

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)

I have often heard teachers dismiss ILPs as extra paperwork that they have to create that goes nowhere and that students hate filling them in as it takes up precious learning time. Indeed I have heard it said that students don't see the point, and teachers tell students that it is for Ofsted, or for funding purposes or the college wants it completed so we have to do it or I'll get rapped over the knuckles or even worse lose my job. Both teachers and their students see it generally as a tick box exercise that means nothing and doesn't aid learning.

Unfortunately, this opinion is very commonplace in post compulsory education. It is a very negative view of what years and years of research have proved that completed correctly ILPs can and do have a very beneficial effect on learning.

What is an ILP?

At its heart, an ILP is a flexible route map in which a student, with the support of their teacher, sets out what their individualised learning goals are. In other words, exactly what the students want to learn during their time in the class with you. It is not what you want to teach, it is what your students want to learn.

The Learning goals need to be SMART. They need to state exactly what the student wants to learn. They also need to be trackable and show progress and they need to be within the students' capabilities.

We, as teachers, must make sure that our learners take ownership of their ILP, and that they see the value of it and that we remember it belongs to the learner not the teacher. Written correctly these ILPs should support the learner and motivate them because they can see their own individualised progress.

How do we support the learner to write and use them?

The first thing we need to do, as teachers, is to understand the value of them. They are not and should not be seen as something we have to do for Ofsted, funding or anyone else. They are invaluable documents that support the learner in knowing what they want to learn, their progress towards their learning goals and for teachers, the backbone of how and what we teach.

When a learner comes to our courses, they know that they want improve their creative writing or learn how to use spreadsheets or improve their knowledge of Italian for example but what they don't know is how they can do that.

We need to describe to students the possible curriculum, that they can follow, and explain it in a language that they will understand. There is no point in adding in a load of jargon that is meaningless. But if you clarify what they can potentially learn and how, the students can then decide what they want to do and in doing this, they will take ownership of their ILP and see its value.

For example:

In a creative writing class:

You may be thinking along the lines of getting students to write flash fiction. To someone new to writing they may think “What’s flash fiction?” You could then ask students if they want to write short stories, and maybe break it down further into stories of a maximum page in length or 2000 words.

In a spreadsheets class:

You may want the students to be able to use formulas. Again to someone who has never heard of formulas, they maybe thinking algebra or worse! So how about asking if they would like to learn how to make the programme add, divide, subtract and multiply, so they don’t have to.

You also need to explain several topics that they can learn on the course and why they should learn them, and how they will support their ultimate learning goal. Remember to really listen to what your students want and need and take these on board. You may have to negotiate.

Writing Learning goals is a good time to manage expectations, so that if say in a cake making class, if a student wanted to create a 5 tier wedding cake in a 2 hour session, clearly that isn’t going to happen, however they can start to learn the basics.

All goals should be personalised to the learner, however I do ask students what in particular they want to learn, and using the previous example, that they want to learn how to make cupcakes, I will endeavour to ensure that this happens.

Learning goals must link back to the aim of the course, and if they don’t question whether the student is on the right course.

When giving feedback to a student, try also to link this to their learning goals and to the progress they have made. I make a point of saying to my students “today we are going to look at how to create 3 different types of wedding cake, and Jack I know you are particularly interested in this. Then during and at the end of the session, during feedback, check in with Jack that his learning goal has been achieved and the progress made.

When we know our students learning goals, we can use these to inform our teaching and ultimately our students learning. By being proactive at the

beginning of the session, our students will have a greater chance of achieving their learning goals.











I explain what an ILP is, at the beginning of the session, not as something we have to do, or paperwork that needs filling in for whoever, but as their learning journey. I know some people hate the word journey, so use learning route map. If you think about it, you would need a written list when you are doing a big shop, so you don't forget anything. You would write down a plan of what you were going to put in a book you were writing, just as you would write down a plan for a business you were starting. In the same way you need a written plan to achieve a learning goal.

I like a maximum of 3 major learning goals in a course and these need to be broken down into a maximum of 3 minor learning goals in each session leading towards the major ones.

Having said that, there are lots of caveats. It depends on the syllabus, the aim of the course, the length of the course, the students and their needs and so on. But as a rough guide there shouldn't be masses of major learning goals and only one or two minor ones.

Here is a list of more reasons why we need to create ILPs for you, some of which you can share with your students.

Reasons to create ILPs

-  Students can see their progress towards their goals
-  It will motivate learners and encourages self-discipline
-  Can make the learning goals achievable when students see them in small chunks
-  Learners can track their own learning and see the distance they have covered
-  Learners can celebrate their success
-  It gives learners focus
-  Learners will take responsibility for their own learning
-  It encourages self-reflection
-  Students can evaluate their own learning
-  Encourages students to stretch and challenge what they thought they could do.