

Student Agency

AGENCY SPARKS

Entry points to spark student agency in the classroom and beyond.

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Student Agency

I COME FROM

- Add, change or delete any questions.
- To read poems, you begin each line with, "I come from...*insert here what you wrote for that question*"
- Then, read the entire last 2 lines.
- As a sign of appreciation for risk taking and sharing, snap instead of clap, at the end.

Favorite article of clothing?

Best memory?

What do you never want to end?

Least favorite memory?

What keeps you up at night?

What calms you?

What makes your blood boil?

A defining moment?

Favorite time of day?

Best feeling?

Always fills you with joy?

What do you like to make with your hands?

Interesting word?

Favorite smell?

Makes you smile?

Makes you cry?

3 words that describes you?

(a powerful adjective)_____?

(a color) _____?

I am all (Powerful adjective and color)?

It has made me who I am.

I COME FROM

Before beginning this experience, you will want to set the tone. Talk with participants about being vulnerable, empathetic and compassionate.

Discuss how important it is to be an individual and to be proud of the path they have taken to get where they are. Talk about the obstacles, bumps and setbacks we all may have encountered along the way too. After time to think and write answers, ask for volunteers to read their poems. Set the conditions before and after, for risk taking, vulnerability and honesty. The class needs to know it is a safe space for being you. You can change any questions depending on the age and demographics of the audience as well. At the end of the reading, the audience are encouraged to snap to show appreciation for the reader, much like a poetry reading.

You will want to process after the readings as well.

Some sample question ideas for reflection:

- How did you feel writing these and why?
- How did you feel listening to others read theirs and why?
- What connections did you hear?
- How will this help our classroom culture?
- How will this help us understand each other better?
- What other thoughts or questions do you have?

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NOTICING STROLL/ JOURNAL

- Notice the way numbers and data can tell a story about your school.
- Notice the way emotions in your class can inspire a poem.
- Notice the way our habitat has been impacted by humans and take action.

One way to build student agency, is to slow down and look for opportunities. A noticing stroll is a great way to cultivate this disposition. To begin, it may help to have a theme in mind that transcends all specific content areas. Maybe you are looking for stories around the school, or maybe you are looking for things that strike you as unfair or unjust. Perhaps you are looking for emotions around the classroom. The idea is to get students to slow down and notice the world around them more. You can bring in a specific content area in as well. A math class might see how numbers, statistics and data tell stories around the school. A language arts class might notice the beauty in the mundane. The idea is that each student may find something they notice that differs from others. This is particularly helpful when you are introducing a new idea. A noticing journal is another way to slow down. Asking students to keep track of what they notice that others might miss with regards to a theme, question or concept, could help students spark deeper curiosity and wonder before diving deeper into the content. If we are using statistics in math, imagine if students were asked to track how many micro-aggressions they hear in a week. Ask students to sketch the places they see them occur the most and begin to sort and explore the data they collect. What does the data and statistics say about the culture of the class or school? Asking students to slow down and notice the nuances and complexities of the world around them, and share their findings, develops student agency in the process.

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RESEARCH QUESTION

- Begin the year with a research question.
- “What happens when...”
- The best way to cultivate student agency, is to practice and model teacher agency.
- Project Zero Thinking Routines

A great way to develop student agency, is to build teacher agency and model it. As educators, we constantly get bombarded with new initiatives, programs and mandates. It can be hard to feel a sense of agency when people are constantly telling you what to focus on. One area where educators do have agency, is in seeing their space as a research lab. Look back over your years in school and teaching, and think about some elements that really stand out for you. Is it student engagement, collaboration, motivation or something else? Find a research question that can guide your practice for the year. Post the question in your room as a visual reminder of what you are exploring for the year. This also provides a great focus for observations as well. Asking for feedback based on your research question can be the most transformative professional development of your career. Perhaps you and a colleague want to explore the same question from different perspectives. This way you can hold each other accountable and collect documentation to help share what you are finding as your research progresses. One prompt I find helpful (I learned this from Mara Krechevsky at Project Zero) is, *What happens when...?* This prompt can help focus your research question. For example, one year I chose to focus on, *“what happens when I create experiences for students to learn with and through one another?”* Every experience I created was guided by this question and all documentation I collected helped me discover new insights that have had a huge impact on my practice. What will your research question be this year?

Student Agency

MOOD METER

- Student agency and social emotional awareness.
- Mood Meter- A link to Marc Brackett's work on being an emotional scientist.

