



How Students Can Take Ownership of Their Learning

Meaningful Learning and the Architecture of Ownership

Our metaphors for education have evolved from viewing students as empty vessels to be filled with teachers' knowledge, to viewing students as partners and collaborators in their own learning. A benefit of this shift is that we see students as active participants in their learning. [When surveyed](#), students themselves repeatedly described what helps them learn best as “hands-on,” “interactive,” and “activities.” They said these words far more than even the word “fun.”

Now if we couple this interactive learning with [what students are enthusiastic about](#) by, “addressing relevant issues that reflect their interests, their passions, and their identities,” as Adam Fletcher puts it in his article *The Architecture of Ownership*, learning is suddenly both involved and meaningful. Fletcher defines meaningful learning as “the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community, and democracy.”

The following sections will examine how student ownership of learning increases success by examining tested practices and pedagogy case studies.

Using Learning Objectives to Enhance Ownership

Giving students ownership of their learning doesn't negate the need for clear expectations set using the teacher's guidance and expertise. Developing ownership over one's learning requires an invitation to find reasons for wanting to learn, and when teachers collaboratively create learning objectives, students are not only motivated and focused, but can find real stakes in their learning.

Meghan Everette [eloquently describes](#) how objectives can both safely guide and inspire ownership:

“The real magic of a learning objective and success criteria is when they are discussed before, during, and after the lesson. Having students take ownership of their own learning happens when they can talk about what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how they will know when they are successful ... One way to ensure this happens is to ask students to discuss the objective when you start the lesson, telling what they already know and what they are confused about. The important thing is not that a teacher has planned and a teacher knows the success criteria, but that a student can talk about their learning.”

Melissa Kelly offers a creative method for drawing students into ownership roles, with [10 ways to be completely transparent about your classroom expectations](#). The first four methods are highly interactive: giving students visual expectation reminders around the room, engaging them in dialogue, asking them to sign a contract, and letting them experience discomfort and struggle.

In these and many other ways, we can engage [students as planners](#), giving them a voice in every step of their learning process, including its creation. The level and timing of this kind of active participation promotes deep investment in success, and increases the likelihood of asking for help because the teacher is viewed as an ally working with the student toward a common goal.

How to Capture Students' Impulse to Learn

When students enter the classroom, they don't leave their lives at the door. More and more, teachers are leveraging those life experiences, using them to more deeply engage. One method for enhancing relevance is [choice-based learning](#), in which "a student's specific interests, background, and learning preferences guide the way they interact with the content."

Wherever they are, students will gravitate to their interests and they will find a way to learn. And teachers must capture this impulse to learn. Any student [explains Neil Monteiro](#), "[who] has a genuine interest will, without any real intention, learn about the subject of their interest and any subjects connected to it—provided the opportunity is available to them." Relevance and choices have been shown to lead to increased confidence and increased willingness to take risks in the classroom. In other contexts, we call it buy-in, and it's just as vital in learning as it is elsewhere.

Without [making learning directly relevant to students](#), ownership cannot hope to be achieved even by the best intentions and practices. Rohit Mehta advocates for bringing student experiences directly into the class with two especially intriguing techniques: Critical Framing and Aesthetic Framing. Both deeply engage students with their material by giving them agency to respond intellectually and emotionally, reminding us that relevance is fostered and inspired in the classroom as much as it is predetermined by students' lives. Ultimately, when we welcome students as experts, [even as teachers](#), they are driven to gain the literacies they need to share their knowledge.

Students Owning Their Data

Perhaps the ultimate invitation for students to collaborate on their own learning comes in the [data-informed classroom](#), in which students self-assess, set learning goals, and are coached by their teachers to make gains.

They don't just focus on mastering skills and content; they also track and analyze their own performance. Growing attention on [student-centered learning](#)—that turns teachers into coaches—highlights another important shift toward evaluating how students learn as much as what they learn.

Adam Fletcher returns us to the imperative of this kind of reform, calling us to stand with students “together in the [architecture of involvement](#), effectively demonstrating what school change looks like when the hearts, heads, and hands of students are infused throughout the process. But just as in building houses, no one builder works alone: adults, including teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff, must join students on the building crew.”

One of our last steps in shattering the old metaphor of the empty vessel is seeing [students as decision-makers](#) whom we work with and not simply for. Ultimate learning ownership starts to look like students knowing themselves, bringing their whole selves into learning, and being asked to guide teachers as much as be guided.

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