Teaching for Independent and Interdependent Learning

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I. Rationale

Descriptors of Exemplary Teaching:

*The teacher regularly utilizes a wide variety of instructional strategies, resources, technologies and learning activities to:*
1. *facilitate students’ mastery of fundamental skills and processes;*
2. *generate students’ interest, understanding and meaning;*
3. *intellectually challenge and actively engage all students, especially in creative, critical and complex thinking;*
4. *advance independent and interdependent learning;* and
5. *develop a variety of student learning styles.*

*The teacher knows that independent learning precedes interdependent learning; therefore, students are taught to become effective independent learners who successfully transfer that skill into productive interdependent learning that features individual and group accountability.*

Teachers have a responsibility to provide an appropriate instructional program for each student in their classroom. As a result, teachers often need to tailor instruction to small groups of students with similar needs—i.e. they **differentiate** instruction to accommodate individual differences and the different learning styles of students. This gives rise to the following questions:

- When a teacher is working with a small group of students, what does he/she do with the rest of the class?
- How can the teacher work effectively with a small group if he/she is constantly interrupted by students who have questions that need to be answered?
- When working with a small group, how does the teacher ensure that the rest of the students are engaged in productive activity and not just wasting time or interfering with the work efforts of classmates?

The answer to each of the above questions is this—we must teach our students to be **independent and interdependent learners.** If we are to successfully meet the needs of all our students, we must teach a set of skills that enables them to work productively without our direct supervision. Just as we teach skills and processes in the academic curriculum, so too must we teach students the skills to be effective independent and interdependent learners. In other words, we must think of “independent and interdependent learning” as content areas that need to be taught in the classroom.
II. The Ideal Classroom

Let’s visualize the ideal or model classroom in action. What would we see if the teacher has effectively taught the students to be working on-task – independently and with others – while he/she is working with other students? We would see individual students, pairs of students, and small groups of students actively, purposefully and productively engaged in curriculum-related learning activities. Conversations, if necessary, would be very quiet and task-related. When individual student needs arise such as going to the washroom, sharpening pencils, getting supplies, and getting a drink of water, there are no disruptions or interruptions. In fact, we hardly notice these events occurring because they happen so smoothly and automatically. And what is the teacher doing? He/she is working with small groups of students or having private conferences with students. During these interactions, we see the teacher helping, questioning, answering, reminding, explaining, modeling, encouraging, probing, suggesting, and guiding. This is an effective classroom. Why? Students have been taught to be self-directed, independent learners and successfully transfer that skill into interdependent learning situations. Students are actively, purposely, and productively engaged, and they transition seamlessly – back and forth – from independent to interdependent learning situations. The more they work, the more they learn. The more they practice their skills, the better they become at those skills. Yes, this is an effective classroom, if not an ideal classroom. And this is an effective teacher, if not an exemplary teacher. The question is this – how does a teacher create such a classroom?

III. Procedures and Routines—The Keys to Independent Learning

Descriptor of Exemplary Teaching:

The teacher uses procedures, routines, and behavioral expectations to maximize the use of instructional time, facilitate seamless transitions, enhance self-regulation, and engage students in purposeful and productive learning activities.

Exemplary teachers are able to have students work effectively as independent learners because:

1. They have identified the specific foundational skills that students require to function independently. These skills include but are not limited to:

   - Demonstrating appropriate physical readiness for the lesson.
   - Responding to a pre-established signal or cue when the teacher needs everyone’s attention.
   - Getting necessary materials for the task at hand.
   - Following directions for independent and interdependent learning activities.
   - Going to the appropriate source for assistance (i.e. self, classmates, learning centre, teacher)
• Working in a manner so as not to interfere with or distract the efforts of others.
• Working without being distracted.
• Using and returning materials appropriately.
• Choosing appropriate new work after completing an activity or task.
• Responding appropriately to the teacher’s questions.
• Distributing and collecting materials in an efficient and effective manner.
• Following directions for opening and closing activities.
• Addressing personal needs.

2. The specific skills have been taught using procedures and routines. A procedure is how the teacher wants something done in the classroom. It is “how we do things in the classroom” that facilitates “bell-to-bell student engagement”. A routine is a procedure that students end up doing automatically without prompting or supervision. Procedures are transformed into routines through rehearsal and practice. The “equation” for teaching independence may be written as follows:

Procedures + Practice + Practice = Routines + Independence

IV. Activity Types for Independent Learning

The types of independent activities that students engage in fall into three groups:

Type 1 Activities

These activities are intended have students be self-engaged for a period of time. They are typically fun, higher interest activities that students already know how to do (e.g. games, puzzles, coloring, drawing, playing with pattern blocks, and listening at the listening centre). There is minimal academic value associated with these activities since they are primarily used as a means to teach younger students how to function independently. Type 1 activities are a stepping stone to the next level of activities that are more academic in nature.