Enraged	Furious	Frustrated	Shocked	M	Hyper	Lively	Motivated	Ecstatic
Livid	Frightened	Angry	Restless	O	Energized	Cheerful	Inspired	Excited
Fuming	Apprehensive	Worried	Annoyed	O	Enthusiastic	Happy	Optimistic	Thrilled
Repulsed	Troubled	Concerned	Peeved	D	Pleasant	Joyful	Proud	Blissful
M	O	O	D	M	E	T	E	R
Disgusted	Disappointed	Glum	Sad	E	At Ease	Content	Loving	Fulfilled
Pessimistic	Lonely	Mopey	Bored	T	Relaxed	Secure	Chill	Grateful
Embarrassed	Depressed	Discouraged	Tired	E	Calm	Satisfied	Grateful	Carefree
Despair	Hopeless	Miserable	Exhausted	R	Relieved	Peaceful	Tranquil	Serene

A mood meter is a great way to help students develop agency for their social and emotional well-being. Introducing this mood meter and the emotional language behind it, will help students grow their vocabulary and deepen their understanding of their emotions and the emotions of those around them. The link to Marc Brackett's work is a great starting point. This work can help students understand how to identify their social and emotional needs in the wide variety of settings they find themselves in each day they walk through a school's hallways. This mood meter is a great way for students to understand the impact emotions have on the learning process and advocate for their social and emotional well-being.

Student Agency

IMPROV ROUTINE

- [Creativity Sparks- Columbus Museum of Art website](#) with resources to cultivate creative thinkers.

A great way to build student agency, is to focus on the creative dispositions that each student is born with. Imagination is agency, and for students to build these dispositions they need to practice them. On the left, are a few links to resources for helping students cultivate their creative dispositions. One way to do this is through improvisation routines. These whimsical, structured, yet open-ended experiences, pull students out of their comfort zones to build their creative confidence and amplify their creative voice.

One improv activity you can do is the random object performance. Find 3 random objects and place them in the middle of the room. Ask the students to sit in a circle around the objects. Invite the students to freely come up and perform a quick, short skit using all 3 objects. They can bring up other students with them if they choose. The idea is to not use any object the way someone else used it. This joyful activity, invites students to be silly, take risks and exercise their creative muscles in the process. It is a great activity to set the tone for taking risks and thinking differently. It provides many rich discussion points for reflection too. You can talk about taking risks, being comfortable with ambiguity, collaborating, and so much more. Make sure you participate too!

Student Agency

TASK PARTY

- [TASK Youtube](#)- Video of a TASK party.
- [TASK Party!](#)- A how-to for TASK parties.

Oliver Herring is a contemporary artist who developed TASK events. A TASK event is designed to bring people together, while building both individual and collective agency and creativity. The links to the left, will provide more context and guidelines for setting up this event. To begin, you will need to write about 15 or so (depends on the size of the class) TASKs. The TASKs are open-ended. An example might be, *"You are now on the Kind Police Force. Go give 5 tickets to people you see being kind,"* or *"Create a song about your socks and sing it to 5 others."* There is not right or wrong way to write or perform a TASK. You will also need some very basic materials. Items such as paper, tape, scissors, and any other material you can find to create with, will work. Part of the fun of this event, is the creative use of materials and tools. To begin the event, place the TASKs in a bowl or container. If it is a large class, split them up and place them in containers around the room. The rules are simple. Find a TASK and complete it, be safe, step outside of your comfort zone! *(An unwritten, but discussed and understood rule, be appropriate)* One of the most important parts about TASK, is that when a student(s) completes a TASK, they need to write a new one and place it in the container, before grabbing another one. The TASK containers keep growing and growing with new TASKs. Some students may complete 30 TASKs, while others might only complete one. Make sure to allow time to reflect on the activity before students leave for the day. You might discuss the role of taking risks, being open to ambiguity, how collaboration worked or didn't work, how this activity might help you in other areas and why, and many other related questions. Have fun and make sure you participate too!

Student Agency

100 LANGUAGES

- [100 Languages](#) - the poem where the idea of 100 languages comes from.
- [Reggio Emilia, Italy](#)- find out more about Reggio here.
- What tools will you add to your space this year?

Imagine if you had paint brushes in the algebra class. Imagine if you had microscopes in the language arts class. Imagine if you had poetry books in the science class. One way to develop student agency is to make sure their voice can be heard. Reggio Emilia, is a small village in Italy. It is known throughout the world as the capital of child-centered learning. Check out the links to the left for more information on the Reggio approach if you are interested. One of the key components of the Reggio approach, is the idea that every child speaks 100 languages. The language of love, of play, of friendship, of building, and so on. Keeping this in mind, imagine if every school space in a building, had the tools for every child to find their voice. If a creative-minded child walks into a math class and looks around, they might not see a tool that will help them amplify their voice. A science-minded student might look around the art studio and see no tools to amplify their voice. One way to build student agency is to fill all learning spaces with the tools to help a child find and speak their 100 languages. What tools will add to your space?

