

FOR THE IB
PROGRAMMES

Agency

Learners in charge

Teaching for Success

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 **HODDER**
EDUCATION

CHAPTER 1

What is agency?

IN A NUTSHELL

- Teaching has traditionally been very teacher-led. Even in student-centred approaches students' perspectives can be overlooked, and they can be very dependent on their teachers for organizing their learning.
- The concept of agency helps us to better focus on how students can increasingly determine and drive their own learning.
- We use agency to look at students' self-efficacy – their ability to be autonomous, to organize and carry out courses of action to attain their own goals.
- This extends across three interconnected aspects: voice, choice and ownership.
- Agency has huge implications for how we develop our school community, communication and interaction, and the professional development of our staff.
- To help show agency as a continuum, I introduce four levels of agency which I will develop for voice, choice and ownership in the following chapters.

Agency

Students develop agency as they learn to run their own lives and take charge of their own learning. Agency grows when they talk about their learning and their lives in ways that are meaningful to them. We see their agency when they are involved in decisions about what and how to learn, so that *their* school is about *their* learning. This is quite a contrast to traditional schooling, where students are recipients of learning that is laid out by the teacher under the assumption that responsible professionals organize almost everything for the students. Perhaps some of the following scenarios are familiar to you.

■ Scenario 1: Copy and recall

Now, boys and girls, copy down the sentences on the board and write them out ten times.

I hope that this is only familiar as a history lesson, a stereotype from when learning was dominated by a narrow model of teacher-centred transmission. It harks back to a previous age, before the exciting, modern world of photocopiers, countless worksheets and glorious electronic devices. We think back to when students were seen as passive receptacles of teaching and were drilled until they learned something or gave up. We can be happy – smug even – that we have moved well beyond such outdated and ineffective lessons.

■ Scenario 2: PowerPoint

Technology now provides a much more attractive 'glossy' approach to information transmission. Many of us are familiar with the 'death by PowerPoint™' lesson, where information is shown between impeccable transitions, with colourful pictures, and sometimes, if we are lucky, engaging animations.

Thinking about agency makes us focus more on the students' role. They still often watch and listen, waiting to be guided step-by-step about what to write. We can make it seem slightly more modern by calling it 'concept-based' and flashing definitions of big ideas on the whiteboard for students to copy without really understanding them, but their role only changes slightly. When we provide adult language definitions of abstract notions such as 'connections' and 'causation', we have to be careful in case biddable students repeat them back to us without thinking through for themselves what they mean. Students can seem to have become thinkers, if we do not think too hard about it, because they repeat our 'educated' voice rather than developing one of their own.

Agency helps by focusing on the students themselves, their thinking and their roles. When we listen attentively to students' voices, we start to hear when too much is just echoed back from adults rather than what they are genuinely thinking through. When they only have passive roles, they do not take any significant decisions.

■ Scenario 3: Teachers' assessment

We can also reduce agency in much subtler ways:

I've noticed from your last assessment that you need to improve your tables recall/paragraph structure/spelling/biology diagrams. (Select whatever is most relevant to your own teaching.) Practice like I told you and I will test you again at the end of the week.

This seems much better. It is apparently informed by data, but these students are still receiving the teacher's plan uncritically. They are being processed. Agency helps recognize this by putting a spotlight on how students are thinking, evaluating, creating and inferring for themselves – how much they are true IB learners.

■ Change of emphasis onto learning

Agency is a change from looking at teaching. Instead, it looks at what each student learns to do for themselves, throughout the learning process.

In the past our schools have catered mostly for groups of learners, for classes of kids, with a one-size-fits-all approach. Arguably, many students felt disenfranchised in the midst of that, as they just had to sit and do what they were told. Lessons were delivered to students who were passive in the way that they received that.

core-ed.org/research-and-innovation/ten-trends/2014/learner-agency/
(Accessed 14 June 2019)

It is not that we have failed to make learning active and engaging. It is just that busy learning does not in itself ensure that students are developing their voices to the full; making increasingly informed choices; owning their learning.

It can be tempting to look at early learners busily playing together, or primary children concentrating, or secondary students studying hard to learn content, and say that they are getting everything that they need. However, our goals should go beyond students being busy and engaged. Some students are particularly happy when they are busy and do not have to think for themselves! The role of the students in their thinking, the choices and the decisions they make, is just as important.

The real test of engagement is not in being happily busy, but in having a drive to be a learner, and in gradually taking over all the aspects of learning until you can learn independently, in school and throughout the rest of your life. Agency requires more than a 'hands on' classroom where students can be physically active, but mentally dependent on teachers. Agency requires a 'hands on – and think it through for yourself' classroom.

