AURORA
INSTITUTE

Derek Wenmoth
Marsha Jones
Joseph DiMartino

Agency by Design:
Making Learning Engaging

About the Authors

Derek Wenmoth is acknowledged as one of NZ education's foremost future focused thinkers. He is regularly asked to consult with schools and government agencies regarding the future directions of educational policy and practice in New Zealand and internationally. Derek is driven by a deep personal belief in the public good of education, regarding education as the pathway to self-improvement, and a fundamental right of every human being. In recognition of his work in education, Derek was designated one of 2008's "Global Six" by the George Lucas Educational Foundation which recognizes individuals making a difference in education. Derek maintains a blog on matters relating to e-learning and other aspects of interest to educators that can be found on the www.futuremakers.nz website.

Marsha Jones is an experienced educator with over 50 years of service. Upon her retirement she was the Associate Superintendent with the Springdale School District, Springdale, Arkansas. Currently, she is an adjunct professor at the University of Arkansas, teaching in the Arkansas Impact Fellows Program for aspiring administrators, funded by the Walton Family Foundation. During her career, she has received many recognitions for her leadership in curriculum and instruction, including Outstanding Alumni for the College of Education at the University of Arkansas. Marsha has written many articles, made numerous presentations and has served as a consultant with the Center for Secondary School Redesign.

Joseph DiMartino has three decades of experience assisting schools, districts, and state departments of educations to implement programs and policies that put students at the center of their learning. He is the retired founder and president of the Center for Secondary School Redesign (CSSR), which built on work started at Brown University where he served as Director of Secondary School Redesign. He has been a leading advocate for moving away from seat time toward competency based measures for progress and for earning course credit. Joe is first and foremost a parent and grandparent, often stating that he has learned much more from his six children, including the four adopted from outside the United States, than he could ever hope to teach them.

About the Aurora Institute

The Aurora Institute's mission is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning for more than 14 million students through its work in policy advocacy, research, field-building, and convening. We work on systems change in K-12 education, promote best practices, examine policy barriers, and make recommendations for change. Aurora has a national and global view of education innovation and lifts up promising policies and practices that yield improved outcomes for students. Aurora envisions a world in which all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

Suggested Citation

Wenmoth, D., Jones, M., & DiMartino, J. (2021). *Agency by Design: Making Learning Engaging*. Arlington, VA: Aurora Institute.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> *"Learner agency is about having the power, combined with choices, to take meaningful action and see the result of those decisions. It can be thought of as a catalyst for change or transformation. Learner agency is about students having the understanding, ability and opportunity to be part of the learning design and taking action to intervene in the learning process to become effective lifelong learners."* –Derek Wenmoth

The purpose of this paper is to provide a resource for educators seeking to understand more about learner agency. It offers guidance to education leaders and teachers in redesigning schools and classrooms by centering on learner agency, through a shift in the ownership of learning. It also addresses the implications for high-quality practices in new learning models.

In their book, *Putting Students First*, Jones, Avery, and DiMartino (2020) note that *"Students taking ownership of and responsibility for their own learning is nearly universally accepted as a desirous and positive trait. When students have a say in what and how they engage with content, learning deepens and carries over into new applications and areas."*

In our response to the myriad challenges the global COVID-19 pandemic has posed, addressing the need for greater student agency and student engagement must now be a key focus of school leaders and educators. We must rethink learning designs that support students anytime, anyplace, and at any pace. We must re-imagine what agency and engagement can look like in contemporary practices.

This paper presents the arguments for why this is important, provides clarity around the definition and meaning of learner agency, identifies the implications for leadership and classroom practice, and provides practical advice on steps to take.

1. Agency Revealed

The global COVID-19 pandemic pulled back the curtain on what students are doing at school and exposed weaknesses in much of the philosophical understanding that guides our work, both explicitly and implicitly. The pandemic also challenged the preconceptions we have about the structures and processes that define how we work with our students and the expectations we have of them and our teachers.

Understanding learners' experiences during the lockdown period has provided us valuable insights into what we can be doing—as teachers and as a system—to design conditions for learning that are more conducive to developing learner agency. In doing so, we must acknowledge that the whole context of the lockdown was sub-optimal, in the sense that it was an emergency response, rather than a planned and deliberate redesign.

As a consequence, many learners had negative experiences, influenced by lack of resources, support, and/or the skills necessary to work independently and out of reach of their peers. We've heard complaints from parents that the online experience did not work for their children. We heard from the students themselves that they did not participate except in minimal ways, and we heard the frustrations teachers expressed that students were not responding, connecting, or doing the expected work.

On the other hand, some students flourished in this new environment. They enjoyed the flexibility and freedom to do their work on their own time. They appreciated the ability to communicate with their teachers and peers in personal ways through emails, texts, and classroom platforms. The "freedom" to manage their own learning in their own context and time was a positive experience.

The table below (Figure A) captures some of the lessons learned from the research to date and illustrates how, while the experience was not very positive for many learners, it was positive for others. While the negative experiences have revealed areas we need to improve on continually, the positives highlight practices that we should seek to amplify.