Student Agency

AGENCY BY DESIGN

- Agency by Design - website that has many thinking protocols designed to promote student agency.

Agency By Design is a branch of Project Zero in the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Agency By Design is about maker empowerment by looking closely, exploring complexity and finding opportunity in the systems we surround ourselves with and are a part of everyday. The routines and protocols on this website, help build student agency and maker empowerment. Each protocol has a different focus, but the overarching idea is about investigating both literal systems (like how a clock works) to more abstract systems (like how to build for environmental sustainability). These routines and protocols help students understand the interconnectedness of the systems we are a part of. Whatever the content area is, these resources can help provide a launch pad for student agency and deeper learning in any setting.

Student Agency

WONDER HUNT

- How might students create a Wonder Hunt for another class, while also incorporating key content from your class?
- How might students create an experience for another class that also demonstrates understanding of key content from your class?

One way to build student agency, is to ask students to design an experience for another class. This can be used as a formative assessment tool as well. Students can design a simple wonder hunt (*"wonder" seems more appropriate than "scavenger"*), where they write a series of clues to get another class to explore the world (*a classroom, school, or larger community*) around them more. The final clue might be to celebrate with a fun activity designed by the students, but featuring some key elements of a recent unit of study. For example, in a first grade classroom, they had just finished exploring nature for a science unit and decided to have an in-school campout. One of the experiences I created for them, was a white-water rafting trip in collaboration with the music and PE teachers. We set up a course on the stage and down a hallway and ended up in the gymnasium for a celebration. At the end of the rafting experience, I asked the class to write their own Wonder Hunt and plan an activity for another class to pay it forward. The students had a blast finding ways to connect content to fun activities and clues for other classes to experience. This is a great way to build student agency by empowering them to teach another class through fun games and joyful experiences. Try it and see how far it ripples out in your school!

Student Agency

THE GIFT

- How might students combine course content, with an empathy interview, to create a gift for a partner?
- IDEO-- Human-Centered Design resource from IDEO, a design firm based on California.

The gift project provides an opportunity for students to build empathy, exercise perspective taking, harness creative thinking, to make connections and build relationships. The idea behind the gift project is that students get the opportunity to create for someone else. In an education system that seems to prioritize competition, individualism and speed, this project seeks the opposite. The gift project is about slowing down to have a conversation, to learn by creating for someone else, and to turn competition into collaboration. This project is a great one to return to throughout the year, as the class forms a closer bond and relationships grow stronger. The Human-Centered Design process is a good way to structure this project.

Inspiration: To begin the inspiration phase, each student will have a partner. This is an opportunity for students to stretch out of their comfort zones. The teacher can select the groups to ensure they are thoroughly mixed, or the students can select the groups. If the students select the groups, some time should be spent on why they should try and step out of their comfort zone. Once the students select a partner, the first task is to conduct an empathy interview. The purpose of the interview is to help students gain a deeper understanding of who they are creating the gift for. It is not about asking only "favorite questions," but questions that uncover who the person truly is. It is important to have a good discussion about interviewing before letting the students go to interview. When the students get into the interview, remind them to make sure they ask follow up questions. If a student reveals something sad, like the passing of a loved one, they should acknowledge how difficult that must have been. It is not about asking questions as fast as you can. You don't want a student to say they lost a loved one, and the partner immediately asks, "so what's your favorite color?" Exercising empathy is about slowing down to both hear the answers, but feel them as well. Turning the students free to interview without this conversation will result in shallow, meaningless connections.

Here is a general list of some types of questions students might ask

- What have you been doing over the past 6 months?
- What are you most proud of and why?
- What are your best talents?
- What do you look for in a friend and why?
- What do you miss most when you are at school and why?
- Which would you choose, read, write, or build and why?
- What is one thing that would help you this year and why?
- What is one object you think would be awesome to have in class and why?
- What is your best memory and why?
- Where is your happy place and why?
- What makes you laugh?
- What makes you smile?
- Where do you like to spend your time on the weekends?
- Who is your hero and why?
- What is something that makes you sad?
- What is something that excites you?
- What is the strangest memory?
- What is the funniest thing to happen to you?
- What makes you feel safe and why?
- What do you like to hold?
- What do you like to touch?
- What do you like to smell?
- What do you like to taste?
- What do you like to hear?
- What makes your blood boil?
- What do you wish everyone had and why?
- What are you nervous about and why?
- What scares you and why?
- What is your favorite time of day and why?
- If you could do anything you wanted, what would it be and why?
- Who do you admire and why?
- Why did the chicken really cross the road?
- What are some questions you have for me?

If students only get to 1 question, but have a really interesting conversation around it, and they feel like it is insightful to who they are, then that is ok too. It is not about asking the most questions, it is about gaining a deeper understanding about who the person is.

