

Chapter 3

A Modern Interpretation of Independent Study for Gifted/Talented Learners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how independent study serves as a pivotal practice in 21st century instruction for all learners, including gifted/talented learners from diverse backgrounds, by providing personalization, choice, flexible/accelerated pacing, and feedback. ‘Think Like a Disciplinarian,’ universal themes and generalizations, and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy will be layered upon independent study to fortify the practice. The practice of independent study will also be contextualized within the modern construct of the blended learning model that can be tailored to students’ individual strengths and needs, and allows students to progress through course material at a speed that best matches their ability and learning style.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational policies and trends are complex and ever-changing. Educators continually seek ways to balance adhering to required frameworks and standards, while also addressing the individual needs of students. As a result of this continuous tension between standardization and innovation, many educators find it challenging to create systemic educational change, even at the classroom level.

Educators are tasked with the seemingly impossible challenge of implementing curriculum and instruction in accordance with prescribed policies, guides, programs, and assessments – while also meaningfully understanding and addressing students’ unique academic, cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and social-emotional needs. Educators that deviate from standardization can often be viewed as “rule breakers” or “out of compliance” rather than innovators or differentiators.

“It is apparent that the traditional teacher-centered pedagogy needs to be changed,” Dr. Yong Zhao asserts. “It is a paradigm shift, a complete rethinking of how teaching and learning are carried out” (Zhao et al., 2016).

Yet, until this systemic shift occurs, how do educators manifest this shift at the classroom level? When planning and implementing lessons, how do educators ensure that innovation and differentiation are instructionally effective – not just engaging? How do educators demonstrate that modifying content, process, and product is more effective than implementing a one-size-fits-all curriculum in accordance with a teacher’s guide? How do educators convey to leaders and decision-makers that equitable access to high-quality instructional opportunities can only be achieved if students are provided differentiated, individualized learning experiences?

One pivotal practice that enables educators to meet individual needs – by providing personalization, choice, flexible/accelerated pacing, and feedback – is Independent Study. This chapter will explore how a modern interpretation of Independent Study – weaving in concepts of Think Like a Disciplinarian (TLAD), Universal Themes and Generalizations, and Culturally Relevant and Responsive pedagogy – is an effective practice to meet individual students’ needs within a variety of educational settings, including the regular in-person classroom and Blended Learning Models. The practice of Independent Study will be contextualized within the modern construct of Blended Learning and the Individual Rotation Model that can be tailored to students’ individual strengths and needs and allows students to progress through the course material at a rate that best matches their abilities and learning styles.

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