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Ann DeChenne



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What is Agency and Why Does it Matter?

By Ann DeChenne M.Ed Ph.D (ABD), Founder and Director of Little by Little Education Services, Salem, Oregon

It's a question I began to ask myself this year as I struggled to find a way to truly capture my student's attention. It was an aha moment while brainstorming one afternoon in front of my whiteboard; dry erase marker in hand. How was I going to get my students to engage? Over the past few years I have begun to encounter more and more learned helplessness (or should I call it manufactured helplessness, thanks to covid, cell phones, and social media).

Agency for both students and teachers isn't just a concept, it's a core ingredient for meaningful learning and long term sustainability in the classroom.

The reluctance to increase our speed and embrace technology at the rate society does isn't just a missed opportunity - it's a disservice. Our students are growing up with social media, generative AI, and online ecosystems baked into their daily lives. If we're still debating whether to let kids use tools like ChatGPT or Khanmigo - we're not preparing them, we are restraining them.

To lead with purpose in this new environment, educational leaders must do more than tolerate technology. We must model it, integrate it, and reimagine systems that prepare students not just to navigate the world, but to shape it.

What is Agency?

Simply, agency is the ability to make choices and take action in ways that matter. The student who raises their hand and says "Can you help?" or "I don't understand?", that student is demonstrating agency. For students agency isn't just voice or participation, but also influence, relevance, and ownership.

For educators, agency is professional autonomy, creativity and room to respond to real student needs. This doesn't mean letting students do whatever they want, but giving students some control when they often don't feel in control of much at all.

Agency is not a soft skill, it is foundational and it is important now more than ever. Agency supports deeper thinking, especially for the multilingual, those who are identified as needing special education, and students from marginalized communities.

Too often, in education the work focuses on what people lack, rather than what they can do. When narratives position students as passive recipients, they strip away agency, the very thing that drives long-term engagement, learning and self-determination.



Some ideas for what an agency-centered approach might mean are:

- ➔ Recognizing that students are not helpless, they are capable, resourceful, and often already leading change. Even when they don't feel those things, we can model, affirm, and create space for them to grow into that identity.
- ➔ Shifting from “giving a voice” to actually listening to the voices that are already speaking. With grading, planning, and committees it is easy to get caught up and forget to actually listen to what the students are saying. I gave my students a survey and it took me almost the whole year to actually get to the results. It wasn't timely but I actually looked at the results to identify what the students were telling me. I have made some changes accordingly and realize some work that I need to do to help the students understand that they have a voice.
- ➔ Ensuring that students are decision-makers, not just passive recipients of the content. Offering choice, even in small ways, restores agency to students who often feel they have none. It can be as small as giving them a choice of assignments or how to present their work. When we center agency, we change everything.



Schools aren't always designed to nurture agency. They are built to deliver curriculum, manage large groups, and measure outcomes. Student voice is often not centered and neither is teacher autonomy. Yet, moments in the classroom can change everything. Pivoting mid-lesson because of a question a student asks, a group proposes a new way to show their learning, a student says “can you help me?”. These are moments of agency. These are the heart of learning.

Why Agency Now More Than Ever

In the past few years, I've seen student engagement drop in ways I hadn't expected. The pandemic interrupted so much more than academic progress, it disrupted motivation, fractured relationships, and deepened a sense of disconnection from learning.

Students returned to classrooms carrying invisible weight: grief, uncertainty, digital burnout, and in many cases, a belief that school no longer had anything meaningful to offer them. They aren't wrong to question it. Our students live in a world where the future of work is uncertain, where AI tools can write essays in seconds and where viral content feels more valuable than careful thinking and homework. In that world compliance based education, focused on worksheets, rigid rules, and standardized tests, feels increasingly irrelevant.

“For me this journey toward centering agency isn't over. It's a practice. A mindset. What would change if we stopped teaching to students and started learning with them?”



That’s why agency matters more than ever. When students feel powerless and mute, they disengage. When they don’t believe their voice or choices matter, they retreat to apathy and defiance. But when we invite them to co-create their learning, when we show them that their ideas are important, something begins to shift.

Agency isn’t about learning outcomes, it’s about identity. When we center agency, we give them ownership. Confidence. Resistance. Those are the very things they’ll need to navigate an unpredictable world.

This shift doesn’t just benefit students. It can revitalize teachers too. When I began centering agency in my classroom, I felt myself coming back to life as an educator. I wasn’t just managing behavior but watching students begin to become more aware, more curious. I wasn’t just covering content, I was listening, adapting, and co-creating. Did it happen overnight? No, and I personally and professionally have a long way to go, but I am actively on the journey.

We don’t need any more systems that ask students to sit still and be quiet. We need spaces that ask them: What do you think? What do you want to change? What do you want to build? Agency is the thread that connects learning to purpose

Agency doesn’t require a curriculum overhaul. It starts with small intentional shifts: asking more questions, offering meaningful choices, and truly listening. It means showing students, especially those who’ve been marginalized, that their thoughts, voices and decisions matter.

For me this journey toward centering agency isn’t over. It’s a practice. A mindset. What would change if we stopped teaching to students and started learning with them?



Ann DeChenne is a high school English language development teacher at North Marion School District in Oregon. In her spare time she is Founder/Director of Little by Little Education Services a 501C3 that works with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Refugee Led Organizations (RLOs) in Africa and India. Ann has a Masters in Education and PhD (ABD) in Education.



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