Applying the 'used to think/now we think' routine from Visible Thinking, we used to think that active learning was sufficient to have students become lifelong learners, but now we think that they need to become agents in charge of their own learning. You can read more about Visible Thinking on their website: www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking_html_files/VisibleThinking1.html.

■ Scenario 4: Science

I have seen countless science experiments, even in IB schools, when the students are given materials, a set of instructions to follow and a table to fill in. Because it is an IB school, they may have a 'prediction' to write and then perhaps forget, and a conclusion to write, which is sometimes even dictated so that students get the perfect notes they 'need'.

Agency helps us turn around our approach so that experiments become a way for students to think through concepts for themselves. Young learners might be seeing for themselves how mud can become sticky. Chemistry students might think through for themselves the possible structures of ozone (O_3) and how to explain them, or work out how to design an experiment that tests for energy changes from one form to another. It helps ensure that they are authentically involved in making choices, explaining their thinking and designing experiments.

This takes much longer. It needs a high level of expertise and engagement from teachers, who have to follow and guide students' thinking carefully. However, agency is worth all the hard work! It provides students with the deepest possible learning – and also develops the skills needed to excel in Diploma Programme (DP) internal assessments – so it is best to start as early as possible.

■ Great examples

There are great examples at all age groups of IB learners taking control of their learning, from very young students selecting activities and challenging themselves every day, to Diploma students organizing their own Creative, Activity, Service (CAS) activities or Extended Essays (EE). To see how this works, and to make this situation the norm, we need to look at the decisions students make and the skills and habits they are developing that will sustain their own learning. We need to see how much of the learning came from the teachers, and how much from the students themselves.

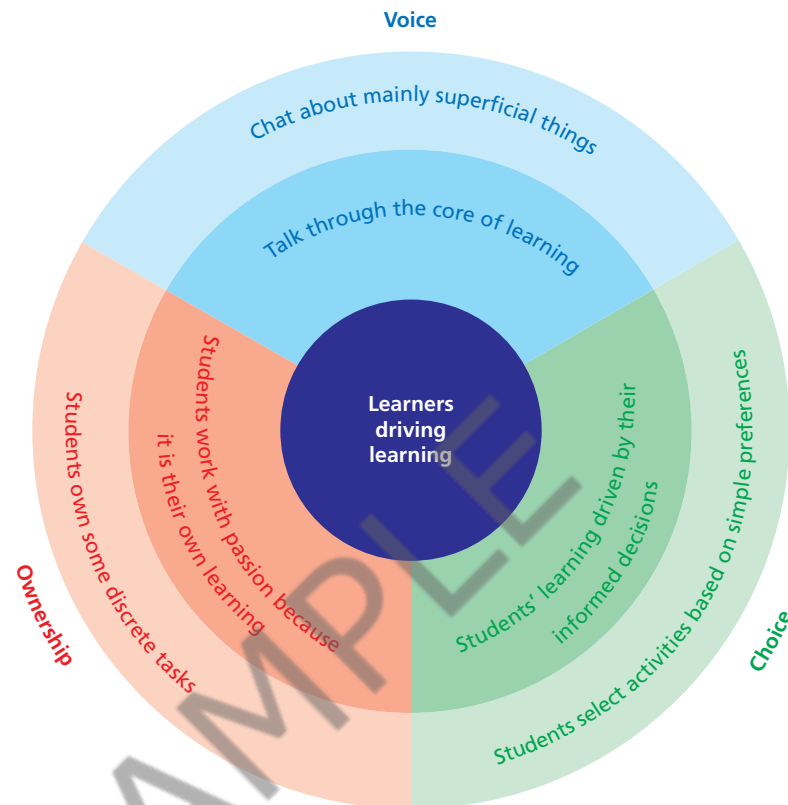
■ What is agency?

This takes us to a closer look at the definitions of agency. In the social sciences it can be:

- an actor's ability to initiate, plan and maintain a programme of action, or
- an actor's ability to act independently (Campbell, 2009).

We need to examine the different aspects of students taking control, and agency provides a set of ideas in how to do this. A key term here is *self-efficacy* – the ability to be autonomous, to organize and carry out courses of action to attain desired goals (Bandura, 1997). We can see education as the process by which students develop their abilities to think and act for themselves in a variety of powerful ways, across the curriculum and applied to practical situations.

Since we will look at agency mainly from an IB point of view, we will now look at the IB's approach to agency, which helps identify its key features.



A cross-section of how agency is driven by voice, choice and ownership.

