

Contents

DIRECTED INDEPENDENT LEARNING: AN OVERVIEW	2
1. The challenge of independent learning	2
2. Defining DIL	3
3. Benefits of DIL	4
4. When and where do students learn independently?	5
.....	5
5. What does effective DIL look like?.....	6
6. The 3E Approach: Enhance Extend Empower.....	7
7. Aspects of learning independence.....	8
References – DIL Overview	9

DIRECTED INDEPENDENT LEARNING: AN OVERVIEW

Much has been written about independent learning over the last couple of decades, but in the context of contemporary UK higher education, a key work is Thomas, Jones and Ottaway's 2015 Effective practice in the design of directed independent learning opportunities (full and summary versions) and the companion Compendium of effective practice in directed independent learning. This overview and the accompanying resources draw on these and other recent works, aiming to complement them by offering academic staff and mentors a brief introduction to current thinking around DIL, as well as a practical set of 'tools' and approaches that they can deploy when designing interventions to support their students as developing independent learners.

1. The challenge of independent learning

... a type of study **at the very heart** of university education

...

'... for many students [independent learning] will prove to be one of the most challenging aspects of study at the higher level. It is a type of study at the very heart of university education, and is a crucial component for the successful completion of a degree. But, when it comes to its support and development, it is not always particularly well understood.' (Thomas, 2015b: 4)

... there is no doubt that many students encounter **serious difficulties** when undertaking independent learning ...

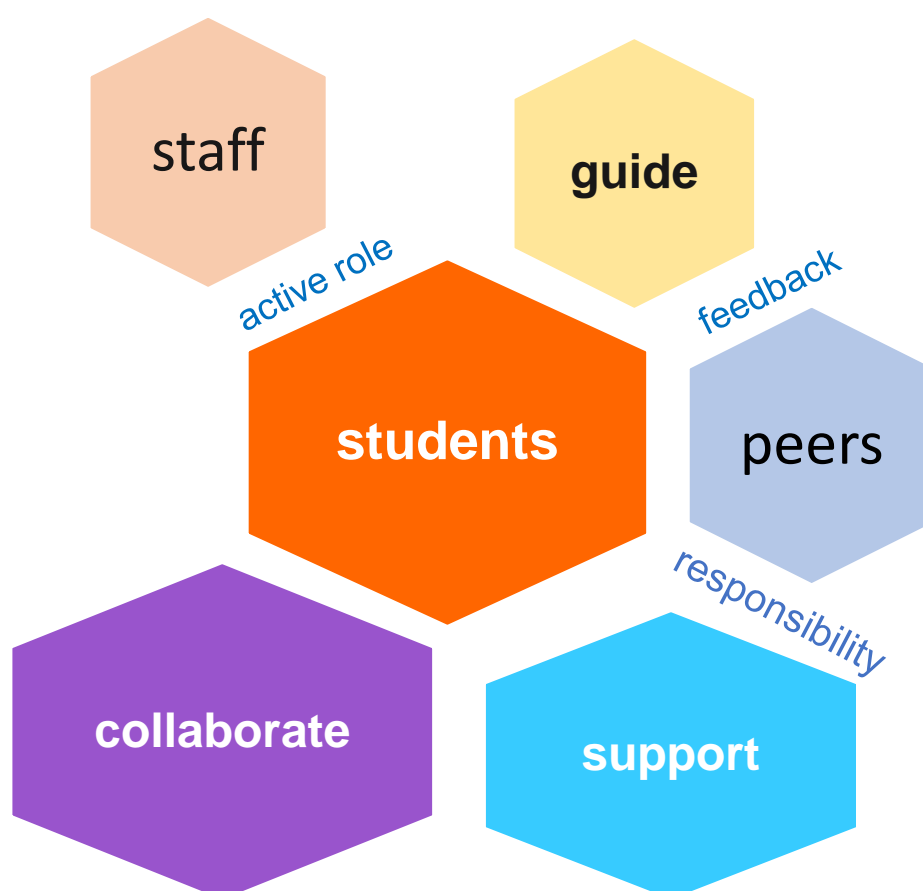
'... there is no doubt that many students encounter serious difficulties when undertaking independent learning – even if they come to embrace it. Most will have passed through an education system where the acquisition of information and knowledge consists of a more or less transparent process, tightly prescribed and closely directed. In many ways, the contrast with study at the higher level couldn't be starker. Here, the student is expected to identify, locate and digest material in a far more autonomous manner – so much so that they may often feel as though they have been cast dangerously adrift in very unfamiliar waters.' (Thomas, 2015b: 4)

