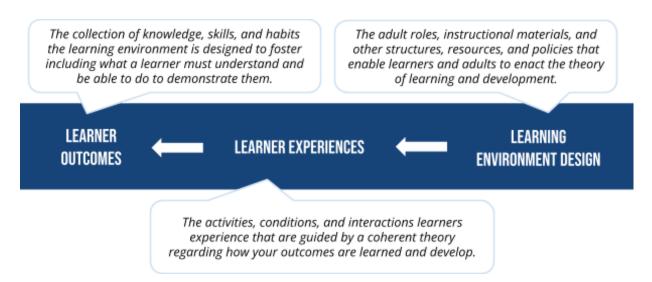# AGENCY

Updated 2018

Transcend

INTRODUCTION

Whether you are designing a completely new school model or updating your approach as part of ongoing efforts to learn and improve, identifying the outcomes that learners will achieve as a result of their time with you is an important starting point. We created the *Graduate Aims Database* to help you along this journey. The information in it is guided by the simple premise that achieving any given set of graduate aims can be best accomplished by deeply understanding what the aims entail, defining a theory regarding the learner experiences that will best foster the development of these aims, and then designing a learning environment to support these experiences. This is shown in the diagram below.

In response to this premise, we've organized each entry in the Database into the following sections:

- **MEANING & MEASUREMENT** - Includes a synthesized definition for the outcome based on a variety of definitions from research, look fors and specific example behaviors to help understand what the outcome means, and research-based measurement tools.
- **LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT** - Contains information on other constructs the outcome is related to, general information on how the outcome develops over time, insights on the experiences learners should have to help foster the outcome, and research-based tools or interventions to support development.
- **DESIGN IMPLICATIONS** - Lists a variety of possible implications for school design related to the roles of adults; curriculum and assessment; and other structures, resources, and policies.

A final section includes an abbreviated list of recommended readings to enhance your understanding of the aim as well as a full list of citations.

One final note, this resource is largely based on peer-reviewed academic research. However, at times we've made inferences to provide additional illustration. When we did this, we indicated it with an asterisk (*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

More and more schools are beginning to view agency as both a critical element of the student experience, as well as an essential outcome of it. This is because agency—which is also often called *self-direction, autonomy, or voice,* among other things—supports life-long motivation and learning and is a critical competency for the evolving 21st century workplace. The concept of agency can be difficult for both learners and adults to understand and measure. However, researchers recently began parsing out specific ways that agency is demonstrated by learners, in both academic and non-academic contexts and while there are few assessments of agency, many of the tools available are helpful in that they speak to these specific behaviors agentic learners would display and are applicable across the developmental spectrum.

Some research-based definitions include...

- Agency is a person's capacity and propensity to formulate intentions and take initiative to achieve them (Transforming Education & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017).
- The ability to make intentional choices about and take an active role in the course of one's own learning (GripTape).
- The satisfying power to make our own decisions and choices, take meaningful action, and see the results in our own development and learning (Cushman & Baron, 2017).
- Being in command oneself, moving towards one's own goals (Bolhuis, 2003).
- To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions (Bandura, 2001).

Synthesized Definition

Ability to clarify one's intentions and goals, identify necessary actions to achieve those goals, and use available resources to accomplish them.

Look Fors *Someone with agency will...*	Example Learner Behaviors *A learner may show this by, for example...*
Plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor, and self-evaluate **[8, 10]**	- Creating a study plan for a final exam that includes how much time per day they will study per subject, reviewing past quizzes and tests to pinpoint knowledge gaps, and testing themselves to see if they know the content.*
Seek the support and resources needed to accomplish goals from others (Reeve & Tseng, 2011)	- Arriving early or leaving late from school in order to get extra help on assignments * - Visiting the guidance counselor's office for advice* - Asking to visit the local library when the school library does not contain sufficient information on a research topic* - Meeting with mentors and peers to gather feedback on their work*

Share their ideas and opinions (Reeve & Tseng, 2011)	• Contributing to class discussion • Making suggestions to adults about changes in their school community* • Challenging the argument of peer or teacher during a classroom discussion*
Explore their interests independently (Reeve & Tseng, 2011)	• Asking for the opportunity to choose their own topics of research for assignments* • Visiting a museum to learn more about a topic of interest* • Borrowing books or read articles about a leader they admire* • Signing up for a club or a class to learn a new skill* • Trying out for a sports team or extra-curricular activity*
Seek involvement in decision-making processes (Reeve & Tseng, 2011)	• Running for learner council or sit on a learner-led committee* • Attending school department or city council meetings to advocate for an important issue* • Participating in their family-teacher conferences or IEP/504 meetings*
Display extraordinary effort and persistence during learning (Zimmerman, 1990)	• A student who is having difficulty mastering geometric proofs stays after school to ask for additional help and asks the teacher for additional problem to practice on their own.* • When receiving an excellent grade, student attributes the outcome to the successful deployment of strategies and hard work, not luck or natural ability.*

