

## Student Agency through Formative Assessment

### What do we mean by agency?

Agency involves students holding a vision for their own learning (the what and the how of it), determining where they are on the path towards that vision, and then carrying out sequential steps to get there. Students act with agency when they can make informed decisions about their own learning based on knowledge of their current learning status, an understanding how their knowledge and skills fit into a larger context (e.g., disciplinary and cultural schemas), and when they can locate their current learning along a progression (e.g., what they knew before and what they want to learn next).

Students do not do this all on their own. They need their community of peers to support them, to share their knowledge and experience, and to be thought partners. They need their teacher to provide a framework to guide their vision, to teach them the skills to advance their own and other's learning, and to give them feedback informed by deep content knowledge. When students act with agency, it is more than just showing up and completing assignments without being monitored. It goes beyond this to include students holding a mental model of the learning aligned with their teacher. It involves students taking initiative to move their learning forward, independently and collectively.

### How does formative assessment foster student agency?

In formative assessment, teachers move from being the keepers of assessment information to supporting students, themselves, to be active participants in noticing, interpreting, and using evidence to gauge where they are in their learning. Students learn to assess where they are in their learning through daily instructional routines, including co-constructing success criteria, peer feedback, academic discourse, and self-assessment. The teacher's role is to model, explicitly teach, and give feedback to students so that they develop the ability to accurately sense where they are in their learning through self-assessment, ongoing monitoring, and engaging in feedback conversations.

While some teachers try to support students to self-regulate their learning by sharing quantitative data with them from summative, standardized assessments (e.g., point totals and comparisons with other students) this often has the opposite effect of ranking and categorizing students, a process that may actually strip them of agency. It communicates to students that others are more adept at determining where they are in their learning than they are themselves, putting the ownership of "assessment rating" on the teacher, e.g., the teacher tells me what I know, rather than placing the ownership of assessment on the student, e.g., I'm aware of learning as a process and I can see myself in that process. During learning, it is more effective to teach students to make sense of the daily evidence they can glean from their own skills: listening, observing, discussing, and analyzing. When students can say: *this is where I am in my learning, this is how I know, and these are next steps I can take*, they have agency. They have the power of discernment through use of evidence. Formative assessment provides them with the inquiry cycle to do this.