Figure A

Not-so-positive experience for many	Very positive experience for others
Lack of digital access and poor internet connectivity at home a frustration when so much of the learning was provided online.	Personal access to an internet-connected device provided opportunities for in-depth learning at own pace. Also provided opportunity for connections with others as required.
Demands placed on parents meant that they were conflicted in terms of how much time they could devote to supporting their child's learning. As a consequence, lack of parent support or feedback was reported by many students.	Parents available for support and assistance — particularly where this was without the bias demonstrated in classrooms. More time to discuss learning with parents and other family members appreciated. Presence of siblings and/or parents to assist with collaborative tasks.
For these highly social students, the loss of face-to-face engagement with peers was keenly felt, leading to a loss of motivation and sense of connection with their peers.	More time to think and focus on the work was appreciated, without the constant distractions from peers and the teacher in the regular classroom setting.
Many students reported a focus on content over connections, with an emphasis on having to cover certain content and complete certain tasks — often in the form of worksheets.	Flexibility around what was learned and how it was learned a strength, particularly for the learners who felt confident in their ability to self-manage and who had the necessary skills for self-directed learning.
For many, their home environment was not conducive to learning due to limited opportunity to find somewhere quiet or private enough to focus on their studies. Interruptions from others in the home environment was also a factor.	Learning from the home environment where various spaces can be used, depending on the nature of the learning task.
Teachers largely were left to respond in the ways they could, with highly variable online practices as a result. Many teachers simply tried to replicate the structures and systems employed in the classroom in the online environment.	Teachers exercised agency in the way they designed for remote learning — focus on relationships and communication, with greater emphasis on individual support and feedback over "whole class" approaches.

As the examples in the table above illustrate, learners' experiences varied greatly depending on the context in which they were learning, the level of skill and experience in self-directed learning, the nature of the learning tasks with which they engaged, and the type and availability of support and feedback.

Each of these factors is an important precursor to developing learner agency. If we wish to see every learner have the positive experiences described above, we must spend more time considering how we design the learning to enable these outcomes. For example, we cannot simply imagine that all learners will have the level of self-managing skills required, so we must ensure we use the appropriate sorts of scaffolding activities and support to help them develop these skills. Similarly, we must plan to reduce the amount of teacher-directed activity that may impede the development of such skills.

In designing learning to achieve these positive outcomes, we also must acknowledge that a building does not define "school." Rather, by the term "school," we mean any learning environment. When we think of school, we can consider the many options available in our technologically linked world of resources. "School" can be defined as the environment(s) in which learning occurs, including any and all actions and activities in which a teacher and student engage when striving to achieve learning outcomes.

Emerging informal research and conversations with our peers concerning this broad definition of school gives us great insight into the experiences established with new instructional practices, in both synchronous and asynchronous interactions. Students accessed their learning through Zoom, Google Classrooms, and other virtual learning platforms. Sometimes, this transition worked for students, and sometimes, students struggled to stay engaged.

When looking closely at those students who were able to thrive in less teacher-directed environments, these students appear to embody a personal sense of agency about their connection to the learning. They exhibited attributes of self-direction, problem-solving, and a personal interest in or responsibility for the learning outcomes.

This paper suggests that as educators, we must be proactive to promote agentic behaviors as part of our lesson-planning model. We propose that we must be more intentional within the learning environment, to foster and scaffold opportunities to give students a more personalized learning experience that instills a sense of agency.

2. Intentional Agency-Driven Lesson Design

One way to observe agentic behavior is by noting levels of engagement. What we often see disguised as authentic engagement is merely students exhibiting compliant behavior. Based on our experiences as seasoned educators, that compliant behavior has guided many a child as they come into the school house and begin their day with face-to-face instruction.

One element of face-to-face instruction is the teacher's ability to maintain focus and control over the students. This often disguises a student's lack of engagement with the work, because the student complied and completed the assignment. And, as we have observed, this does not necessarily indicate interest in or connection with the work. Many students we have encountered are satisfied to do what is asked of them and complete their assignments whether they like them or not. This implied agreement between teacher

and student allows for a well-managed classroom, with little enthusiasm or engagement required on the learner's part.

Without intentional agency-driven lesson design, which fosters agentic behaviors, students may not know how to behave in a learning environment that is not closely directed by a teacher. By contrast, intentional lesson design with agency in mind builds students' capacity to develop problem-solving skills, cope with ambiguity, increase depth of content knowledge, and allow for individual and equitable learning outcomes, because their learning is more personalized.

The excitement we have seen in interactions among students and teachers as the ownership and engagement shifts to the learner is palpable. In Figure B, we have listed our belief statements as we encourage a more intentional approach to ensuring students are included in the learning process.

Figure B

This We Believe
• We believe that student agency is an essential attribute of learners of all ages.
• We believe that student agency must be developed deliberately and intentionally.
• We believe that agency should be a core component of the requisite planning, so all learners can thrive and be successful.
• We believe that agency can and should be promoted within the organization of the curriculum, the planning process, the design of instructional activities, and the assessment of learning.
• We believe that elements of student agency already are established in teacher evaluation and supervision models, but they are not at the forefront of teacher expectations.
• We believe that a catalyst for success requires leaders (classroom, building, district) to embrace "design-inspired" leadership strategies.