Tools for Measurement
Agency can be assessed with evidence from the…

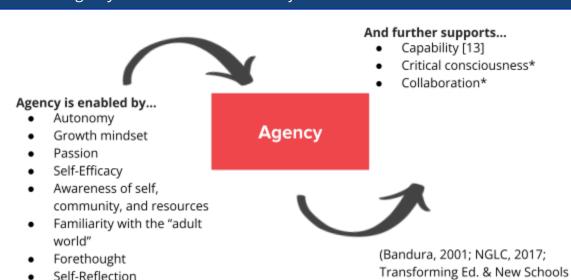|	
Agentic Engagement Scale 🔗	This assessment is a 5-item self-reported measurement of agentic engagement. This assessment was originally tested along with three other self-reported measures of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The researchers who developed the tool argue that agentic engagement should be seen as the fourth domain of learner engagement. Namely, the tool asks learners to report their willingness to ask questions and share their opinions, viewing these behaviors as indicators of agency (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).
New Tech Networks Agency Rubrics 🔗	The New Tech Network has four agency rubrics for learners in grade 2, grade 5, middle school, and high school. The rubrics allow adults to clearly assess learners' growth mindset and agency with developmentally appropriate criteria.
Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale 🔗	The SDLRS is a self-report questionnaire with Likert-type items developed by Dr. Lucy M. Guglielmino in l977. It is designed to measure the complex of attitudes, skills, and characteristics that comprise an individual's current level of readiness to manage his or her own learning.
Self-Rating Scale of Self-Directed Learning 🔗	This self-report or self-assessment scale asks students to reflect on four areas of self-directions through ~60 questions. These areas include: awareness, learning strategies, learning activities, and evaluation (Williamson, 2007).

The concept of "readiness" can often be a barrier to adults providing learners with opportunities for agency (Farrington et al., 2017). The fear is that giving learners the freedom to make decisions about their own learning will lead to chaos or confusion. However, there are concrete characteristics that adults can build and reinforce to enable learners' development of agency. New research has also identified developmental milestones across the spectrum of childhood and adolescence that can be helpful for adults worried about learners' ability to handle certain experiences of agency.

Related Constructs
Agency is related to a number of other constructs and outcomes...

And further supports...
- Capability [13]
- Critical consciousness*
- Collaboration*

Agency is enabled by...
- Autonomy
- Growth mindset
- Passion
- Self-Efficacy
- Awareness of self, community, and resources
- Familiarity with the "adult world"
- Forethought
- Self-Reflection

Agency

(Bandura, 2001; NGLC, 2017; Transforming Ed. & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017; GripTape)

Developmental Progression
Learners are likely to learn and do the following at different stages of agency development...

Early Childhood (Ages 0 - 4)	Middle Childhood (Ages 5-9)	Early Adolescence (7– 12)	Late Adolescence (10–15)
Decision-making based on individual preference. Awareness of ability to initiate and carry out plans and activities.	Understanding of ability to learn and execute a skill or activity that holds value to others.	Awareness of self as it relates to a larger group. Emerging ability to negotiate a balance between self and a role in a group.	Deepening understanding of self and clarification of personal values. Evaluation of goals for adulthood.

Developmental Learner Experiences	
In order to develop agency learners should…	
Experience genuine opportunities to develop the skills necessary to express agency.	Agency is not a quality that adults can transmit to learners. Instead, agency is developed in collaboration with adults in a structured environment with scaffolded opportunities to practice agency (Rikard, 2015; GripTape). These opportunities for learners to be in control must be both genuine--adults have to discard the typical "banking" model of learning and allow learners to take the reins--and valuable--learners must feel connected to the process and outcome (Bolhuis, 2003; GripTape).
Collaborate with adults and peers who provide support through encouragement, structure, and resources.	Adults often choose not to provide learners with opportunities to express their agency for fear that they are not ready for the responsibility. However, agency is a collaborative process where learners should work with their peers and adults to develop and practice the skills necessary to take ownership for their learning (Bolhuis, 2003; Bandura, 2006; Rikard, 2015). Adults can provide social and emotional support to learners by encouraging a growth mindset, self-awareness, and reflection (Transforming Education & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017). They can also ensure that an environment is structured and creates a sense of safety and predictability for learners (Bolhuis, 2003; GripTape). Lastly, adults should equip learners with the necessary material resources and support to express their agency (Transforming Ed. & New Schools Venture Fund, 2017; GripTape).
Experience structures that hold learners accountable for their choices and finished product.	Once learners have begun to make autonomous choices, members of the community--adults and peers--should support by providing feedback. This feedback should focus both on their decision-making process and their inevitable product, thereby reinforcing strong habits of work and making the standards and objectives of the task explicit (Sturgis, 2015). Receiving constructive and public feedback encourages learners to take ownership of their product and feel accountable to their community for producing something useful and thoughtful. Learners are then left with the task of choosing how to incorporate feedback to improve their work, further developing agency (Cushman & Baron, 2017).
A school culture that promotes self-direction	Traditional educational settings have focused on passive learning environments. Students who are accustomed to teacher-led instruction will need to adapt in a school environment that prioritizes self-directed learning. Having a school culture that promotes self-direction by establishing it as school-wide priority across grade levels and subject areas helps students learn how to become self-directed learners (Martizens & McGrath, 2013).
Direct instruction on learning strategies that are required to become a self-directed learner	Since most students have probably received their education in a teacher driven model, new skills such as goal setting, organization, and reflection skills such as self-monitoring, and self-evaluation need to be explicitly taught (Martizens & McGrath, 2013).