2. Defining DIL

Directed independent learning is variously defined in the literature, but for the purposes of this work, it is

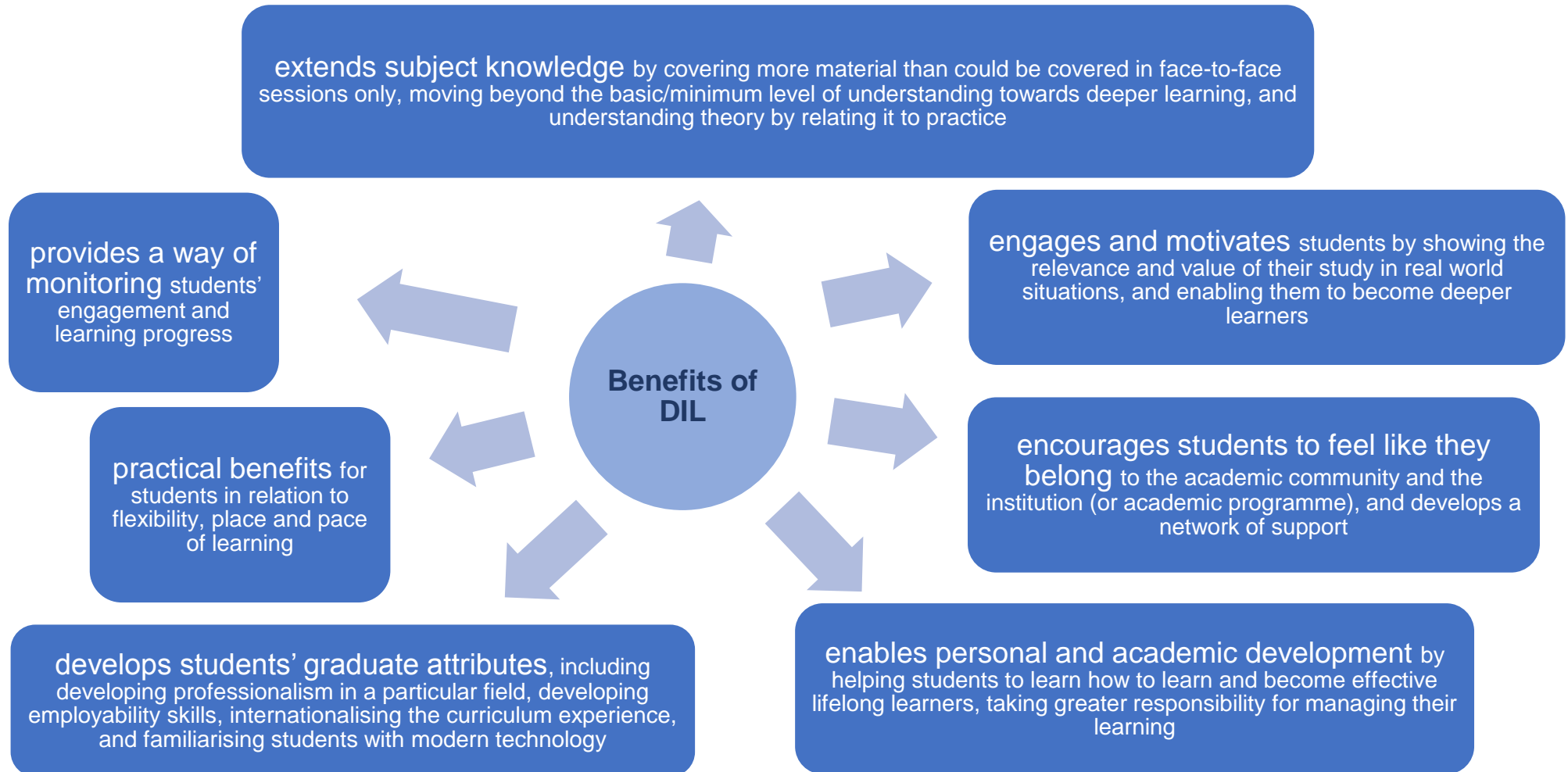
‘understood as learning in which students are guided by curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment, and supported by staff and the learning environment, and in which students play an active role in their learning experience – either on their own, or in collaboration with peers. They are supported in their independent learning by learning resources, including libraries, online materials and learning environments, and physical learning spaces; and by the development of their academic capacity either through the core curriculum or through additional support services.’ (Thomas, 2015b: 7 – 8)