3. Design-Inspired Leadership

A key purpose of this article is to capture the momentum toward a more intentional approach to designing learning that enables more authentic and sustained learner engagement, self-direction, and ownership of the learning. Such an environment cannot be created without leadership that inspires agency.

As noted earlier, many learners did experience this environment during the COVID-19 school lockdowns, and we need to consider how we can best amplify this positive experience as learners return to classrooms.

One essential question embedded within this paper is: "How do we move the practice of instructional design to a level that embraces the student as a partner in the process of instructional planning?" It boils down to leadership.

Leadership matters when it comes to making the desired culture shift so that students can become realistic

partners in the process. Furthermore, such leadership must not focus purely on learners' activity but must also consider the extent to which teachers themselves can act agentically in their practice. For example, they also must be considered partners in the design process and followers of the expectations set out for them in a pre-prepared curriculum or external set of assessment standards.

Building professional capability and collective capacity is a core function of leadership. Effective leaders must focus on empowering teams to work collaboratively with each other and with their communities to create powerful learning experiences for learners, so that all are equipped with the skills and dispositions to thrive in times of uncertainty and change. This is the real test of agency.

Some progressive educators explain this shift in leadership model from the traditional "top down" or centrally mandated model to the "design thinking" shared ownership way of working. Design thinking allows leaders to move away from being managers limited by traditional roles to leaders who embrace new roles that encourage new ways of thinking and behaving. This way, leaders generate greater participation and partnership in learning from both staff and students.

We agree with Gallagher and Thordarson in their book *Design Thinking for School Leaders* (2018) when they offer this observation about school leadership based on design thinking:

> What if leaders were able to approach their work more like designers? Designers actually see the world differently and therefore bring a new perspective to their work. This new perspective is desperately needed in schools and really does begin with the school leader. We call this new perspective design-inspired leadership and believe it is one of the most powerful ways to spark positive change and address education challenges, using the same design and innovation principles that have been so successful in private industry. (p. 5)

Leaders seeking to generate new ways of including students can use a design thinking approach when designing and developing the learning environment. Certain elements of the classroom have been traditionally managed and maintained outside the purview of student, teacher, or even the principal. They're regarded simply as the way things are and have to be. However, this doesn't have to be the case. Numerous avenues for student inclusion exist that should be available when making specific changes to the learning

environment. Examples include everything from negotiating new classroom layouts and creating optimal learning spaces to the choice of displays on walls that inspire or celebrate learning.

Traditional hierarchical forms of leadership often derail these efforts. The leadership to make this happen requires the leader (be it teacher or principal) to focus on being a co-leader with the student at certain key points in the planning process. People in positions of decision-making or influence must be partners in the process of promoting student agency.

Administrators who have the ultimate authority over the use of space, approval of lesson planning, evaluation of teacher performance, or flexibility in schedules can be of tremendous help and encouragement, or they can be a deterrent to allowing more student agency to flourish.

Shifting toward allowing teachers to deliberately plan for and support more voice and choice in the classroom requires support from both the building and the district level. The expectations of the classroom will be nontraditional at the start. Patience and permission to try something with a bit of risk takes courage from leadership.

Figure C that follows lists seven key leadership qualities for enabling the development of student agency.

Figure C

Building leadership qualities to enable the development of student agency
1. Understand that learners should be at the heart of all learning experiences, including giving students voice and choice in classroom functioning.
2. Accept that roles and relationships will be different between student and teacher when agency is activated. Students will have more input into the the classroom operations, creating a greater sense of equanimity between teacher and student over sharing of information and decision-making.
3. Recognize that classroom activities will reflect more choice, self-determination, ownership, self-management, creative freedom, and student leadership. Students will embrace the diversity within their environment.
4. Create a broader leadership model that will allow students to have a voice in a formal way. Focus groups, student councils, and house leaders should be part of discussions about problem-solving and should provide input in areas that directly affect students' lives. Student voice is valued and invited.
5. Promote inquiry as a philosophy within the school. Student inquiry is built into the structure of the classroom environment, where students work together to initiate inquiry questions for study, to enhance the required curriculum model.
6. Expect the curriculum to be designed around learning progressions supported by rubrics. Students help construct and use rubrics for self-assessment. Accountability for learning is shared as students self-reflect based on rubrics and teacher input. The curriculum is not a time-bound experience; rather, task completion throughout the day/week is more flexible.
7. Implement practices that support assessment for learning. Shift away from summative grade-book experiences to providing feedback, reflection, and use of progressions. Students have access to the assessment tools and the common language of learning, which is used to provide feedback and for student reflection.

Shifting Leadership Roles

Traditional leadership characteristics do not allow for the leadership qualities listed above. To effectively implement agentic learning, leaders must rethink their roles as laid out below:

1. Leaders must recognize that the leader's primary role as "influencer" is to support educators to move away from thinking that being the "sage on the stage" is the best method of engaging learners. The leader's goal is to remove obstacles and resistance to change through positive influence, to make everyone's job easier.

