



Putting Students at the Center  
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## Building Skills for Independent Learning

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Students must be at the center of learning, but making this happen is no simple task. Learners accustomed to sitting passively while their teachers dole out knowledge may initially be unready to take on more active roles in the classroom.

We cannot simply throw students in the deep end of the learning pool and expect them to swim. Educators must teach the noncognitive or "soft" skills that are the foundation of independent learning.

We suggest three strengths teachers should seek to develop in their students so that they can assume more responsibility as learners: self-regulation, persistence, and collaboration.

### Self-Regulation

Self-regulation skills, which include setting, pursuing, and meeting goals, are essential for success within and beyond school. If we want students to take more ownership of their learning, we have to help them develop these strengths.

Instructional approaches that promote self-regulatory skills include modeling, conferencing, and encouraging reflection. First, teachers should model the creation of personalized goals and checklists that break down complex assignments, such as performance assessments into manageable pieces. Second, teachers can hold individual or small-group conferences with students to provide feedback on their goals and proposed means of meeting their goals. Third, teachers should use self-assessments that require students to reflect on successes and challenges experienced in meeting their goals. Such practices cultivate intrinsic motivation and help students develop valuable transferable skills.

### Persistence

When asked to assume a more central role in their own learning, students will undoubtedly face new challenges. In such circumstances, they will either give up or persevere. By using continuous formative assessment practices coupled with specific feedback mechanisms, teachers can help students pursue the path of persistence.

Thoughtful teacher-designed formative assessments provide opportunities for students to attempt challenging tasks multiple times before performing on a summative or final assessment. It is not enough, however, for students only to complete these assessments or even to receive feedback on them. Teachers can use approaches such as charting, compiling portfolios of works in progress, and self-assessments to help students track their growth and to recognize connections between their effort levels, persistence, and final performances.

Acknowledging the reasons behind their accomplishments will help foster students' self-efficacy and responsibility for their own learning and ultimately encourage future persistence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

### Collaboration

Perhaps counterintuitively, collaboration is necessary for students to become more independent learners—it helps wean students from overreliance on the teacher. But just because we decide that learners should work together more does not mean they are ready to do so.

Educators must explicitly teach students a variety of collaborative skills, including basic social skills, such as addressing classmates by name and offering praise; group process skills, such as encouraging peer participation and paraphrasing others' ideas; and reflection skills, such as assessing a group's success and identifying personal contributions to that success.

To develop such skills, teachers can, for example, assign students roles such as "group process manager" during collaborative tasks and regularly require simple cooperative learning assessments, such as filling in a pie chart that indicates how a group's work was divided up among students. Students who become proficient at collaborating with others through such scaffolded activities are better equipped to take ownership of their learning.

As we progress further into the 21st century, many emerging instructional approaches reflect the importance of

increasing student ownership of learning. For this shift to happen, teachers need to support learners as they experience more autonomy and responsibility and face inevitable obstacles and challenges.

Success in school and life requires more than just intelligence; it demands a noncognitive skill set that provides a foundation for learning and growth (Tough, 2012). By promoting the development of self-regulation, persistence, and collaboration, educators help grow independent learners who will thrive in a variety of endeavors.

## References

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