‘DIL describes one of the processes by which HE students engage with the curriculum - and academic staff - to achieve learning goals. It may also include interacting with peers, other HE staff, employers, communities, families and stakeholders. DIL places increased responsibility on students when compared to the forms of learning they are most likely to have undertaken prior to entering HE. But students should be engaged, enabled, facilitated and supported by staff through relevant and guided opportunities, suitable pedagogies and an appropriate learning environment. Staff should ensure students have informal and formal opportunities for feedback, and monitor participation and understanding.’ (Thomas, 2015a: 8)



3. Benefits of DIL

Based on Thomas et al (2015c: 4)



4. When and where do students learn independently?

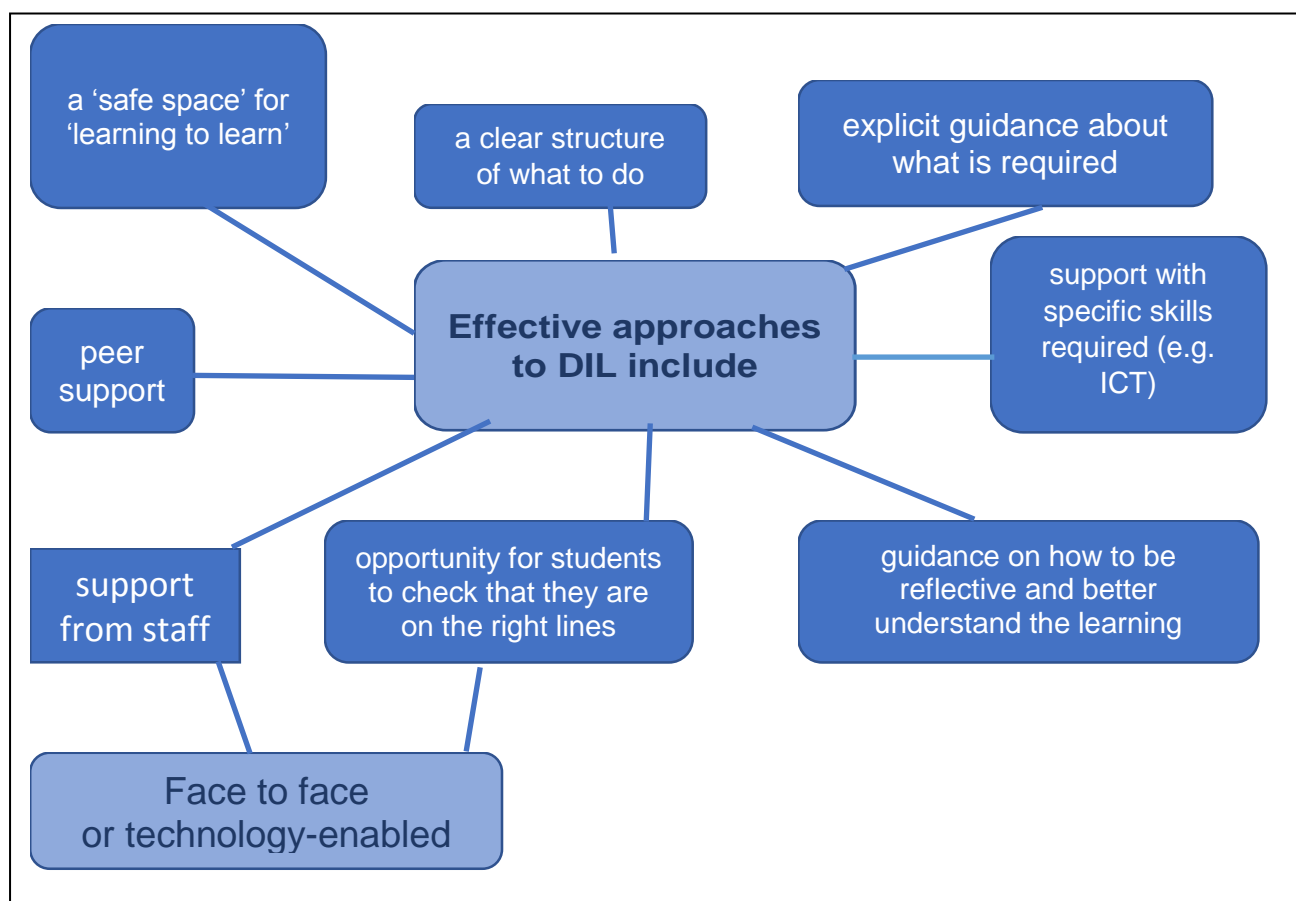
‘... the [independent] learning undertaken by students **after the lecture or seminar finishes, and when outside the laboratory**, is tackled in various ways and to differing extents. But ... independent learning can – and indeed does – [also] take place **during lectures and seminars** etc., for instance if students are requested to form groups and reflect on an issue or topic raised therein.’ (Thomas, 2015: 4)