■ Agency in the IB

Agency has formally been part of the IB Primary Year Programme (PYP) since October 2018. However, all IB programmes have had student agency since the founding of the DP in 1968, when it went beyond simply providing an internationally recognized university admissions qualification for mobile young people. The IB has always had high aspirations for developing mature young people with the personal and mental qualities to act as responsible global citizens. The start of the IB Diploma has included three core elements (Hill & Saxton, 2014), which all develop students' agency:

- In the Extended Essay students develop and follow their own lines of research.
- In Theory of Knowledge (TOK) they study multiple perspectives about knowledge and develop awareness and agency over their own thinking.



Students engaging in service in the community develop self-efficacy.

- As part of CAS, students engage in service where they make decisions and are responsible to a breadth of physical, creative and social engagements. CAS should never, of course, be about counting service hours. At its best it has always been about developing responsible students with self-efficacy.

■ Enhancing the role of agency

In the enhanced PYP, launched in October 2018, agency now plays a key role. It is likely to have a similarly explicit role in the other IB programmes in the future; it is emerging as a major organizing theme. Since the enhanced PYP was launched, every IB school that I visit says that ‘agency’ is the new element that makes the most difference, and that it is relevant across all their programmes. However, there is still a huge variety in what agency looks like in different schools, with different schools having different insights, as we learn together how best to use the concept of agency to develop our students.

■ The three aspects

As part of the extended PYP, the IB identifies key aspects of agency (IBO, 2017).

Agency is the power to take meaningful and intentional action, and acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of the individual, supporting voice, choice and ownership for everyone in the learning community.

IBO, 2017

Voice, choice and ownership are all expanded in the coming chapters (specifically Chapters 2, 3 and 4), but here's a very brief overview.

■ Voice

Voice provides students with the ability to express themselves and be heard. It emphasizes learning from a students' point of view. They talk and listen meaningfully about themselves, their learning and their learning community.

Voice is relevant for all ages: young learners are beginning to express themselves outside the home, while adolescents need to spend time developing their abilities and sense of self. All adults in school need a voice to be fully part of the community.

■ Choice

Choice can be much more than making a simple option within an activity. For students to make good choices, they need to develop their metacognition and self-regulation. They need to be aware of their learning journeys and be involved in setting and monitoring their next steps. This helps them make informed decisions about their learning. This is vital for having truly effective differentiation, which rarely works smoothly and consistently with only the teacher making choices. Well-developed choice also leads to thoughtful action, which is more likely to be initiated by learners the more they are used to making important choices.

■ Ownership

Students are more motivated and successful when they have control over their learning and when the learning is connected to their interests. They understand school as *their* community which sustains *their* learning. Ownership increases as their voices are heard and their choices are respected.

For students to become self-directed learners who own their learning, they need to share the responsibility for their learning. Responsibility needs some student empowerment which is grounded in shared values and purpose, so a well-functioning learning community plays a central role.

Owning their learning helps students become citizens in charge of their lives and, if we have done our job properly, citizens who are internationally-minded and own their responsibility to act ethically.

Aspects of agency

Voice

- Communicate
- Self-advocate
- Include all voices – equity and international

Choice

- Students making decisions about their learning
- Using metacognition
- Setting goals and selecting strategies

Ownership

- Identity as agent in each subject
- Shared responsibility
- Shared ownership of the learning space

Communities for agency

Culture of respect, positive relationships

Teacher roles

- Executive
- Setting direction and providing provocations
- Planning for students to plan for themselves

Student roles

- Becoming self-sufficient
- Discussing and debating ideas – with each other, not just through teacher
- Self-management and executive functions

The three aspects of agency and the two communities for agency.

■ Different levels of agency

Students cannot get to the deepest level of agency straight away. That is normal – and quite okay. Agency should not be seen as an intimidating and unrealistic learning utopia, but a progression from low agency to high agency through which both students and adults move.

I therefore suggest various levels of agency for each dimension of voice, choice and ownership. These approaches are not meant to be definitive, but to present some of the dimensions along which students, and other learners, develop.

I encourage readers to develop their own rubrics to match their circumstances.

■ Level 0: No agency

The teacher decides everything. Students follow and demonstrate successful compliance. They may be successful in narrowly-focused assessments, but they do not develop agency and are not prepared to organize their own learning in later education or in life.

■ Level 1: Apprentice

Students are getting started on agency. They are learning to use their voice, making relevant choices about their learning, and have some sense of ownership.

■ Level 2: Capable

Students are working effectively on their own learning.

■ Level 3: Accomplished

Students are agentic learners with a mature approach.

■ Level 4: Exemplary

Students are doing something extraordinary. Perhaps they are taking charge of extended projects, where they think critically and sustain their own work, or perhaps they are combining many aspects of agency. They are certainly well-prepared for life's great challenges.

