

Building Blocks to Support Learner Agency

Key vocabulary to support noticing how students learn to learn

Learner agency is the set of skills, mindsets, and opportunities that enable learners to set purposeful goals for themselves, to take action in their learning to move toward those goals, and to reflect and adjust learning behaviors as they monitor their progress toward their goals. Learner agency requires an understanding of the learning process, a belief in one's abilities, opportunities to practice and demonstrate personal autonomy during learning, and the capacity to intentionally direct one's efforts to meet specific goals.

Students with a high sense of agency create rather than respond to educational opportunities. In the classroom, they ask for a say in how problems are solved, seek to add relevance during learning, and communicate their interest in learning. They act with intention by recommending goals or objectives, soliciting resources, identifying strategies, and seeking guidance when needed. Students with agency advocate for their learning and that of others, and actively support peers' learning by offering suggestions, reflecting on the learning process, asking questions, and engaging in rich dialogue.

Building Blocks in Support of Learner Agency

Metacognition is the ability to think about one's own thinking. Metacognitive students routinely seek out and engage with evidence to reflect on their current learning status, consider a range of learning approaches, understand different ways that they learn best and make conscious decisions to manage next steps in their learning.

Self-efficacy involves the beliefs students have about their ability to carry out tasks. Students with higher self-efficacy believe themselves to be capable of setting and accomplishing goals and are more likely to attempt and persist in unfamiliar tasks. Conversely, students with low-self-efficacy may demonstrate behavioral issues, exhibit a sense of helplessness or show signs of stress when faced with a challenging or unfamiliar learning task.

Self-regulation capabilities involve students having the ability to direct one's efforts towards specific goals. Self-regulating students set short and long-term goals, check progress towards those goals, manage their time, and develop positive learning strategies.

Learner autonomy describes the capacity and willingness to act independently *and* in cooperation with others, to support learning. Students with higher autonomy show greater control over how they plan and carry out learning tasks. Often misunderstood as an individualistic construct, autonomy goes beyond how an individual learns to include how students choose to engage in learning with peers, the teacher, or those in their extended network (mentors, coaches, or other adults) to deepen expertise.

Understanding the Synergistic Effects of the Building Blocks for Agency

The building blocks have a synergistic effect, reinforcing one another as agency develops over time. For example, developing students' metacognitive skills through daily routines that involve goal-setting and self-monitoring learning can, with the appropriate models and scaffolds, increase student motivation and feelings of self-efficacy. Similarly, increases in self-efficacy promote improved motivation and confidence, which strengthens student perseverance and increases positive learning behaviors such as seeking out help or reflecting on learning with peers.

Site leaders and teachers understand the building blocks, how they develop over time, and how these are explicitly taught in their buildings. Principals and teachers know how to leverage the critical relationships among behavior, motivation, self-efficacy, self-regulation and autonomy.

Instructional Approaches that are Designed to Support Learner Agency

A commonly held misperception is that agency is a fixed characteristic, either a student has it, or does not have it. The opposite is true - agency can and must be taught. Modeling and explicit teaching of the building blocks of agency are central tenets in *deeper learning* and *assessment for learning* practices, such as:

- Student demonstrations of learning
- Formative assessment
- Performance assessment
- Graduate profiles
- Personalized learning
- Student-led conferences
- Micro-badging
- Work study practices
- Student advisories

However, when these models are placed within traditional instructional routines that rely heavily on **teacher-instructs-students** approaches to learning, the opportunities to explicitly

model and teach the skills of agency are limited or absent. Developing these instructional approaches in ways that will support agency also involves addressing legacy systems (e.g., scripted curriculum, accountability-driven assessment practices) that encourage compliant behaviors and hinder opportunities for students to learn the foundational skills of agency.

Learning from Students

Students provide a window into understanding the landscape of agency. Asking students how they are learning, and what skills and knowledge they use to guide their own learning, is a routine practice in schools where students demonstrate greater agency in their learning. This is also a leadership practice. Leaders checking in with students may take different forms, such as identifying focal students to check in with, leading occasional student focus groups, or observing classrooms to notice how students express agency during learning.

A critical first step for leaders interested in deepening instruction to support agency is to understand the landscape of agency at their school. Listening to students describe their experiences as learners helps leaders gain a rich understanding of how individual students experience agency, where it is developed, and how it is being approached at your site.