

Boosting High School Students' Sense of Agency and Motivation

Providing students with greater voice and choice in the classroom can build their desire to learn and do well academically.



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It's hard to be a teacher in any year. But 2021–22 was particularly difficult, and anytime students are unmotivated, forget about it.

So this past year I applied author Daniel Pink's three principles of motivation (autonomy, mastery, and purpose, from *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*) in my 10th-grade English class to rethink how I approached curriculum and assessment design. I found much success in student agency and motivation—and dare I even say, at times enthusiasm.

Autonomy

Autonomy begins with my work as a teacher. No student who does the same thing every single unit feels like their independence and freedom are being honored. So it is up to me as a teacher to take a broad look at the standards, curriculum, and context, and then creatively but intentionally design a variety of styles of assessments.

This year, instead of repeating essay after essay, we included project-based, performative, and creative assessments. The variety allowed for every student to shine at some point in a way unique to themselves.

More than anything, creating opportunities for autonomy has necessitated a shift in my perspective. Our field likes to talk about everything standards-based, but there are dangers to that: When the standard becomes more important than the student in front of us, we have lost the true meaning of education.

As a colleague once said, standards-inspired is more student-centered. It allows us to approach the standards through a holistic and humanist lens grounded in the research that deep learning is conceptual and narrow, rather than siloed and broad.

After the behind-the-scenes work of setting up opportunities for autonomy, the work then transfers to the students; they need to become the principal agents in their own learning through choice. I offer students choice by giving them options regarding

- learning content (which texts to read, videos to watch, podcasts to listen to);
- communication and processing (written, verbal, or visual);
- assessments (choosing topics, choosing texts, choosing supports, choosing structures); and
- work time (independent, collaborative, location).

Mastery

Autonomy is vital to students' learning because without it they are only knowledge consumers rather than meaning makers. Only by making meaning can they achieve true mastery. Designing instruction for the purpose of mastery relies on [an understanding of neuroscience](#). If the brain is a terrain of both designated paths and open lands waiting to be navigated, I need to put the onus on my students to make those journeys.

Inquiry is one way to encourage meaning-making. Starting units and lessons with recall questions allows for students to tap into their own recognized and established neural pathways. Embedding divergent and complex prompts throughout the learning process ensures that students are forging new neural pathways.

The richest opportunities for inquiry are found in student reflection. Every single time my students complete an assessment now, it's accompanied by a reflection. This is dedicated time and space for them to make connections in and among their learning, self-assess strengths and weaknesses, stoke continued curiosity, and discover and articulate their own mastery. It's also time for both of us to celebrate their growth and honor their investment.

Purpose

Reflection is also a chance for students to solidify the why of their learning, and this supports Pink's third principle of intrinsic motivation: a clear and relevant purpose.

A clear purpose requires me to think about and plan for the deep and enduring learning with which I want students to walk away from the unit. Once I've designed for that, then I need to communicate it up front and often to students. I have found it very helpful to check in with students' understanding of the purpose. Whether I communicate it and whether students grasp it are two different scenarios, and I have to let go of the ego part of me that says, "I already told you," and find ways to make it clear—not for me, but for them.

A clear purpose is not enough to drive student agency and motivation; it also needs to be relevant to them. This means I have to know my students on an academic and human level. Then, I have to use that information to pick texts and topics that matter to them and their world. I also want to provide multiple opportunities for students to make connections so that they themselves can build the relevance.

Prompts and activities that encourage students to connect content and skills between units and classes, but also between their contexts (e.g., sports versus academics) and between time frames (e.g., now

versus their futures), are key.

Focusing on autonomy, mastery, and purpose helps my classroom be a place where both my students and I want to be. And that makes all the difference.