CHAPTER 7

IB, agency and skills for learning

IN A NUTSHELL

- IB students have played an active role in their own learning since the beginning of the Diploma Programme in the 1960s. As other programmes developed, they shared this vision of active and responsible learners, but with features adapted to the different age groups.
- Each programme has significant opportunities for extended agency, through the Exhibition of the PYP, the Personal Project and community projects of the MYP and across the core of the CP and DP.
- These opportunities work particularly well when students have experienced challenges with extended agency beforehand, for example, through mini-exhibitions in earlier grades of the PYP and meaningful projects as part of MYP units.
- Approaches to Learning (ATL) help students manage their own learning and master the broad range of the twenty-first-century skills mentioned in Chapter 6.
- Now that the role of ATL has been clarified as a continuum across all IB programmes, it provides an important way of embedding voice, choice and ownership across them.

Agency from the start of the Diploma

The Diploma Programme developed students' agency from the outset, even before the term itself was coined. In fact, one of the main advantages of the DP is that it prepares students so well for their subsequent education and work precisely because it develops their agency.

IB students are clearly successful. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) compared IB students with matched A-level students and found that the IB students were more successful in several ways: they were more likely to be admitted to the top 20 universities, and more likely to achieve a first class degree; they were likely to study a STEM subject; in addition, a higher proportion of IB students went on to further study after they finished their degrees (www.ibo.org/research/outcomes-research/diploma-studies/).

IB Diploma students seem to learn well and sustain their learning well beyond high school. What makes the difference? Most IB classes spend a considerable amount of time with students learning to organize their own inquiries, and reflect on and communicate their conclusions in a variety of ways. Even when course teachers have little background in constructivism, students will still develop content as well as the comparable students studying for A-levels. Their agency is amplified through how many internal assessments are organized. Their learning is constructed so that they become articulate and independent thinkers as they reason about subject matter. This is especially true across the programme. It is particularly strong in the DP core, which encourages students to take ownership of key elements of their learning.

■ Demonstrating agency in specific subjects

In the Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course, students take ownership of reasoning. As they learn about the different kinds of knowledge and the ways that knowledge claims are made, they can decode other voices and they develop their own logical voice. TOK classes involve lively dialogue in which students can take ownership of critical thinking. Typically for DP courses, students have to develop their own presentations and their own essays, which show how they can address important ideas.

The Extended Essay makes a huge contribution to how students take ownership of their studies, and their preparation for university-level independent work. They are mentored through making a sophisticated choice, as they select a topic and then draft and pin down their research question. Students are not spoon fed. They refine their own ideas and filter evidence. They construct their own outline and are responsible for writing and polishing a lengthy essay.

Students do as much as they can for themselves – with scaffolding from a supervisor and the school, giving them an experience of taking ownership of critical thinking and research that prepares them well for university study; especially compared to other students who can be pushed through exams by micromanaging how they tackle one question type after another.

The third part of the DP core is also full of agency. Students self-manage creative work, physical activity and service which addresses an authentic need. They extend their agency as they reflect on how successful their approaches are, using outcomes that show how effective their choices and ownership were. The CAS outcomes are all about increasing agency (IBO, 2017).

1 Identify your own strengths and develop areas for personal growth.

When students understand more about their skills and abilities, and how they learn, they can make better choices throughout their studies and their lives.

2 Demonstrate that challenges have been undertaken, developing new skills in the process.

Students take ownership of their learning when they have to show for themselves how new challenges have led to new learning.

3 Demonstrate how to initiate and plan a CAS experience.

Their ownership goes back to initiating and actively planning what they do – agentic students cannot be passive followers who produce good work only because someone else says how to do it.

4 Show commitment to and perseverance in CAS experiences.

A huge amount of agency is the ability to successfully carry something through when it is difficult. Agency in easy things is not so much of a challenge! When students learn to carry things through in difficult circumstances, they can be agents throughout life. There is nothing wrong with letting things be quite difficult for your students. It may seem hard to add CAS demands on top of all the other pressures of the programme, but it turns out very resilient students. They might not like it now, but it will make them more successful later in life.

5 Demonstrate the skills and recognize the benefits of working collaboratively.

Students increase their agency when they work well with others. As you will see in Chapter 11, communities help agency thrive. CAS students reflect on how their work is enhanced by working with others and so understand better how much more of an impact they can have as part of a team.

6 Demonstrate engagement with issues of global significance.

Students' agency needs to matter. There is little point affecting something completely insignificant. If you can only deal with trivia, you have trivial agency. As students learn how to approach and affect important issues, they become more powerful and more relevant to the world beyond the classroom.