2. Leaders recognize they must model appropriate vision-focused behavior that reflects personal ownership of the results. This starts with a clear understanding and modeling of performance accountability.

3. Leaders focus on those styles that produce positive results, and they vary those styles to fit situational needs. These styles include that of captain, coach, democrat, and politician.

4. Leaders engage in activities directed at building teams' capability, distributed leadership capability, and infrastructure/systems that support sustainable change.

5. Leaders share control through collaboration and input at all levels, while still recognizing they have the ultimate responsibility for results.

6. Students are given a significant and meaningful role in school governance. They make up the majority of the site council and hold key leadership positions wherever possible on school teams.

7. The union is viewed not as an antagonist but rather as a full partner in developing and supporting processes that allow teaching and learning activities to be fully personalized.

8. Leaders are fully schooled in applying individual, team, and organization performance models, as well as culture change best practices.

9. Leaders create and implement communication plans that address both internal and external/community needs. Appropriate communication vehicles are developed, employed, and resourced.

10. Leaders are open-minded about use of space, including flexibility as to when and where students learn. They place less demand on structured time and allow for more open-ended access to the curriculum. They encourage and support student voice in deciding how the school runs and allow for lesson designs that include student choice.

Potential Barriers to Success

The explicit behaviors listed in the leadership section are essential to establishing an agentic culture school-wide. They are also essential in building the relationship between student and teacher. However, leaders who are shifting to promote agentic student behaviors may need to overcome certain barriers as they make changes. In terms of our leadership efforts, emphasis on the following can impede success:

- student management over authentic engagement

- grades over authentic achievement

- structure over innovation

- hierarchy over collaboration

- compliance over self-direction

- delivery over discovery

- fixed mindset over growth mindset

- risk avoidance versus risk taking

In summary, the mindset toward fostering agentic behaviors requires leaders to engage and exhibit those attributes that contribute to self-direction, problem-solving, creativity, and initiative within their sphere of influence. This point cannot be overstated.

4. What Do We Mean by Learner Agency?

Student agency is the skill set that enables the student to become self-directed, a problem solver, and responsible for their own learning. For this to occur, the student and the teacher must change their relationship and establish a partnership in learning. Even respectful compliance is not the desired outcome—rather, the desired outcome should be for students to be committed to the learning and to drive their own learning.

In the book *Putting Students First* (Jones, Avery, and DiMartino), the authors define student agency as follows:

> Students taking ownership of and responsibility for their own learning is nearly universally accepted as a desirous and positive trait. When students have a say in what and how they engage with content, learning deepens and carries over into new applications and areas. There are numerous, well-documented, research-based practices designed to support and promote student voice and choice, including things like project-based learning, student involvement in school governance and advisory programs where individuals set and work toward short- and long-term goals.

New Zealand's educational system has been ahead of the game when it comes promoting what they label as learner agency. The conversations taking place in New Zealand contribute greatly to building understanding of this concept:

> Learner agency is about having the power, combined with choices, to take meaningful action and see the result of those decisions. It can be thought of as a catalyst for change or transformation. Learner agency is about students having the understanding, ability and opportunity to be part of the learning design and taking action to intervene in the learning process and become effective lifelong learners. (Wenmoth)

A research project sponsored by Core Education focused on what is needed to foster agency. A combined review of the literature and interviews with students and teachers involved in innovative learning environments have identified 10 key conditions that foster agentic learners. (See Figure D.)

Figure D

Fostering Agentic Learners
1. Learner at the center of all learning experiences: Empower the student to engage in active, self-directed learning experiences.
2. Relationships and partnerships: Maximize the potential of the relationship between student and teacher to create partnerships that increase learning.
3. Cultural responsiveness: Affirm students' different cultural identities and incorporate their cultural contexts into teaching and learning.
4. Leadership: Develop a student's mental model of what it means to be a leader and have a voice in areas that impact them.
5. Teaching as inquiry and student inquiry: Enable student agency through self-reflection about practice, providing students opportunities to have choices and reflect on their experiences.
6. Curriculum and pedagogy: Create conditions so that the student has choices about control and self-direction while the teacher assumes the role of guide to the students.
7. Assessment for learning: Expand the process of assessment to include reflection and feedback by the student along with that of the teacher.
8. Assessment for capability: Engage a growth mindset and the language of learning as a tool to communicate about the student's learning and to improve performance.
9. Technology: Use technology devices in high-level ways that enhance collaboration, life skills, time management, and electronic tool selection.
10. Innovative learning environments: Create an ecosystem of learning that is conducive to embracing student agency, which includes student voice and choice.

5. Three Dimensions of Agency

Simply placing the learner at the center of our planning will not produce agentic learners; neither will simply giving individual learners more choice and voice in their learning. Achieving agency is more complex than that. Demonstrating agency is primarily about demonstrating responsibility. Wenmoth (2013) has identified three dimensions of agency that must be addressed within the learning design process. Each of these is premised on how we exercise responsibility as individuals. The three dimensions of agency he identifies are:

1. Responsibility to self—Managing self, self-regulation, and self-direction are all terms used in classrooms where learner agency is intentionally promoted. Having the freedom to choose or express ideas is good, but those things come with a responsibility to do so in a way that avoids harm or negative consequences.

