
Facilitating Life-long Learners in the Regular Classroom

Years P - 12

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Although the Autonomous Learner Model for the Gifted and Talented (ALM) was first designed to meet the diversified cognitive, emotional, and social needs of gifted and talented students in special programs and classrooms, it is now being used with ALL children and youth (Years P-12). First of all, we have learned that the ALM is effective not only with gifted and talented students, but with all students. Secondly, the ALM can be incorporated into all areas of the school so that it becomes part of the basic philosophy of the entire school, including the attitudes and strategies of teachers, media specialists, administrators, secretaries, and other support staff.

If it is good for the gifted, isn't it good for all students? The answer is 'yes' or 'no'. One of my favourite quotes is, "Giftedness is not a stimulus, but the response to the APPROPRIATE stimulus". All children will benefit from the ALM activities, but it is the gifted and talented who will go beyond what the others are able to accomplish. Not all students can achieve what gifted students can do, but they can begin the journey and go as far as they are capable of doing, and will definitely benefit. The model is

structured in such a manner that all students, after completion of the Orientation Dimension, are able to select the most appropriate areas and dimensions of the model to meet their individual needs with the support of the teacher and the other students. The ALM is designed so that students are involved in determining some of their own education as they become learners. This is a paradigm shift in education; a shift which is necessary if school reform is going to be successful and if we are going to pursue the journey of facilitating all of our students as life-long learners.

The Ultimate Goal: The Life-long Learner

Let's look closely at today's typical classroom (yes, this is a generalisation) to see what is occurring. Most of the work presented to students during a school year will be decided by the Education Department or Board of Studies, the administration, and the teachers. Rarely do students (or their parents) have much input into their own education. In the past there were more opportunities for students to take elective courses, but it is more and more difficult to make room for electives in their timetables.

There are other challenges as well. In a typical classroom, the majority of decisions are made for the students, not with the students. The curriculum is prescribed, most of the techniques and strategies are selected by the teacher, and the students are not involved in the decision-making process of the classroom. Additionally, most

students have one or two special areas which they want to study, but must pursue these interests in the home and community.

In other words, much of the school experience is done to the students, rather than with the students. When we ask students why they are doing what they are doing, or what the major goals of their education are, they are not articulate. They have learned to do what is assigned because they know that this is how school works.

Before children enter school, there is little direct instruction in their lives. They learn because they are exposed to learning and their parents usually reinforce learning. Parents read to their children but they do not say, "Sit down, I want to teach you how to read". Children learn to read because they want to, because of their natural curiosity and ability.

But once in school, they are bombarded with direct instruction on material that educators believe is important. They rarely spend time learning what is important and meaningful for them, but what is prescribed. (I am not opposed to prescribed knowledge, but perhaps we teach too much in this manner.) They lose their roles as learners and begin to develop into the role of students. This process may take one year, two years or maybe more, but the results are usually the same. Our children lose sight of their ability to be LEARNERS, and have become STUDENTS. They are motivated by teacher content, teacher direction, teacher help and teacher evaluation. Conformity is important and

marks become the ultimate. By the time many of our children are in high school, they have learned to ask many important questions. "How long should it be?", "Where should I put my name?", "Will this guarantee me high marks?", "If not, what can I do for extra credit?"

The transition is unfortunate. Most of the time, especially in school, our children are now students rather than learners. Intrinsic motivation has been replaced by extrinsic motivation. Many of their independent, self-directed behaviours have been lost.

The major goal of the Autonomous Learner Model (ALM) is to facilitate the total growth of individual students as independent, self-directed, life-long learners. This includes development in the cognitive, emotional, social and physical domains of the potential learner. The learners develop and incorporate their own knowledge and skills, learn independently, and apply their knowledge to the entire scope of their learning experiences and to their lives. They become "autonomous learners", which is defined as those who solve problems or develop new ideas through a combination of divergent and convergent thinking, and function with minimal external guidance in selected areas of endeavor.

