Agency
Learners in charge

Teaching for Success

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Introduction

Agency in IB: learners in charge of their learning

We all like to have some control over our lives and what happens around us. From childhood, we don't like to be forced to eat certain foods. We get frustrated when we lose control of our work situation. We feel inspired when we are in charge of something interesting or important to us. We like to be able to organize our own homes and our free time. We like to feel that we can influence events.

When I was a child in school, I liked it most when I felt in control. Sometimes this was in the playground, helping to organize football teams. Other times I worked out for myself how to calculate an integral, or I wrote the wording for motions for a student-run debating society. I was less engaged when I had to work in a specific way through an exercise that seemed irrelevant to me.

When I first started teaching, I disliked how little agency my students sometimes had, but I found it hard to balance controlling difficult classes with empowering them to learn in their own ways. Without knowing the term, and without the skills to do it, I always wished to give them agency, with more active roles in their own learning. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I gravitated towards the IB programmes.

Agency is a complex concept

Rather than merely 'letting go' of control, we look at how students can progressively 'take control' of all the aspects of their own learning, and eventually be in charge of their own lives. We keep both the student and their learning at the centre, as we see how a student becomes a 'learning agent' through 'self-efficacy' (their abilities and confidence to succeed in specific situations and accomplish tasks).

For us, agency doesn't take the rather weak meaning of an intermediary, like property agents arranging letting or selling. Rather, an agent is in charge of themselves. This is worth more than James Bond's 'double 0' code – students are all special agents of their own learning.

Agency highlights how people act, make decisions and learn how to think for themselves. The concept of agency helps us avoid some of the traps common to student-centred learning, such as dwelling too long on a student's particular likes and dislikes. Instead, it brings out what is central to their learning: how students make decisions; how they develop organizationally; the skills they need to manage their own leaning. It shows how they self-evaluate and set goals.

This book is about putting the spotlight on such learners and what learning means to them. It does not claim to introduce brand new insights, but brings together some important ideas and concepts, under the umbrella of understanding the implications of agency for learners who use the four IB programmes.

■ Chapter previews

We begin with an overview of agency in Chapter 1. The following three chapters (Chapters 2–4) look at the three aspects of agency identified by the IB: voice; choice; and ownership. Student voice helps them working out and expressing their own thinking, as well as being aware of the thoughts of others. Choice moves beyond simply selecting preferences to being aware of one's own learning and considering options before making choices. When their voice is heard and their choices respected, students develop their sense of ownership. It brings the intrinsic motivation and responsibility for one's own learning that leads to long term success.

Chapter 5 looks at the relationship between agency and the most relevant models of learning for the IB. These models are developing, due to both advances in psychology, and because of changes in society, which present new challenges and possibilities.

Chapter 6 looks at the extra need for agency in the twenty-first century, while Chapter 7 looks at the tradition of developing agency through the IB programmes, for example, in the core of the diploma, and how approaches to learning provides a useful language for continuing to enhance agency in IB learning.

Chapter 8 looks at how the work of Carol Dweck can help us provide students with mindsets that support agency. Chapter 9 looks at how students with individual learning needs benefit from a particularly strong focus of agency, so that they learn to take charge of whatever modification or accommodations will make them most successful.

Chapter 10 emphasizes how a deeper and more authentic sense of rigour comes from a thorough approach to agency – sometimes it can look like the most rigorous approaches come from a tight sense of control from teachers and school management.

Chapter 11 looks at how agency is not just individual. It arises from a healthy community which jointly owns learning, with a clear sense of purpose, and with roles and relationships that support students with developing their voice and making their own choices.

Chapter 12 looks at how teachers can also foster interaction, by using forms of interaction and planning that promote agency most effectively. Chapter 13 then looks at how play promotes agency, and how flow and gamification can enhance learning.

Chapter 14 looks at service learning, which can provide one of the most meaningful contexts for students to develop and apply their own agency to real world situations and genuine needs. It is not only students' learning that benefits from agency. Teachers' professional learning, as well as their actions, are at their best when they have meaningful voices and choices, and when they take ownership of their professional growth. This is explored in Chapter 15.

Chapter 16 concludes by summarizing the potential and the challenges of making agency central to our vision for learning.

■ Not only IB

This book is written particularly with IB schools in mind, and to work across the four programmes, but the ideas are relevant to all forward-thinking educators. Best practice is not, of course, limited to IB schools. Many teachers wish their students to become autonomous and empowered learners, who will develop the tools to continue learning throughout their lives. This book stems from IB practices but it is not written to be exclusively used by IB schools, and blends IB vocabulary with terms commonly used elsewhere.

■ How to use this book

Naturally, since readers are also agents in charge of their own thinking and professional practice, one should feel free to use the book in any way that is helpful. To help with this, each chapter starts with an 'In a nutshell' summary of the chapter. Some readers may prefer to read only the summaries before choosing which chapters are most relevant to read in depth. Some may prefer to read individually, others as part of a professional learning community. This book is only a starting point. Be an agent – make its ideas your own!