An MBE Take on Blended Learning

Part I - Student Agency

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What is Student Agency and Why Is it Important?

Visit any staff lounge or educator collaboration session, and you may hear educators discussing student agency and the importance of students being active participants in their own learning. Exactly what is meant by the term "student agency?" As stated in OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030, "there is no global consensus on the definition of "student agency" and the interpretation of this idea can be vastly different among different cultures." OECD continues that student agency is not a personality trait, and it is not a synonym for "student autonomy," "student voice," or "student choice." According to Renaissance EdWords, student agency is "learning through activities that are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated with appropriate guidance from teachers. To put it simply, student agency gives students voice and often, choice, in how they learn."

Research shows that an environment which supports student agency, with fidelity, can have profound effects on student learning. However, we must note that building student agency is a process that should develop and evolve throughout a lifetime, and this process must include feedback as well as metacognition and deep reflection on one's own learning. When implemented with fidelity and appropriate support, benefits of student agency include learners who are more motivated, have higher educational success, are self-directed and deeply engaged. Additionally, these students work harder, set higher goals, tend to have greater focus, more interest, and are less likely to give up.

We all want to develop and support students in their educational journey to become motivated, successful and engaged learners. We all want our students to be drivers in their own education and develop student agency. So what is the caveat? Student agency does not mean students can do what they want, when they want. Students of all ages require the appropriate structures and support to guide their learning. OECD states that "students need support from adults in order to exercise their agency and realize their potential." OECD further explains "certain methods teachers use in class may be more effective for some students than for others. When mathematics teachers let 15-year old students decide on their own procedures to solve a problem in class, or when they present problems in different contexts, not only do socio-economically advantaged students benefit more from these approaches than disadvantaged students do, but the approaches can have an adverse impact on disadvantaged students' performance. It is thus particularly important to ensure that

disadvantaged students receive adequate support when teachers use teaching strategies that call for student agency."

As educators, we want to support and cultivate student agency, develop learners who become drivers of their own learning, and develop the skills of goal setting, metacognition and deep reflection. In order to do this successfully, we must know our students well and provide the appropriate supports to allow freedom within boundaries. Students need to be held to high standards, be held accountable for the required curriculum and content, while also co-constructing learning experiences that allow them to have a voice in their own learning.

How Can We Cultivate Agency in Our Students?

We often hear that educators are looking to develop agency in their students and there are benefits to helping students drive their own learning processes. Agency is not something students do or do not have, it needs to be developed (Greeno, 2006). However, like many other things in the classroom, the adults will need to support this process. It will not occur without lots of modeling, scaffolding, and guiding students to develop agency for their learning.

As was recently shared by author Jim Heal at researchED US, "Many sins are committed under the guise of student agency." This refers to the idea that in the name of developing student agency educators often run the risk of unintended consequences. What exactly are the consequences that could arise and how do we avoid them and actually work towards student agency?

Choice, Choice, and More Choice, Not Always a Good Thing For Our Brain

Have you ever been to the Cheesecake Factory for a meal? Have you ever looked at their menu? If you haven't then this should summarize it in a nutshell, "*Over 250 items made from scratch daily.*" As educators we often look at choice as a positive approach to driving student agency and it is. But when does choice become like a Cheesecake Factory menu and cause us not to choose, even when there are some great choices available? Too many choices can cause decision fatigue, choice overload, and consume valuable cognitive resources for students.

Curate Instead

Choice will help students have agency and providing limited student choice is a great way to help them develop their agency. Curate those choices, offer them in a way that provides choice that doesn't seem overwhelming, and if a student shares they feel frozen by choice help them work through the options and help guide them to a choice that feels right for them.

It is important to provide choices that allow students to have some control but really push them to stretch themselves in areas they might need growth in. If a student always chooses to show their learning in a podcast, are they really stretching themselves as a learner? This is where the teacher would want to curate

some choices to help move them to develop areas where they have room for growth. Curate books, articles, ways to show their learning, that are directly aligned with the learning goals/targets or objectives and provide choices that feel right for their readiness. Teachers who are in tune with their student's readiness and areas for growth can really use curated choices to help students develop their agency.

Goals: Do They Know Where They Are Headed?

Goals are an important part of helping students to cultivate student agency, yet often we set students forth on a learning journey towards agency without helping them set learning goals.

Anindya Kundu, the author of *The Power of Student Agency*, shares that he thinks it is important, "*to have students set goals for themselves at the beginning of class or the beginning of a unit, and then check in with them about how they are doing in terms of meeting their own goals. So then again, they're in the driver's seat, this kind of Venn diagram between autonomy and goals. And then what the teacher can do is support that from a standpoint that is warm but also demanding. If you've had your students set their own goals, you can feel the onus of making sure that they're living up to them because they're the ones who set them in the first place*."

Goals that are smaller and short term allow for those small wins students need to motivate them to continue and work toward larger goals that are further down the road. While working towards those goals, provide plenty of opportunities for students to engage in reflective practice possibly by having them maintain a learning journal to capture their progress towards their goal. This will help to practice metacognition and get them to deeply think about what they have learned and help them to consider where they are headed next for their learning.

If you would like to do a deeper dive into how to work with students in the area of goal setting, take some time to explore this blog post on getting goal setting right from Innerdrive.

Resource Document