Dr. Mishkat Al Moumin:
When Students Own the Work, Learning Gets Applied



On the Road Again *is an exclusive monthly feature on our Roadmap 2031 initiative, written by Dr. Mishkat Al Moumin, a leading voice in thought leadership on the future of public education. We house her collective work on our dedicated* ***On the Road Again*** *page. Follow her there!*



The student is not struggling; in fact, they score the highest on every test.

Homework is completed to perfection. Everything looks right on paper. As an educator, it is the kind of performance many hope to see across the class.

Until the next open-ended question comes, a question that asks the student what to do in a specific situation, how to approach a problem without steps, or what position to take and defend with reasoning.

Silence.

You start to wonder why. Where did the high performance go? What happened to perfection? The student looks at you and says:

“Just tell me what to do.”

It is not a gap in knowledge. It is a gap in ownership.

School often trains students to follow directions with precision. Instructions are clear. Tasks are defined. Success is measured by completion. Over time, students learn to respond, not to decide.

Then the structure disappears.



Outside of school, problems are not assigned. Steps are not provided. Decisions carry consequences. The ability to move forward without waiting becomes essential. In these situations, agency shows up.

Agency is not a program. It is visible in behavior:

- Students set goals.
- Students track progress.
- Students make choices and adjust when those choices do not work.
- Students ask questions that go beyond the task.
- Students take responsibility for outcomes, not just completion.
- Student agency is not theoretical.

While teaching service members and training faculty at the Defense Language Institute, a shift became clear. When instruction relied on control, students completed tasks but disengaged. When trust was introduced, the classroom changed. Students began to ask harder questions, challenge ideas, and take ownership of their learning. They did not wait for direction.

They participated in shaping it.

The shift from completing tasks to taking ownership did not happen by accident. It was built through specific choices.



Start with voice. As an educator, begin by asking students what they see in the task, the problem, or the situation in front of them, what they think is working or not, and what they would do differently to move it forward.

Make decisions visible and reward them. Acknowledge when students share their thinking, even when it is incomplete. Students are more likely to engage when their input matters and does not put them at risk. Instead of giving answers, ask students to explain their reasoning and next steps.

Use reflection consistently. Not at the end of a unit, but during the work. What is working? What is not? What changes next?

Create space for mistakes. When errors are treated as part of learning, students take risks without waiting for permission.

Build regular check-ins. Short conversations focused on decisions, not just results.



Agency becomes visible through clear indicators:

- *Work begins without waiting.*
- *Questions are raised before prompts are given.*
- *Revisions happen without direction.*
- *Decisions are explained, not just answers.*
- *Feedback is sought and applied.*
- *Approaches shift when something does not work.*

Agency is not a personality trait. It is a learned behavior.

Without agency, learning depends on structure. With agency, learning gets applied beyond it.

> ***The question is not whether students completed the work. The question is whether students own their work, not because they were instructed, but because they are invested in it.***

Ownership becomes visible in specific moments.

- **Where in the classroom do students make decisions?**
- **Where do students track their own progress?**
- **Where do students adjust when something does not work?**

If those moments are missing, ownership is missing.

When students own the work, learning gets applied.

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Originally published on The Worthy Educator Blog on Wednesday, September 2, 2026.

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