The Beginning of the ALM

One of the most important features of the ALM is that it was NOT developed at a university or administration building by a group of professors or administrators. Teachers were given the freedom to select a group of students whose needs were not being met in school, and to begin asking them questions. "What is not working for you?", "If you could redesign school so that it would meet your needs, what would it

be like?" These and many more questions taught the teachers a very important lesson. Given the opportunity, students, both achieving and underachieving, know more about their education than we give them credit for.

The ALM (Betts & Knapp, 1981; Betts, 1985) was first developed at Arvada West High School in Jefferson County, Colorado by gifted students, George Betts, and Jolene Knapp Kercher. The model belongs to the students, not to the teachers, administrators, or parents. Although the model started at the high school level (which is unusual in the United States), it has been expended and is now being used in primary schools, middle schools, and high schools throughout the United States, Canada, Germany, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand.

Educators are enthusiastic about the Autonomous Learner Model because it provides them with a well-developed philosophy and plan which can be implemented within their own classrooms. The basic ALM model is divided into five major dimensions:

1. Orientation
2. Individual Development
3. Enrichment Activities
4. Seminars

These five major dimensions are designed to provide students with the appropriate experiences which are necessary to facilitate their growth as autonomous learners. Each dimension provides the information, experiences, attitudes, skills, and concepts necessary for the growth of students to become independent, self-directed, life-long learners.

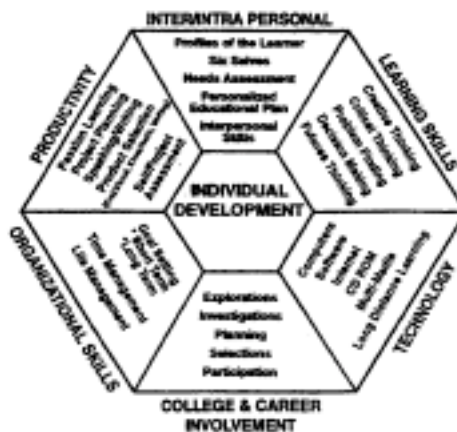
Orientation – Dimension One

The most appropriate word to describe the Orientation Dimension is "foundation". A foundation of information for your classroom is provided in this dimension. Students learn about different ideas and concepts necessary for participation within the ALM. They learn to be responsible for directing their own learning. Without a foundation, students, teachers, and parents would not understand where they are headed, why they are headed in a certain direction, and what will be accomplished. The Orientation Dimension is divided into four separate areas:

Understanding Giftedness/ Multiple Intelligences

Until the students are placed in programming options which are designed to create

The Individual Development Dimension of the Autonomous Learner Model



The Autonomous Learner Model by George Betts and Jolene Knapp

self-directed learners, they have usually not learned about the concepts of giftedness, intelligence, creativity, potential, or life-long learning. This area of the Orientation Dimension provides experiences, activities, readings, and discussions which enable students to learn about these concepts. Students are involved in research about eminent people, experience speakers who are outstanding in their community, and complete interviews of selected gifted, talented, and creative people within their communities.

At this time, the entire concepts of giftedness and multiple intelligences are being expanded. One major concept being used in identifying students with strong intellectual and creative abilities is to "cast a wider net". Within the regular classroom, the ALM provides teachers with the opportunity to learn about the abilities and needs of all of their students, not just those identified as gifted and talented.

Howard Gardner, a psychologist at Harvard University, wrote *Frames of Mind* in 1983. In this book, he attacked the concept of a one-dimensional intelligence which can be measured by one intelligence test. He stated that there are many additional intelligences. *Frames of Mind* is the basic work for the development of the Multiple Intelligences Theory. Besides the logical / mathematical and verbal / linguistic intelligences, Gardner introduces the concepts of rhythmical / musical, visual / spatial, bodily / kinaesthetic, inter-personal, and intra-personal intelligences. In addition, Gardner himself admits that there may be one or more as yet unidentified intelligences.

Many discussions, materials, books, and activities about life-long learners are shared with the students in this area of the ALM, so that they will see themselves in a more developed manner. In

other words, we should "cast a wider net", both in those already identified, and those who need to be discovered and challenged. By using this philosophy, educators are able to discover the abilities and needs of all students, not just those identified as gifted and talented.

