How can educators best promote student agency?

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In my [school district](#) we adopted the [five learning beliefs](#) from [Education Reimagined](#) to help drive our district vision: competency-based; personalized, relevant & contextualized; learner agency; socially embedded; open-walled.

In working with these five beliefs, we must (1) have a clear understanding of what they mean, and (2) be equipped with explicit strategies to make them a reality. Otherwise, a vision is not much more than words on paper.

That being said, here's the Education Reimagined definition of learner agency:

Story continues below

Learning that is characterized by learning agency recognizes learners as active participants in their own learning and engages them in the design of their experiences and the realization of their learning outcomes in ways appropriate for their developmental level. As such, learners have choice and voice in their educational experiences as they progress through competencies. Harnessing his or her own intrinsic motivation to learn, each learner strives to ultimately take full ownership of his or her own learning.

And, reflecting upon my work with inquiry-based learning and project based learning, here are five ways to promote student agency.

1. Create a culture of inquiry and creativity

We start to create this culture on the very first day of school, but it's truly

established as a result of the successes students experience throughout the year. In other words, we don't just "set it and forget it." The four subsequent points, as well as everything else that contributes to student agency, are all dependent upon culture. As [Mike Kelly](), Middle School Principal, says, "If we don't focus on school [or classroom] culture, we might as well not waste our time focusing on anything else."

Here are three ways to create a culture that lends itself to student agency:

- Learn to let go: If students are to engage in *productive struggle*, we must possess the patience that allows for them to do so – patience (and scaffolding) that will vary based on student need. We should also be transparent with our students in regards to what we're trying to accomplish, so they view the struggle as part of the learning process.

- Do not lock it and block it: If students are going to design and drive their own learning, they must possess the tools to do so. More specifically, they should (if possible) have access to a device with an Internet connection, YouTube, online research databases, content creation software/apps, and more.

- Explicitly teach collaboration skills: Rather than putting students in groups and then getting angry with them when they don't get along (which I did on multiple occasions), explicitly teach collaboration skills by having students establish what effective collaboration should look like, sound like, and feel like.

2. Emphasize relevance over engagement

There's a fine line between trying to get students excited about *our* interests, and involving students in learning that is based on *their* interests. While the former can generate engagement (which is oftentimes short lived), the latter approach *starts with the student*s and prioritizes what makes each and every one of them unique. As a result, they are the designers of relevant learning

experiences that tap into their intrinsic motivation.

As a 4th grade teacher (and a foodie), I had my students complete a restaurant review project that included each student going to a restaurant of his or her choice, taking notes throughout the dining process, and then systemically converting the notes to a professional looking review that was posted on a blog and sent out to the restaurant! The problem – I never once asked my students if *they* were foodies or if *they* were at all interested in writing about restaurants. Looking back, I could have (1) provided this project as one option alongside others, or (2) simply told my students the understandings I wanted them to demonstrate and then allowed for them to carve out their own paths.

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It's easy to fall victim to spending an excess amount of time, meticulously planning units that focus on our interests or what we think/hope will grab student attention. *We should spend more time giving our students a voice and then working backwards from what they have to say.*

3. Share out learning targets

The understandings we want students to achieve as a result of a project or lesson could be shared with students (or *uncovered* by students through inquiry) in the form of learning targets to give them a clear picture of what they are supposed to learn. This approach is similar to what I did as a student teacher, when I was ordered to write the standard on the board prior to each lesson. However, standards are not the same as learning targets. Here are three tips to consider when converting the former to the latter:

- If a standard calls for multiple independent actions (e.g., *I can identify a dog. I can identify a cat.*), split it up into multiple learning targets.

- Make sure all learning targets are in student-friendly language.

- To promote inquiry, present each learning target in the form of a question.

For a project based learning unit, students can analyze exemplars, found by them or the teacher, so they can see what each target looks like in the context of their current work.

If students know what they have to accomplish, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning. Of course, on the way to their goals they'll probably take their work in directions that include their passions and interests (which may not be encompassed by academic standards). *Let them!* The nurturing of students supersedes the covering of curriculum.

4. Facilitate ongoing feedback

As students work towards their understandings, what they need perhaps more than anything else is feedback. In short, feedback tells us (1) where we are, (2) where we need to go (the understandings), and (3) how to get there. And, in a learning space, feedback generally takes on three forms: teacher to student, student to student, and student to self. While all of these are likely to occur at one point or another, to promote student agency we should mostly be aiming for *student to self*. But, we need to create the conditions for this type of feedback to be the norm.

To assist with this process, [Erin Murphy](#) and I rethought the traditional rubric from the ground up when we created the Progress Assessment Tool (PAT). The PAT contains three columns: left, learning targets to be assessed; middle, what each target could look like within the context of the project (through the aforementioned analysis of exemplars); right, where feedback is provided in relation to each target. Of course, ideally, much of this feedback is student to self, but teachers and other students should be able to help. Either way, if we want the emphasis to be on the learning, ongoing feedback (in the

absence of grades) is the answer.

(The PAT is detailed in Chapter 7 of "[Hacking Project Based Learning](#)," a chapter that is available for free in the "[Hack Learning Anthology](#)".)

5. Allow for Reflection and Publishing

We can facilitate additional self-feedback by organizing opportunities for students to reflect upon their work. One such opportunity could be time set aside for students to do nothing but analyze where they are in relation to the learning targets (without the burden of having to move forward with their project). We can further assist students by giving them reflective questions. Here are a few examples:

- What additional questions do you have about this topic?

- What strengths can you identify in your work?

- What are you most proud of?

- How could you improve your work?

- What would you do differently next time?

These are prompts from which we can look to gradually release students as they get used to owning their learning.

Finally, reflection and publishing can go hand-in-hand, and publishing (through blogs, websites, videos, social media, etc.) shouldn't just take place once everything is done. After all, when was the last time you were in the middle of a significant project and didn't post about it in some way, shape, or form? Sharing our experiences publicly is now considered a social norm, hence it should also be happening in our schools. Not only does this publishing help students to obtain audience feedback from those inside and outside their learning space, it also gives them opportunities to promote their

work, which can be tremendously self-motivating.

In the end

In "[Learning Transformed](#)," [Eric Sheninger](#) and [Tom Murray](#) tell us, "Student agency must become the norm, not the exception." And, I couldn't agree with them more.

In looking at the definition of learner agency, this is exactly how we learn as adults, and it is our duty to blur the lines between our schools and the real world.

Our students are now more aware than ever. They know whether or not they're getting the education they deserve. And they know when they're moving thousands of miles per hour outside our school walls, but *forced to adapt to our comfort level*s by moving at a snail's pace in our classrooms.

How else can we promote student agency?

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