



Unlocking How Students Learn to Learn

Reshaping Instruction to Foster Learner Agency

Imagine a classroom where students communicate their interest in learning, ask for a say in the learning process, and act intentionally to explore and grapple with new ideas. Classrooms like this are real, and they

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result from learner agency. Learner agency is a set of *skills*, *mindsets*, and *opportunities* enabling learners to establish goals for themselves, take action toward those goals, and reflect and adjust their learning behaviors as they monitor their progress.

Learner agency is necessary for students to consolidate new learning. In environments where teachers and students prioritize learner agency, students actively engage in and take ownership of their learning. Students with agency seek relevant learning experiences, connecting new ideas, academic knowledge, and personal experiences. They are comfortable reflecting on how their learning is developing, recognizing when it is still emerging, and selecting strategies they can use or resources they can review to connect new ideas to what they already know. These practices are necessary

to assimilate new ideas and consolidate the learning process.

When teachers and students work collaboratively to develop agency, the classroom culture shifts. Students assess their own learning proactively rather than waiting for the teacher to evaluate it. They consider evidence of their learning by exploring their peers' thinking, asking questions, and sharing their emerging understanding. Compared to traditional instructional models where the teacher is in charge of how content is delivered, students develop skills to construct new

knowledge by building on their own ideas and those of their peers.

“I never realized how much learning I could achieve when I allowed myself to cooperate with other people. That whole group aspect of a classroom really did help bring out another level of how I could extend my learning.”

-Enrique R., a Student Learning Ambassador in Tucson, AZ

The Journey, Not Just the Destination

Twenty years ago, WestEd’s Formative Insights Team began developing and leading professional learning focused on supporting new student roles. Our work is grounded in key principles of the formative assessment process. In *formative assessment*, teachers adopt instructional practices that uncover what students know *during* learning — not at the end of learning. In advanced formative assessment, teachers and students share responsibility for using evidence of learning *as it develops* during daily lessons.

In our team’s early professional learning models, teachers reported beneficial shifts to their practice, including improved feedback routines and greater awareness of where students were in their learning. Yet the hallmark of advanced practice — *students using evidence to inform their learning* — was largely missing from our early impact data. We learned from focus groups that teachers assumed their students, given the opportunity, could self-assess and monitor their own learning without being taught these skills. We also heard that educators had widely varying ideas about student agency, how it developed, and their role in developing it.

So, our team took a closer look at different characteristics of classrooms based on their degree of advanced formative assessment practice. We returned to the core research and were inspired by the literature on self-regulation, metacognition, and motivation, particularly the work of Barry Zimmerman and Dale Schunk. Using their guiding principles, we reframed how teachers and school leaders could support students in developing and strengthening their learning agency during daily classroom instruction — in every classroom, every day.

Building Blocks

Our team’s professional learning approach shifted from a focus on the teacher’s role in formative assessment toward reframing the students’ role during daily instruction. We sought ways for teachers to become more intentional in using formative assessment to support students as they developed learner agency — while learning academic content. We based our work on the premise that **agency skills can and must be taught**. Teaching students these skills has significant benefits, including greater student participation, increased attendance, better-quality learning behaviors, increased motivation, and improved achievement.

WestEd’s Formative Insights Team supports students, teachers, and school leaders to reframe daily instruction in ways that explicitly teach the skills and mindsets necessary to develop learner agency.

A key challenge when modifying professional learning was the variety of beliefs about what agency is and what evidence teachers should seek of students’ agentic learning. Through a literature review, our team identified four underlying constructs describing the characteristic elements of agency: self-regulation, metacognition, learner autonomy, and self-efficacy. Knowing these building blocks helps teachers and students learn and apply agentic skills and knowledge.

- **Self-regulation** reflects the extent to which learners set goals, plan a course of action, select appropriate strategies, self-assess, and independently monitor their learning. When students self-regulate their learning, they do so in three distinct phases: a goal-setting phase, a performance phase, and a self-reflection phase.
- **Metacognition** is the ability to think about one’s own thinking. When acting metacognitively, students seek out and engage with evidence to reflect on their current learning status, consider a range of learning approaches, understand ways they learn best, and make decisions to manage the next steps in learning.
- **Learner autonomy** is the capacity and willingness to act independently. However, it also encompasses working cooperatively with others to support learning. When exhibiting learner autonomy, students express comfort working alongside and learning from peers, seek out peers as learning resources, and provide feedback to peers to deepen their learning.