Group Building Activities

There are times when students have not connected with others in the regular classroom, nor in the school at large. They are isolated because of their differences. Virginia Satir (1976), a world-renowned psychologist and family therapist believes that you can exist in the same classroom, school, or home and never fully achieve "emotional contact". Activities which serve to facilitate a positive environment are included in this area. There are also activities which provide all students with the opportunity to learn more about others and themselves. Emphasis is placed on group dynamics, which group roles are necessary for a group to function, which roles impact the group negatively, and why group activities will be essential in this program.

As group members, students experience activities designed for them to learn more about themselves and others, and more about the importance of learning to work together as group members. Students feel comfortable with each other as a result of their experiences in the area of group building activities. Although some students at first might not understand the importance of being able to work together as a cohesive group, there are activities in future dimensions of the ALM which require group participation to solve problems and to develop new and unique products. Students report that the foundation of group building is a skill which they will use throughout their future learning experiences.

Self Understanding

"What do I know about myself?" "What do teachers think about me?" "What are my abilities and my needs?" Students in a classroom with the Autonomous Learner Model will develop many questions as they proceed. The modification to a classroom which facilitates life-long learning demands many changes which students need to understand. This area of involvement provides students the information necessary for them to begin to develop ideas and concepts about themselves and their own unique abilities.

Program Opportunities and Responsibilities

Sometimes students may not understand the goals and objectives of your classroom, the activities in which they will participate, or what is expected of them once they are in your classroom. This area provides them with the necessary information to carefully decide what they will be completing in the next two or three years. The final activity of this dimension is the development of a Student / Learner Growth Plan which becomes the Guideline for further participation in the model. Although not complete, the following components are included in the Student / Learner Growth Plan:

1. Basic attitudes and abilities
2. Learning styles and learning skills
3. Pre-testing in appropriate courses
4. Teacher-modified and compacted content
5. Student-developed content, including passions and new and unique information
6. New approaches for individual and small group learning experiences
7. Additional programming options to provide differentiation within the school and the community

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8. Self-needs assessment, including the areas of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development for on-going growth and development

Individual Development – Dimension Two

The second dimension of the Autonomous Learner Model is Individual Development, which is designed to give students the appropriate skills, concepts, and attitudes for life-long learning; in other words, to help them become autonomous learners. The Individual Development Dimension of the ALM is divided into four separate areas:

Learning Skills

Cognitive skills, such as creativity, higher-level thinking skills, organisational skills, and research skills, are essential in facilitating students to become autonomous learners. Students are taught the importance of learning specific skills. They then participate in activities designed to provide them with these skills, and are provided with opportunities in which they are able to demonstrate the skills, concepts, and attitudes which have been presented in this area.

Personal Understanding

“Who am I?” “How do I feel about myself?” “How do other people feel about me?” “How can I improve myself?” These questions and many more to be developed by the students are discussed. At the end of each discussion, the students are always asked the following three questions:

1. What did you learn (cognitive)?
2. What did you experience (affective)?
3. And now what? How can I use this information in my life and my on-going learning?

This area is a continuation of the area of Self Understanding which is initiated during the Orientation Dimension of the Model. In the

model, the affective domain is covered in the first two dimensions because the authors believe it is not just part of the Orientation Dimension, but an on-going area throughout the ALM.

Interpersonal Skills

Many people are limited in their interactions with other people because they do not possess appropriate interpersonal skills. Such skills are brainstormed in small and large groups. These skills are then discussed and the students decide which are most meaningful to them at the time. Units of learning are then jointly developed by the students and the teachers. Teachers should not decide which skills are most important; nor are they to develop units with specific objective and activities. This is done by the students and the teachers together. The students become more involved with their own learning process because they are involved in making the decisions which give them new opportunities to improve their skills to communicate effectively with other people. Usually they decide on the skills they would like to focus on, such as communication, interviewing, discussion, and group process skills. No two groups are alike. Each group should have the freedom to decide what is most important for them.

As a teacher, you always have the right to include one or two areas which you believe are important, but it is usually best to share your ideas after the students have developed and completed units on their own selected skills.