2. Responsibility to others—To focus purely on self and not consider the impact of our words and actions on others isn't agency—it's hedonism. As individuals, we live within an interdependent

ecosystem. As such, a student's capacity to enact personal agency mediates and is mediated by the classroom's sociocultural context.

3. Responsibility to the shared environment—Just as we live in an interdependence with other humans, that ecosystem must involve the environment(s) we share. Developing agency includes being aware of the responsibility for one's own actions and the actions of the group on the environment that is shared. Centuries of seeing ourselves being somehow separate from the environment we share is now catching up with us, and we are understanding with great insight that so many of the environmental concerns we are now addressing are a direct result of our own choices and decisions.

To foster authentic, meaningful, and sustainable agency in learners, we must be intentional about our focus on all three dimensions in our planning and implementation of classroom and school programs. Some examples follow.

Responsibility to self:

- Ensure that when choice is offered, frameworks/scaffolds are provided to allow students to be intentional about the choices they make and the reasons for making them.

- Provide opportunities for risk-taking, and for mistakes—but always ensure there is an opportunity to reflect on and learn from those mistakes.

- Help them confront challenges when things get too difficult—provide encouragement and scaffolds for approaching problems. Introducing the "learning pit" by Jamie Nottingham can be useful here (Nottingham, 2010).

- Provide opportunities to learn about the consequences of making poor decisions, such as highlighting the impact of cyber-bullying or ignoring others' advice.

Responsibility to others:

- When focusing on collaborative activity and group work, ensure the group has authentic ways to process choices and decisions. Assigning group roles can be a good starting point here, so that over time, groups will choose to assign roles themselves as they become more aware of the strengths and contributions that individuals bring.

- Take time to allow learners to process conflict in groups, learning to accept different points of view, express empathy, and work as part of a team. Provide assurance that this sort of thing is a natural part of how people address problems. Model these behaviors as adults, and use opportunities to explain this to students.

Responsibility to the environment we share:

- In the immediate environment of the classroom or school, this can include putting away library books, keeping the grounds litter free, cleaning the paint trays, disposing of waste materials or recycling materials used for learning, and making decisions about using plastics vs. natural products when selecting resources for school use.

- For the broader environment of the community or world, examples include demonstrating concern for local or global environmental issues, such as the design and use of public spaces, pollution of local streams and waterways, treatment of refugees, and how local and national political decisions are made.

The key point here is that students understand how their actions and others' actions cannot be divorced from the impact on the environment we share—now and into the future.

6. A Partnership Learning Model

To be intentional about developing learner agency, thinking about creating a "partnership learning model" in our classrooms is useful. In this model, learning design is a shared responsibility involving teachers, students, and, where appropriate, parents. The questions that follow may be helpful in guiding decisions about the new systems and structures being put into place:

- How do learners know when and how to take personal initiative? Do assignments and classroom systems invite individual student initiative? Are there reflective questions for students as they grow in their understanding of what self-regulation looks like when problems arise?

- What opportunities are available for students to establish and work within an interdependent ecosystem? How do individual students understand their contributions to the success of the group? Examples include meeting classroom or grade-level goals, smooth transitions between activities, and small-group project work.

- What structures or systems are in place to ensure that the environment is a safe and orderly place for learning? Do the systems and structures in place provide explicit guidance to students, such as posted agreed upon norms, rubrics, and other aids to help students acquire self-directed behaviors socially and academically?

A sense of agency grows in a supportive environment. The environment for learning is designed, managed, and controlled within intentional learning design. Therefore, the dimensions described above must be considered and then woven into the daily learning environment.

7. Agency by Design

Agency cannot be developed in our learners in a vacuum. We must be intentional about it. The teacher cannot simply announce that, henceforth, students will be in charge. To do that is simply to abdicate the responsibility we have as educators.

But neither can we decide one day to teach our students to be agentic. Agency cannot be taught; it is experienced. It is what happens when we deliberately shift the ownership of learning and create the right conditions and environments. This will allow our learners to become co-constructors of the curriculum

and learning experiences—and to be contributors and activists rather than consumers in our instructional process.

Several dimensions must be considered as we become intentional about encouraging agency in our learners.

First is creating a more agentic learning design based on proven pedagogical models, including constructivist practices and backward design in lesson planning. Fostering agentic behaviors with our students fits well into the science of learning theory as a way to encourage more authentic student engagement with the learning. Simply put, it is a matter of looking at what we do traditionally with lesson design and inviting the students to be contributors along the way. The teacher is still in charge, but as conditions warrant, the student is invited to have more voice and choice in the learning environment.

A traditional learning design model starts with the end in mind—what we want our student to know and be able to do; a design for how we are to assess the learning outcomes; and, finally, the types of activities that would support our learning outcomes. Those fundamental planning and teaching skills will always remain important. Otherwise, we're simply abdicating responsibility as the more experienced learner/leader.