- Self-efficacy** involves students' beliefs about their ability to carry out tasks. Students with high self-efficacy believe they can set and accomplish goals, utilize feedback to guide new learning, and persevere during more challenging tasks. Students with low self-efficacy may exhibit helplessness or show signs of stress when faced with a difficult or unfamiliar task.
- Each of these building blocks is enlivened when using daily formative assessment practices. Table 1 summarizes our theory of action. It frames the relationship among the building blocks, formative classroom instructional routines, and student learning experiences. The center column outlines daily instructional routines used by teachers in formative assessment. The right-hand column outlines how students engage in learning experiences that support their use of each building block.

Table 1: Sample Teacher Strategies and Student Learning Experiences Aligned With the Building Blocks of Agency.

Building Block	Daily Formative Assessment Instructional Strategies	Student Learning Experiences to Strengthen Learner Agency
Self-regulation	Develop daily routines to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop or co-construct lesson-sized learning goals (support students in internalizing lesson goals) Design a range of learning tasks showing visible evidence of student learning as it develops Create opportunities for students to explore new learning through peer feedback and academic discourse Model, teach, and provide feedback to develop students' skills in using evidence to inform learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use success criteria to guide their learning Set academic and personal goals Explore new academic concepts and different ways to understand those concepts through academic dialogue with peers Give, receive, and apply peer feedback to strengthen new learning Conduct self-assessment to assess progress toward the daily learning goals
Metacognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model and conduct think-alouds to develop students' skills to assess and use evidence during learning Plan and model learning tasks and questioning strategies to strengthen how students articulate their thinking Create learning tasks in which students visually represent ideas to demonstrate how they are thinking about processes, systems, and conceptual understandings Collect evidence to show the qualities of student thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articulate their thinking and highlight evidence of their current understanding Ask questions of themselves and others Track how learning is developing through journals, notebooks, portfolios, or learning logs Discuss emerging learning during academic dialogue with peers and peer feedback
Learner autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore with students how they have used and benefited from feedback Use descriptive feedback describing the qualities of student performance as aligned with lesson success criteria Prioritize structures in which teachers and students can gather feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persevere in their learning by selecting appropriate strategies to support next steps Give thoughtful and extended answers that highlight how learning is developing Ask questions of themselves and others
Self-efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use descriptive feedback aligned with the success criteria Support students to reference the success criteria to reflect on their learning at various points during the lesson Share responsibility for learning with students Create learning experiences that make content accessible and meaningful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use feedback from the teacher and peers to further learning Use evidence from self-assessments to compare the current level of understanding to lesson outcomes Use a range of learning and affective strategies to persist when tasks are difficult

New Roles for Students

In 2018, our team piloted a year-long online course called Student Agency in Learning (SAIL). The pilot occurred in three urban school districts and included approximately 500 teachers. SAIL offers multiple sources of evidence, including teacher surveys, student surveys, and teacher learning journals, that our team collects to understand course implementation, impact on teacher learning, and the changing student role.

Pre- and post-SAIL pilot teacher survey data (Table 2)

highlight shifts in the student role aligned with the four building blocks of agency. This teacher-reported evidence, consistent with other course data collected since the SAIL pilot, shows that skills aligned with student agency develop during classroom formative assessment.