7 Recognize and consider the ethics of choices and actions.

Agency has responsibility. When you develop agency, you should be accountable for the impact of what you change.

All seven aspects are important for the kind of student the IB promotes, so all need to be present in an IB student's CAS work.

IB students also have the benefits and pressures of a wide range of internal assessments (IAs). They cannot have the luxury of going passively through their courses and then cramming for exams near the end. Neither can IB students rely on finely honing exam technique and then regurgitating someone else's ideas. They develop their voice through oral presentations and commentaries. They have to design and carry out science experiments. They need to undertake their own mathematics investigations. They may engage with a real-life business problem. In geography they have to go out and do fieldwork. If they do arts they have to develop performances or an exhibition with their voice and rationale as artists. In short, IB students have to be active in the field of every subject that they study.

Compare this experience with a student in a performance-oriented A-level school, who is carefully monitored and tracked to squeeze out all possible marks. Not only do they have little agency, but even their teachers have little agency, as much of their work is determined by the syllabus and mark scheme. Much of the tracking does not typically focus on students learning to take charge of their major strengths and weaknesses, but tells them which gaps to fill. They can be well prepared for a few hours in an exam hall, but they may not necessarily develop the wider range of skills they will need for life.

■ Across the continuum

As the other IB programmes were added, they took into account the special characteristics of each age group. The youngest students learn more through play. Because primary years teachers usually work across several subjects, they can work more freely across subjects and provide extended time for large Units of Inquiry. The MYP addresses the needs of adolescents, who have a solid grounding from the PYP. They are ready for challenging work across the eight subject groups, attacking challenging projects and undertaking action and service more formally. It supports an age group that can be even more obsessed with identity and peers than others. The DP and CP have to be constructed to prepare students thoroughly for many after-school pathways, with specific needs. Therefore they each have special features that they gain.

■ Career-related Programme (CP) – agency for careers

The Career-related Programme (CP) has always had a focus on agency through Approaches to Learning (ATL) skills and the core. ATL has always had a special place in the CP. It was originally thoroughly developed as a discrete course and it is now extended by integrating it across the programme. Just as DP students develop agency as researchers in the Extended Essay, students carrying out their Reflective Project have to take significant responsibility for an extended piece of work for which they take as much ownership as possible. They also take ownership of Service Learning, similar to CAS in the DP mentioned earlier.

A more unique aspect of the CP is the development of personal and professional skills. This has a practical approach that develops the students' capacity to take responsibility for themselves, their studies and their work, including practical problem solving, as well as ethics, thinking skills and self-management. Along with language skills, and the academics of the Diploma courses, it prepares students with the self-direction needed for agency and success.

■ Middle Years Programme (MYP)

MYP students are at a key time in their development. They can focus on their sense of themselves and how they can take charge of different aspects of their lives. As students enter adolescence, they can take on more extended self-regulation skills. Their frontal cortex is developing, so they are starting to use its executive functions, but only with suitable scaffolding and support. They are better able to set and manage goals, manage time and self-evaluate, provided that they have opportunities to do so.

Since its beginning, the MYP has developed agency through the idea of 'learning to learn'. ATL in MYP includes an emphasis in understanding ways of thinking that prepare students for TOK. Over time its role has been expanded so that it supports all the agency skills mentioned previously. MYP students are also often learning to take more responsibility for their out-of-school activities.

They develop their agency through their community projects. They have to find a purpose for in-depth investigation and then take ownership of it independently or in a small group. They carry out sustained, self-directed inquiry, not just for the sake of research, but so that this research leads to action. They need to develop their voice, so that they communicate to all the different people involved.

MYP students take charge of community studies and service throughout the programme. This is expanded on in the chapter on agency in service learning (Chapter 14).

In the final year of the programme, students have opportunities for extended agency in their Personal Project. They can choose their topic. They take ownership of how they develop it and present their findings. Personal Project is often seen as a culmination of five years of ATL skills – it reflects all the agency that they have developed over the programme.

■ Primary Years Programme (PYP)

The PYP has made agency explicit in the enhanced version. Even before then it had many implicit aspects of agency since it developed from the International Schools Curriculum Project in 1997.

- It puts students at the centre, with students working as active inquirers.
- It has always had a portfolio system that brings tremendous ownership, provided that it is managed to regularly draw out students' voices about their learning, and to help them make choices. It has to be much more than a paper-sorting exercise ahead of student conferences.

- Student questions have always drawn their voice into what they study.
- The action component is an invitation for students to initiate and manage their own responses to issues that they discover.