Complex projects and assignments	Completing complex projects and assignments teaches students that learning requires long-term effort and that they must persevere until they have done high-quality work and can reflect on their growth as well as challenges (Martizens & McGrath, 2013).
Opportunities to seek feedback, revise work, and reflect on what they've learned	By going through a continual cycle of feedback and revision, students discover that learning requires consistent effort and self-direction (Martizens & McGrath, 2013).

Tools for Development	
Agency may be developed with assistance from...	
Agency by Design 🔗	Agency by Design is a research initiative focused on maker-learning and using maker learning as an approach to building agency. It focused on learning through inquiry cycles.
Learning Through Reflection 🔗	This framework outlines multiple modalities for reflection that encourage learners to refine their expression of agency. It includes examples of journals, fieldwork logs, and feedback exercises with learners as young as elementary school internalize.

Something to Think About

Agency with Adult Support

Giving learners the space to be agents does not mean there is no adult involvement or accountability. Adults must strike the delicate balance between providing freedom and opportunity to express agency and providing structure and direction (Sturgis, 2015). Agency cannot also be seen as something adults can give and/or take away (Rikard, 2016; Farrington et. al, 2017). While the opportunities for agency should be scaffolded, they should not be limited to one moment or one context (Rikard, 2016; GripTape). If learners are not given real, thoughtful opportunities to express agency, they will not feel in control, thus leading to learned helplessness (Bolhuis, 2003). Creating an environment where learners feel supported as agents requires a shift in mindset among students, teachers, and institutions (Morrison, 2018).

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS
How can the design of the learning environment support agency?

Many different pieces come together within learning environments to support the healthy development of learners. These include the roles of adults; the curriculum and assessment tools used; and other structures, resources, and policies that help the environment operate. The developmental experiences listed in the previous section suggest a number of implications for how each of these pieces could be designed to support the growth of agency. Some of these implications are listed in the tables below.

Possible Implications for Adult Roles
Adults who are part of the learning environment should…

- Prompt learners to reflect independently on both the process and result of an assignment or choice*
- Interview or facilitate interviews of learners to encourage open reflection and feedback*
- Give learners options for how they demonstrate their learning*
- Allow learners to diverge from their peers to explore a unique idea*
- Develop learner committees or groups that make decisions for the school*
- Create democratic processes within the classroom to address culture and behavior*

Possible Implications for Curriculum and Assessment
The curriculum and assessment tools should…

- Prioritize different modes of reflection after each assignment or project is complete*
- Encourage learner input through development of electives or intensive courses*
- Facilitate group work and incorporates many choices*

Possible Implications for Structures, Resources, and Policies
The design of the learning environment should…

- Sustain learners' ability to conduct long-term projects and experiments
- Include time for learners to complete, practice, and deliver presentations of their work to the community

Recommended Reading

Student Agency is Not Something You Give or Take 🔗	An undergraduate learner, Andrew Riker, shares his thoughts about how adults can support learners in the development of agency. He emphasizes collaboration and trust and encourages educators to step back and let learners take the reins.
The Art and Science of Developing Student Agency 🔗	The authors, Kathleen Cushman and Wendy Baron, profile a science teacher who builds learner choice into his curriculum to foster agency. In his class, learners are able to exercise control over their learning and are held accountable by the larger community for producing quality work.
The Danger of Silence (Video) 🔗	Poet and educator Clint Smith discusses the importance of empowering learners to share their voices in the classroom. He encourages educators to challenge learners to use their voices for justice, even if it may be easier to remain silent.
Defining Agency 🔗	Together, Transforming Education and New School Venture Fund have created a resource that provides a broad overview of learner agency. The resource both defines agency and provides insight into related constructs and development.
Student Agency: How Can Learning Environments Foster Student Agency? 🔗	The resource presents videos, transcripts, and key themes from two roundtable discussions Transcend held with adults and learners.
GripTape Framework for Facilitating the Emergence of Learner Agency 🔗	The GripTape Agency Framework begins "with the assumption that youth are capable of leading, and through our learning, hope to understand how best to insert resources, people, and capital in ways that do not reduce the emergence of learner agency." It details the contextual and internal factors that support and encourage agency in learners. The framework identifies related constructs, like growth mindset, and defines each construct as it relates to agency.

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