The Student Experience: Learning the Skills of Agency

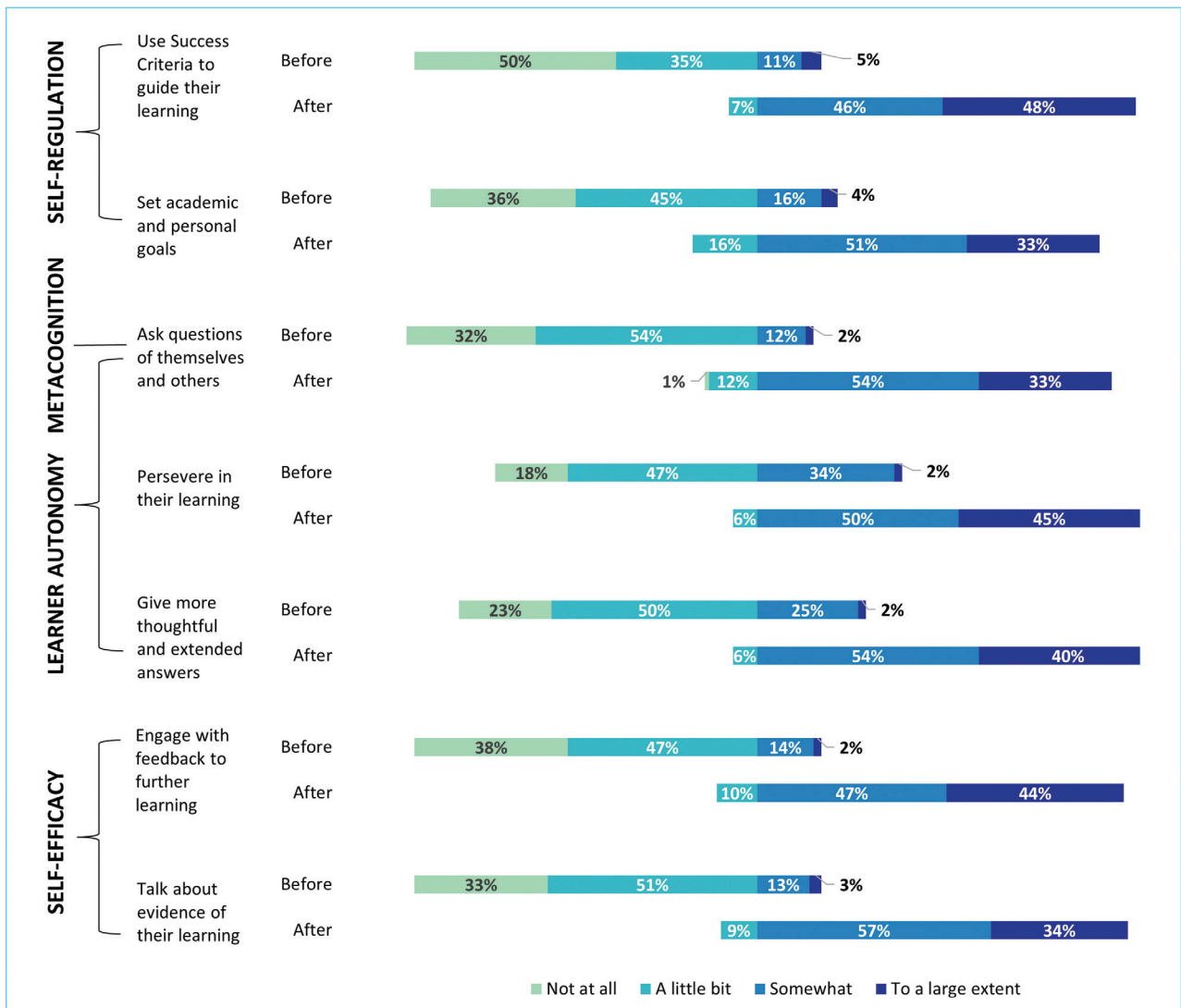
WestEd has collected thousands of anonymous student reflections, directly from students and as recorded by their teachers. For example, teachers shared student

quotes about valued changes in the learning process on a Padlet course “wall.”

WestEd’s team has encouraged and supported students to share what they are learning about agency. Students from multiple sites where teachers are learning formative assessment have spoken at national conferences,¹ led workshop presentations, and shared stories with their peers and teachers.

Sunnyside Unified School District has been developing teacher and student use of formative assessment for about eight years. Their

Table 2: Teacher Perceptions of Students’ Practices Before and After SAIL.



Sample of a Padlet Course Wall

your criteria and your ways of teaching."

Success Criteria
"It helped me get organized about my learning. Because I use it, I can keep track of what I know well and what I need to work on."

Up for the challenge
"If the math is hard you can like get challenged and it makes you want to do it."
Students can be motivated by challenging problems.

"My friend helps me to do high quality work".
"I like sharing how I solve problems with my friends and get excited when I teach them something new."

I like feeling like I can help my friends. It makes me feel good that we are all learning.

Collaborative Groups
"I liked when we worked in groups because I could actually explain what we were doing and I felt smart."
This student had the opportunity to shine in a small group, where as in our large group, he would get swallowed by other larger personalities in the class.

Collaborative Work
"I wish we had more group tasks that are challenging." This tells me that my students enjoy learning from each other and supporting each other as they grapple with tough tasks.