The critical differentiation from traditional teacher-centered planning comes with shifting from a unilateral approach to a bilateral approach. Once the required elements of learning or assessments are accounted for, we can look to broaden the learning environment by allowing our learners to become more actively involved in every aspect of the planning process, including what is being learned and how.

Joseph DiMartino, in his book *They're Not Stupid*, states that "in the ideal student-centered environment, student input is sought, listened to and addressed authentically.... Students can become the chief architects of the learning and contributing citizens to the school community," (2017, p. 60). So it is with this spirit of students as architects of their learning that we explore the various points in time along the planning and delivery cycle when we have opportunities to include student voice and choice.

The columns in Figure E demonstrate the adjustments to be made when moving from a teacher-centered design model to one that fosters agentic behaviors. The dimensions of the teaching and learning process

in column one apply to all learning settings and are aligned with the conceptual framework of traditionally expected or required instructional planning.

In the middle column, indicators of traditional approaches/current practice reflect what may be commonly seen in many school settings. But these practices are not the only ones that exist, and those listed should be viewed as examples.

The third column identifies the key conditions for promoting an agentic approach. This column focuses on specific behaviors or strategies intended to provoke a "stretch" for educators seeking to enact more agentic practices in their classroom/school context.

Figure E

Dimension	Traditional approach/current practice	Key conditions for promoting an agentic approach
Curriculum: What form does the curriculum take? What framework(s) are used to specify the desired outcomes and to guide selection of learning content and design of learning sequences? Who is involved?	School curriculum selected and organized by teachers, with an emphasis on coverage. Little opportunity to incorporate topical or local content. Emphasis on the transfer of knowledge and development of skills required for gaining employment and being successful in life. Focus on meeting external requirements (such as standards).	Curriculum is locally developed within mandated guidelines. Content and resources are contextually selected, ensuring learning is authentic to the learners' context and experience. Learners are included in the process of local curriculum design. Emphasis on development of capabilities, preparing learners as capable, confident, self-directed learners.
Design of learning activity: What will students be doing as they engage with the learning materials and respond to the teacher's direction?	The teacher determines learning activities and approaches, frequently as whole-class or group direction. Some variety in approach may be offered, but choice is limited to what the teacher has designed. Learning is mostly completed independently. While group work may be included, this tends to be orchestrated by teachers based on ability groupings.	Emphasis on learning *as* activity, where learners have choice about the way they approach learning tasks, and they are supported in this by Universal Design for Learning principles. They have a sense of ownership and take responsibility for learning. Learners may choose to work alone or in collaboration with others, including peers and teacher. Learners are aware that every decision and action they take will impact the thinking, behavior, or decisions of others—and vice versa.

Acts of teaching: What are the pedagogical approaches used to stimulate and engage learners?	Teacher's primary role is instructional, taking full responsibility for decisions about what is learned and how it is to be learned. Dominant pedagogical practices are didactic, with a focus on the teacher's role as director and manager of learning.	A range of pedagogical approaches are employed, depending on the scope and nature of the learning activity. Teachers are active in scaffolding the learning process and increasingly act as facilitator, coach, or guide.
Support and supervision: What systems and processes are in place to ensure the learner is supported and progressing at an appropriate pace?	Teachers are the primary source of feedback and support for learners. Decisions about the timing and nature of support provided are generally left to the teacher, based on professional observation and judgment.	Learners are increasingly self-managing and can identify where support is required and seek support/feedback from the best person to guide them. Learners recognize other students' learning and support this through effective, personalized feedback/forward, and questioning. Parents/caregivers are recognized as partners in learning.
Assessment: What approach(es) are employed to demonstrate success in learning and provide evidence to support this? Where is the record of learning stored, and who manages it?	Learning objectives/intentions are pursued, rather than success criteria. Teachers make all judgments as to when these are met.	Learners capable of constructing or co-constructing their own success criteria, with the support of peers or teacher as required. Focus is on learners' ability to succeed, with levels of performance (success) recorded in rubrics.
Monitoring progress: How is progress in learning supervised and monitored?	Teachers maintain systems for monitoring and recording progress and achievement—and for reporting on this. Often a big emphasis on "sampling" as time limits ability to engage deeply with each learner.	Self-assessment and monitoring are an embedded part of the learning process. Learners use various tools and frameworks (such as portfolios and rubrics) to accurately identify and record their own progress and achievement. Learners are active in maintaining and curating their own record of learning.
Learning environment: Where does learning predominantly take place, and how do these environments support the pedagogical design and learners' preferences?	The primary focus for learning is within a school/classroom setting, with some use of specialist spaces (such as library and computer lab). Some learning tasks are assigned to be completed at home or on student's own time.	Learning occurs in a range of settings designed to support the learning activity. Learners have increasing choice about which environment(s) they may use. This includes settings outside of school, such as online. Much learning activity involves growing, working, and participating in local community spaces (libraries, public facilities, and businesses).

8. Fostering Agentic Behaviors in Lesson Design

The following section highlights some of the ways we can invite our students to be better engaged and more agentic in their learning.

