# How to Give Students More Agency in Class Without Losing Control

By Arianna Prothero — June 29, 2023                    4 min read



Fourth graders work together to plan life for their "colony" during a class activity focused on colonial America at Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., on April 4, 2017.
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*Philadelphia*

Choice and voice—these have become buzzwords in the drive to give students more control over their education.

Research shows that giving students agency over their learning  improves motivation   and academic achievement. Students also do better in their post-secondary pursuits because they know how to direct their own learning.

But it's not enough to up and decide one day to let students take the wheel in the classroom without first laying the foundation, said Lauren Boucher, a digital teaching and learning consultant for the North Carolina education department and a former classroom teacher. Presenting at the International Society for Technology in Education's annual conference, she said choice alone is not agency, it's a strategy to help students develop agency.

"How many of you have you said, 'here is your rubric, go forth and learn?,'" she said. "It's a disaster. We have to teach students how to have autonomy, we have to teach self-regulation skills, organization skills, time-management skills, before we can release them to just go do."

Giving students the reins over their learning can sound daunting, said Boucher, so she recommends starting small —looking for the quick wins and little tweaks teachers can make to their curriculum and assignments now to give

students more choice and control.

"As a teacher, letting go of that power is very difficult," said Boucher, "because who is ultimately responsible to those test scores at the end of the year? That's attached to your name."

One way to do this is to examine students' roles in each assignment and where that role would sit on a continuum of choice with teacher-centered assignments on one end and learner-driven assignments on the other. (This chart has more details on how to label students' roles in classroom activities.)

Not every assignment has to be at the learner-driven end of the continuum. That would not be sustainable for teachers, said Boucher, but assignments and class activities should sample from across the spectrum.

If teachers find that their assignments are clustered on the teacher-centered end of the spectrum, here are six strategies Boucher recommends trying to introduce more student agency into their classrooms:

## 1. Set clear expectations.

Giving students autonomy doesn't mean they don't need direction. "You simply can't let your students go," said Boucher. "There have to be some guidelines and rules and expectations."

## 2. Explain the why.

Make sure students understand why they're learning what they're learning. Saying, "because it's on the test" is the wrong answer, said Boucher. Some students are compliant and don't question the why, but there are also many students who won't do the hard work if they don't see a reason for the assignment or lesson. "Have students read through the standards themselves," she said. Then, "have your students tell you where they see themselves in the standards."

## 3. Build community.

Part of giving students agency is allowing them to express their thoughts and opinions. So, it's important for teachers to create a classroom environment where students treat one another respectfully. Asking students to use sentence starters—regular openers such as "I respectfully disagree because…" or "I wish I had learned…" and be aware of their own tone and body language is a good place to start, said Boucher. Although sentence starters are often used in elementary school, she said they are just as useful in the secondary grades.

## 4. Utilize formative conversations.

After giving students tools to engaging respectfully, teachers can dig into the deep conversations. Developing students' agency starts with developing their critical thinking skills, said Boucher. In practice, that means trying to avoid asking yes/no questions in favor of more open-ended ones. "And when a student answers a question correctly, what if you followed it up with, 'yes, that's great, and?' and then you stop talking?" Boucher said. "I love 'yes, and?' And silence is very uncomfortable for everybody in the room so eventually somebody will add to the conversation."

## 5. Assign problem-based learning projects.

Not to be confused with project-based learning, problem-based learning is where students must solve an actual real-world problem. This is a great way to show students why what they're learning and doing in the classroom

matters—because the skills or knowledge they are learning can help them solve a real-world problem.

## 6. Skip grading every now and again.

Feedback is critical to student agency, Boucher said. "If we're not providing good, actionable feedback to our students, we can provide all the choice in the world, but they're going to be stuck." She recommends holding off on grading assignments and trying a feedback loop—where a student turns in their schoolwork and the teacher gives feedback and allows the student to rework the assignment. The teacher can then decide to stop the loop there or continue for a few more rounds of feedback and revision. Boucher recommends not attempting feedback loops with every student on every assignment and instead staggering them.

"My goal would be to do a feedback loop with each student within a marking period," she said. "Just so that they have that engagement at some point at time."