Group Work
"This class is more fun and it's not awkward to talk to random students because you sit somewhere different with different people every day."
"Learning is more fun because it's

helped me to understand my own gaps." - This reminds me that I need to structure in more peer collaboration opportunities. I always give students the option to work with peers but I need to make it more structured to support learning.

connection
"Using the new ways for goals, we can link our learning together from lesson to lesson!" This was huge to me because that is part of the reason I love the learning goals. They are small, easy to break apart chunks of skills that can be put together for a broad, overall goal.

"Can we do more creative projects next year" this shows me that students want to have more direct involvement in the learning process

Peer feedback is an easier way to help me because I feel I can open up around my friends.

- yes because teachers explain what we need to do very nicely and easily
The student is connecting to the daily learning goals and success criteria.

Success Criteria
"It gave me an idea of what I'm supposed to learn and what key points I should focus on."
"to know what I need to be successful at."

Feedback
I like to be able to get feedback because it helps me to become a better student.

"When I'm stuck, my friends can help me"
This stood out because they are showing that they don't need to always rely on the teacher for help, but recognize that there are other "experts" in the room.

I am interested in what I am learning in class often.
I choose Often because I do normally like what we were learning in this class I also like the fun activities that Mrs. Burt comes up with. I will say that I've been nervous about all of the monologues and plays, but that's just because I have stage fright.

Collaborative Work
"What has changed for me is that I want to collaborate and work more with partners, I feel comfortable learning in this class because we always give each other feedback. Everyone is very outspoken about what they know or what they don't understand, so it makes the environment very comfortable. It feels comforting because there isn't any judgement and everyone helps everyone"
My heart actually ached when I heard this. Got a little teary. This is exactly where I want to start next year!

district's vision is to create classrooms where students gain agency, identity, and purpose. For example, at Desert View High School, Sunnyside students have formed a "Learning Ambassadors" club. In this club, they share powerful stories about learning the skills of agency, new ways to support their own (and their peers') learning, how this has changed their vision of themselves as learners, and how they envision their futures.

New Roles for Teachers

Teachers experience three significant shifts as they develop instructional routines that blend academic content with formative assessment to strengthen students' learning of agency skills. These shifts are (1) *reconceptualizing the classroom learning culture*, (2) *reframing individual mindsets and beliefs regarding teaching and learning*, and (3) *reshaping daily instruction and assessment*.

Reconceptualizing the classroom learning culture is necessary for students to explore evidence, share emerging learning, give and

Students as Leaders of Agency: Learning Ambassadors



2022-2023 Sunnyside USD Learning Ambassadors with teachers, school and district leaders.

Sunnyside Unified School District's student Learning Ambassadors meet regularly as a club to explore how formative assessment and student agency have impacted their learning. The Learning Ambassadors, with faculty advisors, design and facilitate teacher professional learning on agency. They also conduct presentations with local, state, and national audiences, mentor elementary students, and work with peers across the district to share the value of learner agency.

"A thing that I learned about agency is that not only do you take charge of your learning, but it's also where you create opportunities for yourself to really like solidify your learning."

-Gio D., a Student Learning Ambassador in Tucson, AZ

Listen to Somos Sunnyside Podcast, Episode 18, to hear from the Learning Ambassadors: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fkF-1ctC64

receive feedback, and engage with peers to discuss what they do and do not yet know. In many U.S. classrooms, the culture centers on student compliance, emphasizing completing tasks, submitting assignments on time, and being assessed by the teacher. To develop the skills of agency, classroom cultures value uncertainty, curiosity, and the opportunity to grapple with new ideas. When a gap in learning emerges, it is seen as a chance for exploration rather than a source of failure. Centered on the belief that all learning begins with what we know, the learning culture encourages students to engage in numerous opportunities to explore what they know, share their funds of knowledge, and offer diverse perspectives. This culture represents a “flattened hierarchy,” where teachers and students share responsibility for learning.

Reframing individual mindsets and beliefs regarding teaching and learning takes shape over time as teachers develop advanced formative assessment practices. Many teachers describe this shift as moving from “the person primarily responsible for content” to “the person primarily responsible for drawing out students’ understanding of content.” Teachers who practice advanced formative assessment report that they have greater control over the learning process. They better understand what evidence to look for as learning emerges and how to respond to different conceptions of learning that students might raise. Students highlight the power of teachers who are transparent about the learning process. Students also feel empowered as learners when their contributions — even partially formed or messy ideas — are seen as steps toward new learning.

