

CASE STUDY: HEIDI HILLESHEIM

Anti-Boring Approach Transforms Independent School into a Learning Community

Variety of students on independent study makes designing lessons a challenge

Heidi Hillesheim manages personalized education plans for students at Gateway Educational Options in Redding, California. As an independent study teacher, she works with students from kindergarten through eighth grade. “Every day is a joy...and a challenge,” she said.

Families choose independent study when traditional school isn't working for their child. Students with advanced skills take independent study classes to learn more quickly. Other students might need extra help or more time to complete assignments or have trouble managing the fast-paced environment of a typical classroom.

Independent study students need more teacher and peer support

With independent study, most of the student's learning is done at home under parent supervision. Students also meet weekly with Heidi to ask questions and turn in assignments. She has one hour to keep students up to speed in English, history, math, and half a dozen other subjects.

During this hour she modifies their assignments and assesses their progress. “Designing interesting and engaging material for 22 different students between the ages of 5 and 13 isn't easy!” she said.

There were other challenges too. Without the community a traditional school provides, students can get bored and disengage. “So much learning happens in communities,” Heidi explained. And because they don't spend much time around other students, they don't have much time to practice interpersonal skills.

Heidi was looking for a way to change that.

Teachers learn new strategies from *The Art of Inspiring Students*

Heidi was on the lookout for new ideas. When she saw a notice for a free workshop on study skills, she signed up. The workshop was part of Gretchen Wegner's program, the *Anti-Boring Approach to Powerful Studying*.



EDUCATOR

- Heidi Hillesheim, Independent study teacher
- 27 years teaching
- Grades K-8, Gateway Educational Options, Redding, California



STUDENTS

- 76% Economically disadvantaged
- 31% Students of color
- 25% diagnosed learning difference
- 52% low income



CHALLENGE

- How to teach multiple subjects and levels every day
- Build Community among students



SOLUTION

- *Anti-Boring Approach* gives students research-backed study strategies
- Innovative ‘Study Lab’ builds a student learning community



RESULTS

- Students take charge of learning
- Collaboration and peer skills improve
- Independent study students gain confidence, independence

Heidi loved Gretchen's wealth of knowledge and playful style. After the workshop, she signed up for the next two classes in Gretchen's series: The Study Cycle and The Art of Inspiring Students.

A colleague had already taken the classes, and the shift in her classroom was immediate. "I was impressed by how different those high schoolers were afterward, and I thought Gretchen's approach could also help the 8th graders I worked with," Heidi said.

Inspired by what she learned in The Art of Inspiring Students, Heidi re-imagined her independent study program as a "Study Lab." "We changed the name, and suddenly the program wasn't just about what the kids didn't know. It was about learners having skills that were translatable, that they could use for any content every year." It provided the kind of community of learners that Heidi hoped for.

Unique 'Study Lab' class helps students take charge of their own learning

The Study Lab concept, and the tools Heidi learned from Gretchen's classes, changed her students' outlook on studying and on school. The tools themselves are simple. The genius is in the system.

For example, one 11-year-old student learned to use the taskbar in his Google calendar. "He's gone from struggling a lot and not turning in work to completing every assignment on time. He's going to finish a unit on Ancient Egypt, and another unit on China by the end of the school year, and he's turned in all of his work," Heidi said.

The Anti-Boring 'toolbox' gives students a sense of mastery. "I finished my math unit by using backward planning," said one 13-year-old. "That feels good, and it feels great to feel good in this wacky time". A 12-year-old announced, " Now I can wake up in the morning and know exactly what I am supposed to do!"

"The key", Heidi said, "is that kids need to be able to have a say in their own learning process. The Anti-Boring method lets them create their own plan and have fun with it. What's going to lead to learning is different for every kid, and there needs to be some room for making a choice."

'Anti-Boring' students shift to growth mindset

When students think about what they need to know before they read, they have a context and retain more information. "Kids participate more," Heidi acknowledged. "They look at a table of contents so they can front-load the information before they start to read their textbook."

According to Heidi, "the Anti-Boring Approach is like the icing on the cake for independent study. It promotes a sense of independence and confidence. Students see that they can learn, that they can do the work, and they get excited. Then they want to do even better."

Students in the Study Lab learn approaches that can be used with any subject. In The Art of Inspiring Students, Gretchen talks about the 3 components to getting new information into your brain. The first two are variety and repetition. These seem like opposites, but they are equally important. The third component is spaced retrieval, which is a method for increasing the space between review sessions.

Gretchen puts all this in the form of an equation:

$$\text{variety} + \text{repetition} + \text{spaced retrieval} = \text{the ability to learn anything}$$

This equation is universal. "I have special education kids, all kinds of kids in the Study Lab," Heidi said. "That simple equation supports them all. It tells them that each student has the capacity to learn. They might not do it in the same way as someone else. But no matter what, they can make their capacity grow. That is the essence of a growth mindset."