Building Blocks to Support Learner Agency

Definitions and Key Constructs

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.

When exhibiting metacognition, students:	To support metacognition, teachers:
✓ Engage with evidence ✓ Reflect on their current learning status ✓ Communicate how they are thinking ✓ Use evidence to advance their learning	✓ Clarify learning goals and success criteria ✓ Plan and model think-aloud ✓ Provide structures for self-assessment

	✓ Explicitly model and teach self-assessment

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.

When exhibiting self-efficacy, students:	To support self-efficacy, teachers:
✓ Believe they can set and accomplish goals ✓ Utilize feedback to guide new learning. ✓ Persist when tasks are difficult.	✓ Use descriptive feedback, inquiry and questioning to guide student thinking. ✓ Have students make predications about how their abilities to complete tasks. ✓ Establish routines to build academic identities.

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.

When exhibiting self-regulation, students:	To support self-regulation, teachers:
✓ Use evidence to set goals to meet learning goals and success criteria. ✓ Use strategies to interpret evidence to monitor learning progress. ✓ Set short and long-term academic goals.	✓ Support students to understand the qualities of evidence that demonstrate progress towards the learning goal. ✓ Engage students in discussions about study habits, strategies and behaviors that sustain attention and improvement. ✓ Allow students to use a range of strategies that support attention control.

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.

When exhibiting learner autonomy, students:	To support learner autonomy, teachers:
✓ Express comfort working along and learning from peers ✓ Seek out peers as a learning resource ✓ Use feedback that supports their peers to deepen their learning	✓ Explore with students how they have used and benefitted from feedback ✓ Prioritize structures in which students can gather feedback from teachers and peers ✓ Use effective descriptive feedback (i.e., what the student did well, and hints/clues for next steps)

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 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.

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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, including formative assessment, graduate profiles, personalized learning, and student-led conferences.

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 Behaviors versus Learner Agency

Leaders benefit from having a precise definition of agency, one that clearly distinguishes the differences between agency and other types of learning behaviors that are important but are not evidence of agency. Varying misperceptions of agency may include, for example, being on time with assignments, showing up for class, correcting work based on feedback, or being motivated to get a good grade. Similarly, sometimes agency is confused with completing an assigned task independently or making a choice about how to engage in learning.

Students who demonstrate the skills of learner agency internalize the expected learning outcomes, understand the evidence of their current learning to accurately assess progress towards those outcomes, and make a plan to move their learning forward. In this way, students with agency are metacognitive, have skills to support self-regulation, and show confidence and motivation to move their learning forward.

Formative Assessment Strengthens the Skills of Agency

Formative assessment is a process through which students engage with daily routines and structures that help them internalize the learning outcomes, explore evidence of their own and

their peers' learning and conduct daily self-assessment to inform next steps in the learning process. Students learn and practice using the building blocks of agency only when teachers explicitly model and teach students to engage with evidence of learning while learning is underway, typically through academic discourse, peer feedback and self-assessment. For formative assessment to strengthen learner agency requires significant changes in instructional practice, as well as new roles for both students and teachers.

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 leadership practice of 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.