



Searching for Synergy: the symbiosis of Creative Thinking and Independent Learning

Thinking synergistically: the essential symbiosis of creative thinking and independent learning

Currently, both creative thinking and independent learning are 'buzz words' in the world of pedagogy, concepts with which classroom practitioners are engaging with to varying degrees and with variable outcomes. Undoubtedly, the ever-changing world around us requires teachers to continually reflect on pedagogical approaches in order to offer an adaptable and flexible educational provision that both caters to and reflects the world for which we are preparing students. With this in mind, creative thinking and independent learning have been posited as two possible approaches for achieving this, yet they are often dealt with separately or as discrete concepts. When exploring how teachers can maximise their classroom impact, Jackie Beere posits a 'mindset of enquiry' in teachers that encourages exploratory approaches and encourages this pedagogical adaptability; considering the symbiosis of creative thinking and independent learning is one way in which we can achieve this.¹

Furthermore, as we model and implement this for our students, the hope is that it will facilitate the deepening and development of subject knowledge and will also encourage 'learning about learning' as students engage metacognitively with establishing, structuring, and practising learning.²

Although often discussed as discrete approaches in pedagogical literature, the reality in the classroom is that creative thinking and independent learning often go hand-in-hand, resulting in a symbiotic relationship whereby creativity requires independence and independence fosters creativity. When considering how we might challenge our more gifted and talented students, David A Souza suggests creative thinking activities that 'would have students suppose, invent, imagine, explore, and discover', all very pertinent ways in which we stretch bright students, and also all strategies that require students to develop something independent of teacher-led content, albeit supported by the foundations of taught material.³

Again, this is not something novel, but explicitly considering both creativity and independence alongside one another and the synergy between them can help us to facilitate opportunities for even deeper and more challenging learning in the classroom and beyond.

It is essential that these principles are inculcated across the school in order to cultivate skills that transcend individual classrooms and subjects, and even the curriculum, but become embedded in how students learn and approach their learning. Lucas and Spencer argue that 'schools which really

embed capabilities rapidly realise that, for it to be sustainable and authentic, they need to be creative in engaging children and young people, giving them new roles, [and] creating new co-curricular opportunities.'⁴

Consequently, it is what goes on both in and beyond the classroom that supports students in appreciating and harnessing the connections between their creativity and their independence; the ultimate goal is to facilitate the forging of cross-curricular and real-world links that take learning out of the text book and into real life. Independent learning and creative thinking offer the opportunity for students to 'pursue interests on their own by setting learning goals, establishing criteria for judging their work, assessing their progress, and presenting their work products to an audience, [all with the aim of moving] from being teacher-directed to self-directed.'⁵ Self-directed students are empowered to take control of their own learning and maximise their potential.

APPROACHES AT KING'S HIGH SCHOOL: THE KING'S HIGH CONFERENCE

At King's High School, the King's High Conference was introduced in 2021 as a further opportunity for students to combine their creativity with their independent learning, engaging in student-determined and student-led research that culminated in an academic paper that was both presented at an academic conference and published in the literature that accompanied the conference. The theory behind the conference is not new, indeed, neither is the method of research and presentation, but offering it in the aspirational format of an academic conference encouraged students to think explicitly about the combination of these two skills in a practical manner.

David A Souza proposes a six-step strategic methodology for embedding independent study into students' learning:⁶

1. Define the topic or area of study.
2. Formulate a set of study questions.
3. Gather information and data.
4. Organise and summarise information.
5. Present the information.
6. Evaluate progress.

The King's High Conference encourages exactly this process, with students beginning by submitting a short abstract outlining their paper proposal (or topic / area of study), determining their research questions, conducting research, writing a paper, presenting their paper, and then reviewing and evaluating the success of their research for publication. Taking ownership of both the subject and the method of their learning in a co-curricular context encourages students to think outside of the box and make conscious decisions about learning processes and topics that best suite their individual learning

style and interests. Furthermore, the experience engenders a range of soft-skills that contribute to students' success such as responsibility, imagination, resilience, and communication.

Most importantly, the King's High Conference promotes the symbiosis of independent learning and creative thinking; broadening the scope of both topic and methodology provides the opportunity for synthesis as students make cross-curricular links in both their chosen subject matter and their approaches to learning. Student-determined and student-led research results in independent linking of cross-curricular concepts which is fundamentally creative in nature. Furthermore, the process fosters higher-order thinking and real-world application, offering students the potential for intellectual freedom in their research, both in terms of subject and methodology. The culmination of their skills and interests drives ambitious and aspirational endeavour, inspirational output, and impressive achievement for students.

INCULCATING INDEPENDENCE FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING: HIGHER EDUCATION, THE WORKPLACE, AND BEYOND

Whilst opportunities such as an academic conference will hopefully be an exciting and rewarding school experience, the symbiosis of creative thinking and independent learning looks beyond a student's time at school. Robert Sternberg asserted that 'creativity is three dimensional. It requires synthesising (the ability to see problems in new ways and escape from conventional thinking), analysing (being able to recognise which ideas are worth pursuing and which are not), and contextualising (having the skills in difference settings to persuade others of the value of any specific idea).'⁷

We hope to encourage students to develop all of these skills to maximise their success at school, but, perhaps more crucially, to prepare them for the world beyond. The synergy of independent learning and creative thinking encourages deeper learning and aspirational ideas, but its application has real-world value, instilling skills and approaches that translate to higher education, the workplace, and beyond.

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- ¹ Jackie Beere, *Independent Thinking on Teaching and Learning* (Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2020), p.39.
- ² Jackie Beere, *Independent Thinking on Teaching and Learning* (Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2020), p.39.
- ³ David A Sousa, *How the Gifted Brain Learns*, 2nd edition, (London: Corwin / Sage, 2009), p.58.
- ⁴ Bill Lucas and Ellen Spencer, *Teaching Creative Thinking: developing learners who generate ideas and can think critically* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2017), p.12.
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- ⁷ Bill Lucas and Ellen Spencer, *Teaching Creative Thinking: developing learners who generate ideas and can think critically* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2017), p.18.