Career Involvement

“What do I want to do with my life?” “What career is for me?” “Do I have the skills necessary to be successful in the career I have selected?” These and other important questions are covered in this area. After careful presentations of various careers are completed, students spend

time exploring careers in the community, working with adults in the appropriate areas of endeavour. Many times students find their in-depth studies and mentors through student-developed activities in this area.

Enrichment Activities – Dimension Three

Enrichment Activities comprise the third dimension of the Autonomous Learner Model. This is the dimension in which two major events happen. First, you look carefully at the content in your regular classroom and begin to incorporate it within the ALM. Also, students are now becoming student / learners, which means that more responsibility is placed on them by the teachers, and they will have the opportunity to study topics of their own choice through the different areas of this dimension. The main goal is to help the student / learner become more aware of what is “out there” to be learned. The concepts of “teacher-based content” and “learner-based content” are presented to them. In addition to the content which you modify in your classroom the student / learners are given the opportunity to decide what they would like to study and how they want to approach these new areas of learning.

“What resources are available in my community?” “In which topics am I interested?” This area covers these questions and many, many more. Explorations give student / learners the opportunity to explore, to learn how to retrieve information. No forms are filled out, nor are reports or products needed. Student / learners search the community for places to find information. This would include using computers, libraries, individual, and places of business.

To complete an exploration, student / learners share with their classmates what they have learned, their sources, and how

they learned. For some, a little knowledge suffices, and they will go onto other explorations, while others will become excited about their explorations and want to turn them into investigations, and later, into in-depth studies.

Investigations

An investigation is a mini in-depth study. Again, investigations may be in your content area or in the content areas of your student / learners. A brief contract is completed for each investigation. The form contains a description of the investigation, objectives, activities, resources, as well as a time line, plans for a final presentation and assessment activities, to be completed by both the teacher and the student / learners. Several investigations must be successfully completed before student / learners are given permission to begin an in-depth study.

For some student / learners in your regular classroom, the goal will be to complete several investigations even though they may never move into the fourth or fifth dimensions of the model. From experience, it has been shown that all student / learners are able to reach this area of the Enrichment Dimension if the model has been incorporated into the regular classroom.

Cultural Activities

Many times students are unaware of opportunities available to them. Through this area students are exposed to many different cultural experiences. They visit art galleries, attend concerts, and have additional experiences which allow them to “go behind the scenes”, to learn how organisations work. Any activity which encompasses something new and unusual for them can be accepted as a cultural activity. These may be planned and completed by small groups or by the entire class. At least three such activities are usually completed during a school year.

Service

Activities which benefit the community are intrinsic to the development of self-understanding in relation to others. During the school year each student / learner is required to complete a service unit within the program. Such activities might include working with the elderly, raising food and money for a charitable organisation, or working one-on-one with a person who has particular needs. The satisfaction gained by giving of oneself creates an appreciation of the rewards of sharing. For most ALM programs, this component is required and non-negotiable. It must be designed and completed during a school year. Student / learner evaluations show that this is a preferred activity, although they are apprehensive at first because most have not been involved in this type of experience.

Adventure Trips

Student / learners have the opportunity to organise, finance, and implement adventure trips which provide for growth in the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains. Being together for ten days with nineteen other people can be a very rewarding and growth-producing experience. Trips can include adventures into cities, excursions to national parks, or other places that offer intellectual, emotional and physical challenges.

Seminars – Dimension Four

By the time the student / learners have reached Seminars, the fourth dimension of the ALM, emphasis is placed on the “production” of ideas and topics. Student / learners are now seen as “learners” instead of as “student / learners”. More and more autonomy and responsibility is placed on the learners. Also, additional opportunities are available.

Learners, who work together in small groups, select a topic,

research the topic and plan and implement a three-phased seminar. The seminar includes the presentation of factual information, a group discussion and / or activity and the concept of closure.

Seminars are divided into five major areas and learners select the areas in which they are interested, and brainstorm all of the different topics in this area. They then develop the seminar. Included here are the five areas from which they select.

