



LEARNING POINT

What is learner agency?

Learner agency is a term that captures the important goal of students being active learners who can make choices and take actions to fully participate in their learning communities. Learners need opportunities to realize that they can make good things happen while they are in school; they need not wait until after graduation.

Learner agency is, therefore, a big idea of education that is achieved through everyday interactions, such as Assessment for Learning (AfL) or formative assessment practices, that set up routines and practices for lifelong learning.

Learner agency described

Learner agency isn't a word that is often used by teachers, yet it can feel familiar as it has some conceptual cousins.

Agency is like:

- *engagement* when students are investing in the learning tasks with all of their attention and positive emotion, asking questions, and making connections. Yet engagement focuses on the immediate learning now, whereas agency is when students take their capacity to learn and put it into action now and in the future.
- *autonomy*, but it is more than being able to do something just for oneself. Agency occurs within a learning community with its social norms and resources, and learn-

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ers can have different agentic capacities and roles in different communities. They may be highly autonomous and agentic in playing online games by organizing resources, teams, and strategies. Alternatively, they may have less opportunity to be autonomous, but still be agentic, as a member of a gym team where a coach establishes routines and norms and an agentic learner contributes by fitting in.

- *self-regulation*, as learners need to know themselves well, to plan and monitor their progress when they take action. Learner agency often involves taking action with others and knowing how to organize ways of acting together in collaborative activities.
- *active learning*, as agentic learners feel like they have power to take action and make things happen, but it has a more political overtone. Actions in school are often sanctioned by adults in authority who set up and approve

who has room to maneuver, or who has power to make decisions. Some student choices and actions get approval and momentum in the community, while other student choices get shut down.

Educational researchers have defined agency as “the ability to exert control over and give direction to one’s life” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 134). The challenge for students, and for teachers, is that in schools, control over learning and activity is often fully in the hands of the adults. Students can also be agentic in ways that are highly challenging to teachers (Harris, Brown & Dargusch, 2018). Learners also need access to materials and conceptual understandings in a discipline in order to take informed action (Cowie & Moreland, 2015). Learner agency in schools is, therefore, a bounded or situational type of agency, where the teacher shares power with students and designs opportunities to enhance agency.

A practical definition that can help teachers design learning for agency comes from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who propose that agency develops through the interplay of:

1. looking backwards to make connections to routines and learning habits,
2. experiences where students make practical judgements about their own and peers' current performance, and
3. imagining how what they are learning now connects them to a future that they can shape through their creativity and participation.

Assessment for Learning practices—which are embedded in our understanding of the formative assessment process—connect these ideas about learner agency with practical pedagogical strategies.

Assessment for Learning practices—pathways for agentic learners

These well-established Assessment for Learning practices can encourage students to develop agency.

- **Safe and supportive social relationships:** Students need to feel confident that they can contribute ideas, try out options, and make decisions. A classroom that welcomes dialogue will have a shared language of learning, and routines for collaboration and sharing of materials that make it safe for students to be agentic.
- **Working with exemplars:** When students can see examples of what quality performance looks like, and interrogate and compare them, they are able to visualize and articulate success criteria. Multiple examples help learners get a feel for quality and expand their example space. Agentic learners may propose new criteria or ways of representing ideas.
- **Learning intentions and success criteria:** Clarity around the learning goals, and how they connect to gether over time, can provide learners with a sense of control. When learning goals are negotiated and connected with personal

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interests or collected to show a narrative of learning over time, students can begin to recognize their strengths and gain confidence about their ability to make changes for themselves. They identify as someone who can make things happen. When success criteria can be demonstrated in multiple ways, students also can feel like they have choices in how they can best represent their understanding.

- **Peer then self-assessment:** An understanding of quality expectations from observing how peers talk about their work, or giving peers feedback on their work in progress, against the success criteria are both ways to help students develop agency. Not only do they quickly work out what appears to be effective, they also draw on that knowledge to self-evaluate what they might need to do to improve their own work. Self-assessment using rubrics can also help students gain increasing control over the quality of their work.
- **Questioning and feedback:** Participation through posing questions, along with recognizing and making choices through giving and receiving feedback, help to build a sense of confidence for learners.
- **Authentic assessment:** Real world assessment tasks and inquiries are a tangible way for learners to develop their agency, as they see themselves becoming more expert and belonging in the community of practice. Developing an identity—as a writer, a scientist, a community builder—can fuel the imagination of learners and provide momentum for learning. Importantly, teachers also need to leave space for students to be the experts (Willis, 2011).

Teachers who successfully focus on learner agency remain open to the unexpected possibilities that can emerge (Adie, Willis & Van der Kleij, 2018); maintain an attitude of mutual learning alongside students and colleagues; and advance an important outcome for a democratic education system.

In summary, helping students to develop agency can be an important step in helping them learn in the short term. Over the longer term, agency can help students to become more confident and productive life-long learners.

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The Michigan Assessment Consortium's Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI's professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan's professional educators.