Just as the other programmes have an extended project with lots of student agency (the Extended Essay, Reflective Project and Personal Project), the PYP has the PYP Exhibition. Students have significant responsibility for deciding their own direction and carrying through their work, including choosing their topic, within the school's general direction, and framing their questions. As with the other extended agency projects, students are most successful if they have already experienced ownership of significant choices and challenges. Therefore many schools have increased the opportunities to work with high degrees of agency before the PYP Exhibition, for example, from a mini-exhibition the year before or through large challenges in previous units.

■ Approaches to Learning (ATL) – agency across all areas of learning

ATL is all about agency. It is all about making learners autonomous, able to manage their own personal organization and their emotions. They learn how to learn, with powers of the mind and ways of thinking which enable them to take charge of new learning, new situations and new challenges. Since 2018, this has five areas, common across all programmes:

- Thinking
- Research
- Social
- Self-management
- Communication.

These are all huge areas, which can be subdivided according to the age and the existing agency levels of the students. (For example, the MYP divides each area into ten clusters.)

How can we maximize the agency in ATL? As a rule, help the students take charge of their own ATL. For example, make sure that Research is not a set of skills that they apply by rote when a teacher insists, but rather consists of information tools that students learn to use by and for themselves.

■ Connecting experiences

ATL connects these areas across all subjects, so that students' agency is consolidated not fragmented. Using ATL language consistently helps students make and explain the connections between both what they learn and how they learn.

■ Thinking skills

In many ways, the ATL skills are a way of bringing alive the Learner Profile, of making sure that it happens in the classroom and around the school. One of the clearest examples of this is how 'thinking skills' develop 'thinkers'. Thinkers understand how to approach complex problems and to think through ethical decisions.

Thinking skills provide agency when students know for themselves how to play around with ideas and pose problems. They have agency when they can think critically and creatively, and they have the metacognition to know how they do so. They own their thinking when they can experiment for themselves how to apply it to real-world contexts, and understand what their learning is really about, and how it matters.

■ Research skills

Research skills ensure that students do not only want to be inquirers, but that they have the skills to carry out their research and come to their own, valid, conclusions. They learn to use many different types of sources, and how to validate, compare and contrast the information that they find.

They gain agency in research as they learn how to seek information, draw their own conclusions and develop their voice in articulating what they have learned. When students can find things out for themselves, and know which conclusions are valid, they are in control of information. They develop a deeper understanding and eventually, we hope, some wisdom.

■ Communication skills

These skills also develop the Learner Profile. They make explicit what being a communicator is all about – developing their voice and understanding the voices of others.

Students gain agency when they are confident speakers and presenters. They become agents of their own written and oral communication, formulating arguments and expressing them to diverse audiences and in different media. They become powerful listeners when they can understand and interpret many voices, draw conclusions and take into account the different viewpoints that they hear.

■ Social skills

Students with great social skills become agents who thrive in teams and communities. They act ethically because they are caring and respect others. Agents value teamwork and use it to get things done. They can collaborate successfully because they accept responsibility and have the skills to resolve conflict and solve problems together with their team members. You cannot have agency unless you can form and maintain positive relationships. People with the most agency can take leadership roles and work well as a team member when others lead. Social skills can make teams, and adult lives, both fair and productive.

■ Self-management skills

Choice and ownership need strong self-management skills. To own any complex work, you have to organize tasks and manage your time. You have to be in control of your own state of mind and motivation. You are in charge of your 'next steps for learning' and how they lead to a bigger goal. We also want our 'balanced' students to manage themselves outside the classroom. We want them to own behaviour and choose safe and healthy lifestyles.

■ Challenge of content and skills

It is not always easy to prioritize agency, even when we know that it has a bigger impact on our students' futures than much of the content that they learn. In the CP and DP, success in all forms of assessments is vital for admission to the next stage of education. It is not straightforward to provide time for student agency when teachers and students are faced with a large amount of course content and the pressure of ongoing formative assessment. PYP and MYP students also often sit state or national tests which evaluate content rather than the skills of learning.

This can give a tension between preparing students to do their best on a particular test, which might include spoon feeding exam material for short-term recall, and developing them as great thinkers and independent learners. Sometimes we have to be pragmatic and focus on test success for short periods. When doing so, the more you help your students take ownership of the shortcuts you take, the more they can also be pragmatic when they need to.

At the end of the day, more self-efficacy is likely to have more impact on students' lives than a couple of extra points on exams – it is not only our world averages that are important, but how we prepare students for their future, and their own agency which will stay a part of them well after the exams are over.