Reshaping daily instruction and assessment is far more challenging than it appears, but it is necessary to align daily instruction with key components of formative assessment and self-regulation. Teachers design daily lessons that include the following three elements:

- *Develop clear, lesson-size learning goals and design opportunities for students to co-create daily success criteria.* These practices help students internalize evidence that they have met the daily learning goal. This approach typically involves students analyzing work samples to determine learning qualities. It helps students make connections to prior learning and build schema around important disciplinary ideas and ways of knowing.
- *Develop multiple learning tasks through which students and teachers share, explore, and respond to evidence of learning as it manifests during the lesson.* When planning lessons, teachers consider what students already know and the evidence they expect to see as learning develops. They clarify how they might respond and consider ways to leverage students’ existing knowledge to guide new learning. Teachers integrate models for peer feedback and academic discourse designed to strengthen how students articulate and integrate ideas about their learning. Traditional teacher responses shift toward more student-centered approaches, as modeling, questioning, feedback, and assessment tasks teach students how to monitor and direct their own learning.

- *Design ways for students to reflect on, self-assess, and monitor their own learning.* Agency requires students to self-assess learning accurately and consider possible next steps. This is often a new role for students and teachers. Teachers adopt new strategies to ensure students learn to self-assess independently and determine their next steps. To do this, teachers use questioning and prompting, refer students to the success criteria, or ask them to check in with their peers.

When students can develop and use learning goals, use evidence, and make independent decisions about what’s next in their learning, these practices will guide lifelong learning.

Roles for School Leaders

To develop learner agency for students, teachers must have opportunities to build their own learner agency. Leaders help bring that about by supporting new models of how teachers engage in learning, get feedback, and have space to explore new instructional practices that are often messy and nearly always take time to develop.

Leaders who succeed in leading schools through this shift model agentic skills. They set goals, review evidence as their learning develops, and adjust practices based on that evidence. They ask questions, wonder aloud, notice new practices emerging, and check in with students and teachers to understand how they are doing as they develop new roles. They integrate collaborative, teacher-led, inquiry-focused professional learning that provides teachers with learning experiences similar to those of their students. Because



educators are central to supporting learner agency, they stand firm on the vision that learner agency is a skill all students should develop.

Summary

The skills of agency can and must be taught to maximize student learning. When teachers integrate the building blocks of learner agency into daily instructional routines, students develop greater ownership, motivation, and confidence in their learning. Students become more independent, open to sharing emerging ideas, and learn with and from their peers. In such environments, students simultaneously gain independence and interdependence. They grasp the contribution of their ideas to the group's learning, and they develop new knowledge by exploring ideas with others. Integrating the building blocks of agency within the formative assessment process is a unique way for teachers to model and teach students to guide their own learning. The skills, mindsets, and opportunities of learner agency are powerful levers that enliven student learning today and provide the foundation for lifelong learning.

Note:

¹ <https://www.nextgenlearning.org/articles/learners-perspectives-on-formative-assessment-culture>

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WestEd is a preeminent educational research, development, and service organization with over 1,000 employees, and 13 offices throughout the United States. WestEd has been a leader in moving research into practice by conducting research and development programs, projects, and evaluations; by providing training and technical assistance; and by working with policymakers and practitioners at state and local levels to carry out large-scale school improvement and innovative change efforts. The agency's mission is to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. In developing and applying the best available resources toward these goals, WestEd has built solid working relationships with education and community organizations at all levels, playing key roles in facilitating the efforts of others and in initiating important new improvement ventures. In 2016, WestEd celebrated a half-century milestone, marking 50 years of improving learning and healthy development for children, youth, and adults from cradle to career.

Disclosure Statement:

The authors are employees of WestEd.

The Impact of Climate Change on Education and What to Do About It

By Sergio Venegas Marin, Lara Schwarz, and Shwetlena Sabarwal
Policy note from the World Bank

Education can be the key to ending poverty in a livable planet, but governments must act now to protect it. Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as cyclones, floods, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires. These extreme weather events are in turn disrupting schooling; precipitating learning losses, dropouts, and long-term impacts. Even if the most drastic climate mitigation strategies were implemented, extreme weather events will continue to have detrimental impacts on education outcomes.

Download at <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/41483>