Dimension 1: Curriculum

The essence of our work as educators is found within the curriculum. Learner agency is enhanced when students contribute to curriculum design, through building empathy or passion with what they are expected to learn, and when they have voice and choice through extended learning opportunities in the broader community.

Agency in curriculum is fostered when:

1. Students know why the content is important and how they will use it.

2. Students experience and help create learning activities that address cultural differences and individual differences.

3. Students contribute to lesson design with suggestions for additional content and/or variations or additions to the learning activities, based on personal interests.

4. Students can access the complete unit of study and the required performance activities.

5. Students are able to expand the curriculum to include topics or units of personal interest beyond the traditional curriculum content.

6. Students can apply their learning to real-world experiences that they design and implement.

Dimension 2: Design of Learning Activity

The design of learning occurs when teachers engage in planning the lesson or units of work, based on the curriculum. The challenge here is to ensure that this process involves learners as design partners, and that the design of learning includes opportunities to create learning partnerships with students.

Agency in design of learning is fostered when:

1. Students collaborate in identifying the purpose for what is being learned.

2. Students co-construct the learning goals and outcomes with the teacher.

3. Students collaborate with the teacher in designing the learning activities.

4. Students contribute to learning design by formulating questions to be answered within the unit of study.

5. Students are able to participate in what is designed based on their individual learning needs and preferences.

6. Students have access to learning activities that allow for flexibility, voice, and choice.

Dimension 3: Acts of Teaching

Agentic behavior is expressed when students are active participants in the learning process and not passive recipients of curriculum delivery.

Technology adds an important dimension for developing agency because of the way digital technologies allow students to collaborate with others, access information independently, assess validity of newfound information, support time management, and aid in discerning tools for learning.

Agency is fostered through acts of teaching where:

1. Students collaborate with others in groups with individual responsibility as well as group accountability.

2. Students are given an appropriate level of freedom in relation to self-expression and self-direction in approaching their unit assignments.

3. Students are given the opportunity to personalize their assignments in ways that support cultural difference; showcase different strengths and talents; and allow for an inclusive learning community.

4. Students regularly receive personalized feedback throughout the learning process, enabling them to shape and modify their performance throughout.

Dimension 4: Support and Supervision

Students can support and manage their work with tools and resources that give guidance and feedback along the way. Timelines, checkpoints of progress with projects, scheduled consultations with teachers, and rubrics that give clear guidance on outcomes can be useful tools.

Agency is fostered through support and supervision when:

1. Students have access to all the tools and resources available within the unit of study.

2. Students are provided clear expectations, descriptions, and outcomes as to what they should be able to know and do at the end of the unit.

3. Students have access to several support options, such as direct instruction, online tutorials, and other individual tutorials, such as peer support and problem-solving resources, when additional help is needed.

4. Students and teachers collaborate on calendar checkpoints.

5. Students are provided opportunities for input as to the type of support that is best for the individual student.

6. Students and their parents are aware of the resources, tools, and checkpoints that help guide the learning process.

7. Students collaborate with the teacher for the purpose of constructive feedback, and they have multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery.

Dimension 5: Assessment

Agentic behavior is more likely to develop when students have a clear and precise understanding of what is expected when demonstrating grade-level performance on any given learning expectation.

Agency is fostered through assessment when:

1. Students contribute to setting clear expectations as to what grade-level performance looks like.

2. Students contribute to developing the rubric for defining grade-level or beyond performance levels.

3. Students can analyze samples and determine why or why not a specific sample of work meets grade-level performance criteria.

4. Students use exemplars to determine areas in need of improvement for their own work.

5. Students use both self- and peer assessments so that they can reflect on and meaningfully discuss their progress with their peers.
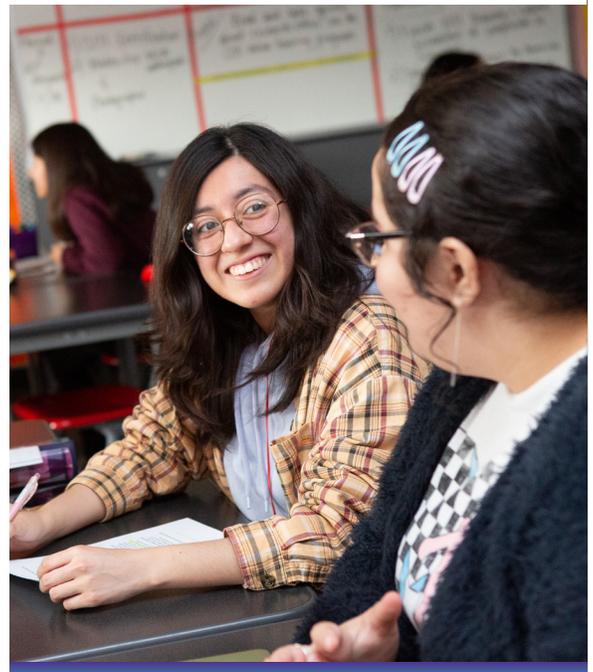
Dimension 6: Monitoring Progress

Engagement in the learning process is heightened when it includes self-monitoring and tracking of progress. Students should be given the tools and expectations to use a self-checking system, rather than waiting for the teacher to provide timelines for assessment.