‘Independent learning seems to be more effective when it is **fully integrated into the programme of study**, is explicit in its purpose, and is structured to provide students with clarity about what is required.’ Thomas et al, 2015c: 4

5. What does effective DIL look like?

'[DIL] is, at heart, a rather nuanced term which may be regarded as potentially oxymoronic (i.e. learning is either independent or directed)' (Thomas et al, 2015a: 5) but in fact, it encompasses a range of approaches familiar to higher education staff:

Action-learning, enquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and peer learning are all approaches that aim to more directly involve students in the process of learning; in contrast with the more traditional knowledge transmission model of education.' (Thomas et al, 2015a: 7)

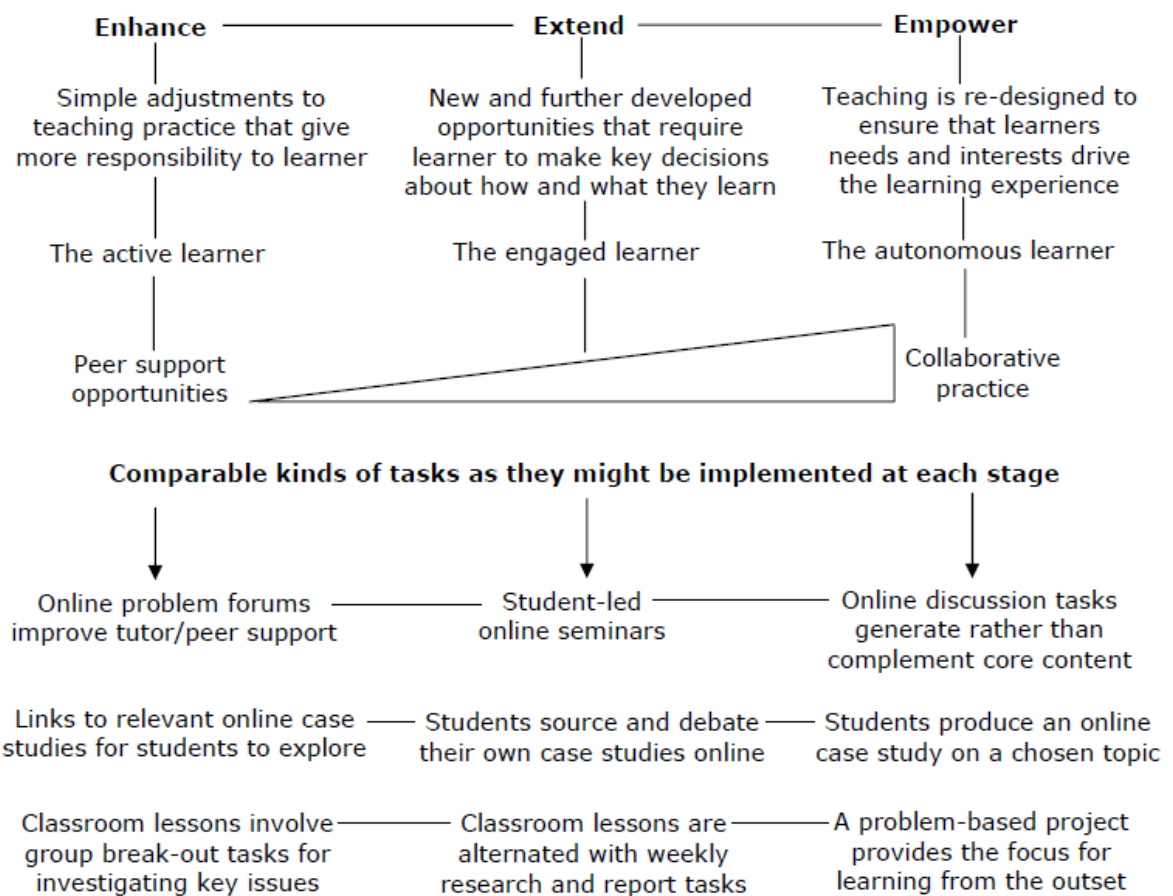


- **Independent learning needs to be monitored** to identify students who are struggling and need support.
- **A staged or 'scaffolded' process is needed** to enable students to move from being dependent learners to autonomous ones by the end of their undergraduate education. (Thomas et al 2015c: 5)
- **Assessment is integral to effective directed independent learning.** Assessment can generate **motivation** for students to engage, provide a useful **mechanism for interaction** between students and academic staff, and offer students **feedback** to improve their study processes and outcomes in the future. (Thomas et al 2015c: 5)

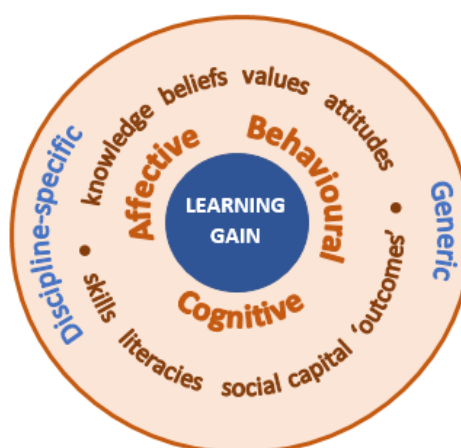
6. The 3E Approach: Enhance Extend Empower

The '3 E' approach is a model for 'involv[ing] students in increasingly active, self-directed learning from an early stage in their studies', with technology playing 'an important role in this process, particularly where students locate material, undertake formative assessment and, critically, where effective collaborative working and critical discussion with peers is to occur.' (Smyth 2007: 3).

The Enhance, Extend and Empower stages are envisaged as a continuum:



7. Aspects of learning independence



Domains of learning relevant to the measurement of learning gain in higher education (Evans et al 2018)

Recent work on defining and measuring learning gain (Evans et al, in print) identifies a range of learning domains and attributes that students may, and arguably should, develop through higher education. This work reflects Anderson and Krathwohl's 2001 revision of Bloom's taxonomy, which covers the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning, and recognises four levels of knowledge including metacognition. This last level is of direct relevance to the ability to learn independently. It can be defined as 'the awareness of one's own cognition and particular cognitive processes. It is strategic or reflective knowledge about how to go about solving problems, cognitive tasks, to include contextual and conditional knowledge and knowledge of self' (Wilson, 2016).

When considering DIL activities, the focus is often on the development of cognitive attributes such as 'critical thinking' or behaviours in the form of 'study skills', and frequently includes reflective activities, but may at the same time overlook the fact that the ability to self-reflect (develop meta-awareness) is a skill in its own right that students also need to develop. When designing a curriculum for directed independent learning, it is worth considering both a broader spectrum of learning possibilities (domains), and also the development of the meta-skills needed for truly autonomous learning.

The Knowledge Dimensions	Cognitive Processes					
	1. Remember	2. Understand	3. Apply	4. Analyze	5. Evaluate	6. Create
Factual						
Conceptual						
Procedural						
Metacognitive						

Knowledge dimensions (cognitive domain) (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001)

References – DIL Overview

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Directed Independent Learning Toolkit

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