CHAPTER 12

Teacher roles and fostering interaction

IN A NUTSHELL

- Agency does not only change the roles that students take. It also transforms how teachers act. Agency is a change of emphasis, in which teachers step back to allow their students to flourish. We look at how teachers can reduce what they do so that learners share agency in important things.
- This brings many dilemmas in finding a balance between how much to plan out in detail and what to consciously leave to co-plan with students. Teachers planning for agency is in itself partly preparation for the classroom community.
- Teachers also plan forms of provocation and interaction that encourage students to think and speak for themselves.
- Within their planning, teachers provide overall scaffolds that support students with developing their agency.

Teachers stepping back

As teachers and school leaders, we all have busy and very responsible jobs. We are accountable for learning and have a huge role in planning and assessing. We embrace our responsibility and sometimes do too much: we put up displays before school starts; we plan details ahead of seeing students' interests; we design activities before letting students show us their misconceptions.

Agency puts the spotlight on the students – their voices, their choices and their ownership. Even so, it still takes self-discipline to step back and wait to hear their voices and choices before planning the details of our classes.

■ Planning for students to plan

Agency brings a change of emphasis where we work out how students will plan, reflecting that we no longer use a model where the teacher passes knowledge into an empty vessel. Not only are students learning what to do with their knowledge, they are learning how to find it.

Teachers aren't, of course, abdicating responsibility, but sharing it. Students are making decisions about their learning, including choosing some of the directions that it will take. The teacher, rather than planning everything, sets the overall direction and then works alongside the students who set their own mini-goals, identify next steps and think about possible strategies.

This creates a shift in how a teacher's time is spent, including a need to provide one-on-one time for students, rather than being able to lecture all students at the same time.

■ Overplanning

It is tempting to start the year with the first units thoroughly planned out. This is repeating a unit that may have been great with last year's class – leaving no agency for this year's class. It could be presenting a unit that went fantastically for a colleague – in which case even the teacher has little agency.

When planning with agency, first identify what students can and cannot bring. They do not know the concepts behind the work. They do not know the key questions of the field. They are still learning to plan and organize themselves. Agentic planning sets out the big issues and questions, but involves students in collaborating and co-constructing learning and learning goals.

Thorough planning ahead of a unit is still fundamentally important, but with agency it is refocused onto clearly identifying the purposes and standards, providing options and having strong provocations to draw students in. After that, planning involves students.

When exams approach, it may seem like best practice to come fully prepared with completed exam outlines, revision schedules and practice papers. Then there is no planning left for the students to learn from, and no way for them to make the plans their own. They do not learn how to plan their own exam preparation in the future.

■ Routines of success and of thinking

Deep thinking is important, but we cannot think hard about everything, all of the time. Humans have evolved to use heuristics – mental shortcuts and rules of thumb that help us make a choice without analyzing something completely. We learn routines that take care of many parts of any task automatically, so that we can concentrate on the highest elements.

This is also true in classes. Spending the first month of the school year in setting up basic routines may seem at first glance like you are not plunging quickly enough into challenging thought. It is important to establish efficient routines that take care of the small things, so that you can then focus properly on the big ideas.

■ The central role of language

Language is at the centre of every classroom. Every IB teacher is a language teacher, developing their students as *communicators*. This is more than just a value or belief – it brings a whole set of demands. It includes reading across

the curriculum – not just using reading, but developing students' abilities to interpret, analyze and assimilate what they read across all subjects. It embraces writing to develop students' voices across all areas of inquiry.

■ Questioning for agency

Traditional questioning has simple answers. Students learn early how to play the game of 'guess what's in my head' with their teachers – trying to find the words that get a 'well done' rather than using questions to pursue new understanding of an intriguing area. They think about what the teacher wants them to say, rather than search for truth.

Questioning for agency requires students to think for themselves. The teacher does not ask many closed questions, with short predetermined and predictable answers. Instead, questioning for agency dwells on a few open-ended questions, with plenty of possible answers that students can consider, and which lead students to pose further questions for themselves.

Rather than the teacher always reacting and evaluating responses, the teacher acknowledges all responses, but often asks other students to evaluate the reply. Sometimes, to avoid any dependency, the teacher might not react at all, and only chair the class thinking through responses for themselves.

Questioning does not only belong to the teacher. We may start with our questions – strategic essential questions or teacher questions that start the ball rolling, but classroom questioning should not stay with the teacher for too long. Students with agency build on each other's answers. When classroom talk is owned by the students, as time goes on they will argue, mainly respectfully, with each other without turns needing to be directed by the teacher. They build on the questions of others. We can help develop this by asking students to summarize what the last person said and why they do or do not support it.

■ Using Bloom's Taxonomy

Since we are teaching students to own their questioning, we need to teach them how to improve their questions for themselves. They can use Bloom's Taxonomy to help them. Bloom's Taxonomy is essentially a way of categorizing levels of thinking, named after Benjamin Bloom who chaired a committee which categorized domains for learning objectives – cognitive, affective and sensory (Bloom *et al.*, 1956). We usually only think about the progression for the cognitive domain.