Agency is fostered through monitoring progress when:

1. Students use a system of portfolios or rubrics, where they can keep track of their work in a systematic and organized way.

2. Students can analyze samples and determine why or why not a specific sample of work meets grade-level performance criteria.

3. Students use exemplars to determine areas in need of improvement for their own work.

4. Students set personal goals and timelines for meeting those goals, tied to specific learning standards.

5. Students have access to the whole unit of study so that they can move at a pace that allows for efficient use of time on learning (a faster rate of learning in some areas, slower in others, with reasonable time constraints to complete the coursework).

6. Students select from various activities to be completed, with flexibility on the order in which activities can be completed, as appropriate.

7. Students have time for personal consultation with their teacher to report their progress on assignments and evaluate whether they need additional support.

8. Students participate in student-led conferences with parents/guardians using work samples that highlight accomplishments and learning goals.

9. Students have access to their achievement data and can use the results to set personal goals.

Dimension 7: Learning Environment

An essential element in fostering agentic behavior is allowing students to have flexibility, voice, and choice in how they use their physical environment. The definition of a learning environment should not be limited to a physical place or time in the traditional school or classroom, and it may include home and community spaces.

Agency is fostered through an expanded view of learning environments when:

- Students have access to technology devices and internet services to enable self-directed work outside the realm of the classroom.

- Students have flexibility in seating areas, small learning hubs, collective work spaces, and quiet work spaces.

- Students have flexibility in managing time; for example, hour-by-hour bell schedules are replaced with larger time frames that allow students to be more fluid in their use of time.

- Students are given options to complete coursework in unique environments, through internships or extended learning opportunities in the community.

- Students have access to the teacher, subject experts, or learning support people in times outside of the traditional school day.

IN SUMMARY: WE CAN DO THIS!

Taking small steps—and sometimes even big steps—to expand student agency is doable. We have many examples of schools from New England to New Zealand implementing this concept with great success.

The book *They're Not Stupid,* by DiMartino and Midwood, captured the spirit of our agenda as follows:

> The irony of school life is that the students at the center of the school enterprise are the least empowered members of the community. Without opportunities for students to create their own voice and influence what learning could look like in their communities, students will have an educational experience that lacks substance, purpose and relevance. In order to better serve students, schools must create a set of conditions in which students are empowered to become key partners in the decision-making process about issues that affect their daily experiences in school. (DiMartino and Midwood, 2017, p. 59)

We opened this paper by asking: What lessons did the pandemic reveal? One answer is that we need to create schools that promote agentic behaviors in students. We learned that student agency does not suddenly appear when needed due to a pandemic. This type of student cannot be developed without teachers' and administrators' deliberate effort. The recent research by Core Education said it best: "The formula for learner agency is having the power, combined with choices, to take meaningful action and see the results of decisions taken. It can be thought of as a catalyst for change or transformation." (Wenmoth)

What we learned about school in the last year of sporadic face-to-face and virtual learning is that there is a tremendous need to ramp up our efforts. Many students were lost when engagement required much more than compliant behavior following face-to-face, teacher-centered guidance. We lost valuable time with students due to the pandemic when students did not have the skills to be self-directed learners. There is no time like now to prepare our students to have the "ability and opportunity to be part of the learning design." (Wenmoth)

The lessons learned from both positive and negative experiences with the pandemic bring the practice of increasing student agency to the forefront. We believe that if we are to create conditions for learning via the virtual school model, increasing student agency is essential. We have seen a desire by students and educators alike to implement the strategies of a more flexible learning environment, both face to face and online.

References

Cover Image Credit: THINKGlobal Academy.

Page 9 Image Credit: Julie Lindsay, Social Entrepreneurship Student Workshop. https://www.flickr.com/photos/julielindsay/15404705223

DiMartino, J., & Midwood, J. (2017). *They're not stupid*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Dimitriadis, D. (no date available). *What is design thinking? A handy guide for teachers*. https://www.makersempire.com/what-is-design-thinking-a-handy-guide-for-classroom-teachers/

Gallagher, A., & Thordarson, K. (2018). *Design thinking for school leaders*. ASCD.

Jones, M., Avery, R., & DiMartino, J. (2020). *Putting students first*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Nottingham, J. (2010 1st ed.; 2016 2nd ed.). *Challenging learning*. David Fulton/Routledge. https://www.challenginglearning.com/product/challenging-learning-au/

Wenmoth, D. (2014). *Learner agency: Final research report*. Core Education.

Wenmoth, D. (2020). *Lessons from lockdown*. FutureMakers. https://futuremakers.nz/2020/08/20/lessons-from-lockdown/

Wenmoth, D. (2013). *Learner agency*. FutureMakers. https://futuremakers.nz/learner-agency-2/

AURORA INSTITUTE

A New Dawn for Every Learner

The mission of the AURORA INSTITUTE is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all.

1100 N. Glebe Road, Suite 1010
Arlington, VA 22201

www.AURORA-INSTITUTE.org