Type 2 Activities

These activities require students to be productively engaged in academic tasks without the teacher’s supervision. Students practice and apply previously learned academic skills and knowledge to increase accuracy, speed, facility and understanding. Examples include mathematics problem-solving activities, flashcards, phonics games, reading, writing, and independent practice from a recently-concluded lesson.
Type 3 Activities

These activities involve extension of previous learning or the pursuit of new learning on an independent basis. They can be self-selected by the student or assigned by the teacher. Examples include the creation of an original product or performance such as writing a story or play, designing a game, preparing a written or oral report, carrying out a science investigation, conducting Internet research, and so on.

Note:

As activities progress from Type 1 to Type 3, there is an increasing shift in emphasis from high demand for self-reliance to high demand for academic growth. If students are unable to maintain themselves with Type 1 activities, they will likely be unsuccessful with the more academic activities. That is why students must demonstrate proficiency with Type 1 activities (primary grades) before moving on to Type 2 and 3 activities (upper elementary and secondary grades).

V. Interdependent Learning

The progression from Type 1 to Type 3 activities also involves work with other students. In other words, interdependent learning (a.k.a. “cooperative learning”) is added to the mix. Working alone is far easier than working with another student or a group of students. In addition to self-reliance, we are adding the dimension of social skills. Stephen Covey, author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, describes the maturity continuum in which individuals move in sequence from dependence through independence to interdependence. He asserts that one cannot function effectively in an interdependent situation unless one has learned to perform successfully on an independent basis. The implication for the classroom is this – we should not expect students to work effectively in an interdependent relationship unless they have demonstrated the ability to work independently. Independent learning therefore precedes interdependent learning. This does not mean that independent learners will automatically succeed in cooperative learning situations. Interdependent learning is another foundational skill that has to be taught by way of procedures which eventually become routines in our classrooms.

Notes:

1. Interdependent learning is designed to have students work cooperatively and interact positively to achieve mutual purposes. It follows that individual and group accountability are integral to productive interdependent learning. Therefore, each student must contribute to the group to achieve its goals and must demonstrate his/her individual contributions. In addition, students must demonstrate the accomplishments of the group as a whole.
2. Robert Marzano cautions teachers about overuse and misuse of interdependent learning (e.g. It is implemented to such an extent that students do not have sufficient time to independently practice skills and processes. This might take the form of having students sit in small groups all day long all year long).

3. Teachers must be on the alert for “socializing disguised as cooperative learning”.

4. Do not permit interdependent learning to reinforce dependence. Over-reliance on a classmate or classmates can easily become the norm (habit?) and therefore a counterproductive situation.

VI. Concluding Comments

A final suggestion is in order. Now that we have a vision of what independent learning looks like in the classroom and the skills required for same, we need to begin procedure instruction. And there is no better time to start than at the outset of the school year. The first step is to identify the procedures you feel will develop the independent learning skills noted in Section III. Be it entering the classroom, becoming physically ready for the lesson, checking the chalkboard/whiteboard for directions, responding to the teacher’s signal for attention, distributing and collecting materials, or working on a Type 1, 2 or 3 activity, students need to practice the procedure until it is internalized. It is further suggested that modeling, checking for understanding and guided practice be used to teach the procedure until it occurs regularly without reminders and prompts. When it reaches the point of being internalized, it is now a routine. Perhaps the most effective practice involves short, frequent practice sessions close together and carefully monitored by the teacher.

When independence starts to materialize, you are now ready to disengage yourself from the class as a whole by working with smaller groups of students. It is time for the unsupervised students to get used to not having you control or direct all of their activities. When working with a small group, it is important to observe how well the unsupervised students remain on-task. It is suggested that you periodically leave the small group (with a specific short-term task to work on while you are gone) and circulate among the independent learners. Provide positive reinforcement where deserved and reminders/correctives where warranted. Finally, it is imperative that you become “off limits” to the rest of the class when you are working with small groups. In order for you to work uninterrupted with small groups, the independent learners need to be taught what to do when they encounter problems. These alternative procedures will enable them to remove obstacles on their own and add to their repertoire of independent learning skills.

Remember that procedures—and their subsequent transformation into routines—are not rules, orders, or threats. They are simply “how we do things around here” to create the most effective working environment for all learners – an environment
featuring self-directed, independent, and interdependent learners engaged in purposeful and productive learning activities.

References

Covey, Stephen. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.*

Marzano, Robert, et al. *Classroom Instruction that Works.*