His committee ranked thinking skills into six types, with increasing cognitive demand: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis,

synthesis and evaluation. There is a 2001 revised edition, which may be better for some classrooms: *Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate, Create* (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

One simple use of Bloom's Taxonomy is to display the levels in classrooms. When students' questions are too trivial, ask them to look at the progression and see if they can raise the level of their question. If this routine is used regularly, students internalize it and over time increase the depth of the questions themselves.

■ Suggestions for agentic dialogue

We can often increase students' ownership of their thinking by changing a command into a question that involves choice. Here are some examples:

Teacher as agent: *Your next step is to ...*

Student as agent: *Perhaps, as a writer, you might be ready for ... What might you, as a scientist, measure? How might you draw a conclusion?*

Teacher as agent: *Do you have any questions?* (This often gets an automatic reply of 'no' since students do not want to appear uncertain.)

Student as agent: *What do you want to clarify? What do you want to know more about?*

Teacher as agent: *You have missed out section 3.*

Student as agent: *How can you know whether you have finished all parts of your task or not?*

Teacher as agent: *This is what you should have done differently ...*

Student as agent: *What were your problems? How did you try to solve them? What worked best? What else could you try next period?*

We can also make the language of initiative routine, to help students understand and own their thinking. We ask them to explain what they did and why. We can ask them for their plans for their next steps.

■ Provide many exemplars

If students are going to take ownership of good work, they have to know what it looks like. If they see plenty of examples of what good work looks like, they can see for themselves what to work towards, and can take more charge of their journey.

■ Checklists

Agency is not just about providing models of higher-order thinking. We also want students to take control of organizing the simple things. We help everyone when we scaffold practical ways of being more effective. A great example of this is the use of checklists; they free up working memory so you can concentrate on the big ideas, and still get the small things done. Checklists are used by airline pilots and surgeons alike to make sure that they do skilled tasks thoroughly.

■ Learning conferences

Regular conferencing between teachers and students is key to supporting agency. It enables students to have focus and direction in their independent work, and to draw from their own voice. These can be regular but very short – only a very quick exchange where the students explain what they are achieving and say how their progress (or even a lack of progress) will lead to new choices. Conferencing has several advantages. Conferences bring different kinds of dialogue than class and group discussion. The teacher gets to know all the students well. Students learn to plan. They are supported in interpreting assessment to understand their personal next steps and stay focused on them. Guidance can be ‘just in time’ – it can lead to a personal explanation, or a group mini-lesson, depending on the rest of the class.

Teachers do not have to say very much in conferences – it is often ideal just to sit and listen. Students often clarify their own thinking as they talk – an important part of voice. Teachers may not even have to provide direction. Students are agents – let them come up with their own solutions.

■ Challenges

Although they can be short, conferences require a high amount of teacher skill. Teachers have to be responsive and able to move across topics fluently. They need to remain open and curious – asking questions more than giving advice.

The shorter and more focused the conferences are, the more regularly they can take place. So they can focus quickly when the conferences happen, teachers need a system that works for them for keeping ongoing notes during other activities, regarding the feedback they might give each student – these notes will jog their memory. There should also be a system for noting down the outcomes of students’ voices and choices from the conference. There are a variety of digital tools that facilitate this – choose one that works for you. (Older and more experienced students can record their own notes.)

Conferences can replace some written feedback in marking. Students often respond better to short conference feedback than to copious amounts of written feedback. Why spend ten minutes writing a feedback note, when a two-minute conference is more effective?

■ Scheduling

It can be helpful to mix scheduled and spontaneous conferences. For maximum agency of schedule conferences, let the students choose their slots. They should have expectations for preparing for *their* conference, including selecting evidence of learning to bring with them and bullet points they want to consider.

■ Parking lot

A technique that I first used with adult groups, that I have since found works very well for children too, is the 'parking lot' for questions that cannot be answered then and there. They are written in a 'parking lot' space on the whiteboard or a flip chart, to keep and value students' points without disrupting the flow of the lesson. At the end of the lesson, or when there is time in a subsequent lesson, their ideas can be addressed. Students can own the parking lot, adding questions of their own as they arise during activities, and they can even begin to address their questions.

Acknowledgments

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Agency

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Simon Davidson has worked in IB schools since 1998, teaching PYP to Diploma. He has held a wide variety of leadership roles focusing on developing the quality of learning, before working as an educational consultant. He now focuses on supporting schools with developing their programmes, as well as reviewing the impact of teaching on students. He has particular interests in agency, creativity and innovation.

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