1. Futuristic
2. Controversial
3. Problematic
4. General Interest
5. Advanced Knowledge

At the conclusion of each seminar, learners and teacher / facilitators discuss the concept of a seminar, the effectiveness of those presented and what can be done to enhance the seminars in the future.

In-depth Study – Dimension Five

The main goal for each learner who participates in the ALM is the attainment of autonomous learning skills. The In-Depth Study, Dimension Five of the Autonomous Learner Model, is designed to allow learners to be involved in an in-depth study. Either independently or in small groups of two or three, learners develop an In-Depth Study Contract, which outlines a brief description of the study, objectives and activities, questions to be answered, a time line, a list of human and material resources, and a plan for on-going and final presentations and assessments.

An in-depth study is the most demanding and challenging dimension of the Autonomous Learner Model. Once the learners have developed the contract, they are able to participate in their studies. Most studies are completed between two months and two-and-a-half years. Is it possible for all students in your classroom to

complete In-Depth Studies? At this time, the answer is no. Usually it is only the gifted and talented learners who are able to be successful in this dimension while many of the other learners remain in Dimensions Three and Four. The differentiation comes from the abilities and needs of gifted and talented learners. They need this dimension to fulfil their potential.

Learners are over 90 per cent responsible for their studies, but support from mentors, teacher / facilitators, and parents are still required. Adults are not involved in the planning or the day-to-day activities, but they may still be involved in many different roles, including one of being an advocate. The learners are now totally involved in their own in-depth studies, but there may still be times when adults can open doors which the learners might not even know exist.

The Classroom, the School, and the Community

Although the ALM started as an elective subject at the high school level, it has been modified in many different directions. At the primary level, it has been used in resource programs or pull-out programs but is now used in all regular classrooms within the school. In other words, the ALM has become a school-wide model.

One of the strongest components of the ALM is the inclusion of members of the community. Community people serve as guest speakers, enrichment group leaders, and ultimately, mentors for individual learners or small groups of learners. Without community participation, the ALM would be limited and would not provide the necessary experiences needed to produce life-long learners.

And Now What...

Several years ago, while taking a group of learners on an Adventure Trip to the Grand

Canyon, I had time to reflect about our children and what they may become. It was 5.00 am and I was sitting high on a bluff in Monument Valley, Arizona. I sat silently while the sun was just beginning to appear. Suddenly I saw, far down in a valley, five of our learners, jogging back to camp. They were laughing and happy, and were jogging without effort. There was something magical about that scene: the campsite, the joggers, and Monument Valley so early in the morning.

I watched in silence for several minutes and then I began to write...

Some people have the ability to create excitement in their lives.

*They are the ones who strive,
who grow
who give and share...*

They are the ones who love...

*They possess passion...
for themselves, others,
Nature, and experiences.*

*They have the ability
to see beyond today,
to rise above the hectic pace,
to strive for their own
perfection...*

*And they are gentle,
for they love themselves,
and they love others...*

*Through their living
they create peace and
contentment.*

*At the same time,
they create excitement,
for there is always
another mountain,
a deeper joy
a new dawn...*
(by George Betts)

I want to share this article with all of you, whether you are learners, educators, or parents. The ALM is a direction, a goal, a process. It cannot be prescribed in one way; it must be used by a group of people with a common goal who want to work together. Decisions are made not only by educators, but in co-operation with learners and parents. The ultimate goal is to involve

learners in the process of their own learning, to prepare them to be life-long learners.

Use the ALM model as a guide, but not as the final word. Each educator and learner should use the ALM in their own way, in their own setting and with their own goals, standards, and needs. Please let me know how the ALM is working for you. I welcome feedback, suggestions, activities, and letters. Jolene Knapp Kercher and I listen carefully to the feedback we receive. That is why the ALM of 1976 is not the ALM of today. The model changes as the needs of learners change.

Best of luck and remember that education is what you have after you forget what you memorised for a test. Education is not a destination, but a process, a journey.... Good luck!!!

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For a complete list of ALM books and supplemental material write to or call Elaine Brownlow at:

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