experiences from the unique perspectives of the students.’ John Hattie’s work (*Visible Learning*, 2009) highlights the importance of reflecting on how learning is taking place and also the quality of feedback and discussion on that feedback. This need for discussion may mean less class time for ‘safety-first’ content coverage but such coverage can be the enemy of understanding of how to learn effectively and of the opportunity to revise written work so that feedback is put into action and this learning is consolidated. It’s therefore important to think long-term about students’ ability to work independently – ground will be made up, both in the classroom, by students on their own because their own reading and note-taking becomes much more effective and because written work is revised and polished effectively, using feedback to consolidate learning.

### **Helping students identify and use prior knowledge and understanding**

Another very important role for teachers is to help students identify what they already know and understand as they begin a new topic. Students can find studying history frustrating because unfamiliar new names and events in a new topic can make them feel they are starting again and they have nothing useful in their minds to bring to the new topic. Therefore teachers need to help students realise they can bring knowledge and understandings from past studies. For example, what might students bring to a study of why Stalin was successful in becoming leader of Russia in the 1920s even if they have not studied Russian history before? We could start students on the road to building a hypothesis by pushing them to think back to other topics when individuals achieved power. Firstly, identify such leaders and occasions, then think about how they succeeded (maybe

through force, propaganda, election, a deal over power with others, the promise of ‘succession’ from the previous leader). Which of these might have been most likely to apply in 1920s Russia? Such a process uses time that might seem better spent on starting the ‘proper material’ but is actually time well used, both in starting students thinking about the possible nature of their answers and also giving them confidence that past studies continue to be useful. This latter point is important in increasing students’ own sense of the value of their studies, seeing an A level course as a whole course of study, not just as a series of separate modules.

### **Preventing students getting lost in detail and note-taking**

Another vital part of the teacher’s role is helping students maintain their overview of the developing answer to their question. It’s all too easy for students to focus on making lots of notes but, as a result, to lose track of possible answers. One way for students to keep in mind their developing answer is to use a diagram (such as the kinds listed below) which offers a quick visual reminder of key points and can be up-dated and amended more easily than a paragraph if it’s recorded in pencil or on a laptop. What kinds of diagrams help students stay on top of the ‘big picture’ of their answer? Here are some possibilities:

‘How far ...?’, ‘To what extent ..?’ ‘How successful ...?’ questions - can be built up on a continuum line (also known as a washing line). As an example, students investigating the impact of an individual, a government or an event such as the Norman Conquest can maintain an overview by recording where key features of the topic go on a continuum line, the ends of which are labelled according to the wording of the question (success-failure, change-continuity, etc)

At the same time students make detailed notes to justify the placement of each item, why it can be difficult to decide an exact placement, why the placement might vary across time within the period studied or why historians disagree about a placement. This gives a clearer purpose to note-making.

Straightforward tables and mind-maps can also be used but in addition here are some other types of questions and the diagrams that suit them:

Causal questions - causation maps, diamond nines

Questions about motives - Venn diagrams

Questions about turning points - living graphs

Competing interpretations – continuum lines

The key is to develop in students the ability to recognize and use the type of diagram that best fits the type of question. Imagine if a student going on to study history at university had an armoury of diagrams suitable for different types of questions. That student would be well-able to study new topics without losing track of possible answers to questions and so study independently and with considerable confidence.

### **Conclusion – Developing Independent Learning**

Trying to find your own path to effective learning as a student is very difficult – even if you actually realise there's a path to be discovered! Therefore teaching students how to become independent may sound paradoxical but is an extremely important part of students' education. Therefore by way of conclusion:

1. Teaching is far more effective when it is based on an understanding of how students learn and why they find learning difficult. Courses, individual lessons and activities need to be structured around learning problems such as how to develop effective independent learning.
2. Students need to develop an explicit understanding of how to go about learning effectively. They need to be able to describe how to use the enquiry process, from asking questions about a new topic to creating an initial hypothesis all the way to how to sum up their conclusions