Ideation: At the ideation phase, students look over the answers and reflect on the conversation to begin to gather ideas for the gift they might create. Students generate ideas based on the answers and empathy interview. The ideas should relate in some way to one or more of the answers. Their ideas could be symbolic or representational. At the end of this phase, there should be documentation through sketches, lists, interview questions or any other evidence of the ideation process that makes the thinking visible.

Example: I learned that my partner's best memory is having overnights with their grandma. I also learned that their grandma is their hero. I might create a mini sweater out of fabric scraps, since they told me when they went on overnights, they would wear their grandmas sweater to bed. I also want to create a bowling pin trophy since one of the activities they did with their grandma on the overnights was go bowling. So, I am creating a bowling pin trophy with a sweater on it. It represents their love for their grandma.

This artifact combines several answers into one object. It was clear from the interview that their grandma plays a special role in their life, so that is why the focus was on her.

Implementation: At this phase, the student begins to create the artifact. The student can use whatever materials are available. This phase will take some time. To speed it up, you could have the students draw it or make a collage out of magazines.

The last part of the implementation phase is to wrap the gift and create a card to share with their partner. This card can explain the symbolism behind the gift and also serve as a thank you note for taking time to share a little about themselves and demonstrate empathy and vulnerability in the process.

Reflection/Celebration: A gift giving ceremony! Have students find their partner and have a gift exchange celebration. Provide time for the students to share and explain their thinking too. Remind the students this is not about completing the task and saying, "I'm done!" It is about having a conversation, sharing laughter and finding joy together. Spending time talking about the purpose of the gift-giving celebration prior to it, will be helpful as well.

Student Agency

UNFAIR MUSEUM

- How might you create an Unfair Museum in your space?
- Parts, Perspectives, Me

One way to help cultivate student agency for the world, is by creating a brave space for students to share their thinking about the world outside of traditional academic school disciplines. The Unfair Museum, is designed to showcase student thinking about the world we all live in, from a variety of perspectives. To begin this process, spend some time with students investigating what is unfair or inequitable to them, to others and to the world. They can research this through empathy interviews, observations, the internet, books and various other ways. The students could even take a noticing stroll to see what they find in their neighborhood that might be unfair or inequitable in some way. The purpose of this initial step is to slow down to notice the world, and illuminate the cracks where unfairness and inequity typically reside. Once students have had time to gather research and inspiration, ask the students to narrow their list down to the one they have the most connection to and interest in. Using the *Parts, Perspectives, Me* routine from Agency by Design, have the students break down their selected unfair or inequitable situation. Asking students to think about the parts that make this situation unfair, the various perspectives on this unfair situation and lastly, their own personal connection to this unfair and inequitable situation. This process will help the students gain a deeper understanding of the complex and interconnected nature of the identified situation. The last step in this process, is to create a museum space to make these thoughts and ideas visible. The students can create a persuasive artifact to make these unfair and inequitable situations visible for others to see and experience. The purpose of creating a museum, is to value each student's voice and empower them to illuminate unjust and inequitable situations. Letting students know what they think, feel and care about is important, and is a powerful condition to cultivate student agency. Students need to feel heard, before they will speak up. This museum setting is also a way for students to begin to see the power of influence. Seeing how their artifacts create opportunities for dialogue, action and change. These museums can live and grow throughout the year. They help set the tone that not only will this class be on the lookout for unfair and inequitable situations, they will take action to address them.

Student Agency

RULES TO BREAK



It seems like every year students return to school, one of the first items of business is to talk about the rules. Some classes talk about the rules the teacher has, some classes talk about the rules as a classroom community and some do a combination of both. Imagine if the first day, time was spent talking about the *rules to break* to be more creative! Inspired by the Pablo Picasso quote, *Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist*, this activity is a great way to empower students to challenge the status quo with creativity. Exercising creativity is an act of agency. It represents an individual or collective response to the world through the act of making. Using simple supplies, ask the students what rules they need to break to be more creative this year in your setting. They should write them in a way that they need to be broken. For example, *be like everyone else, never ask any questions, always play it safe* and so on. These can be created on small bumper sticker size sheets of paper with simple tools and materials. After creating these rules to break, ask the students to share their rule and talk about why the rule is so important to break. See if anyone else has connections to those rules as well. Post the rules in the room and in the hallways as a visual reminder to challenge the status quo and take the path less traveled. What rule do you need to break to be more creative?

Student Agency

DESIGN A SPACE

- Some questions to inspire the design.
- What interests do you have? Where do you like to relax? What time of day is the best? How do you unwind if you are stressed? What brings you joy? Who brings you joy? What is your greatest strength?
- What other questions can you think of?
- Example [here](#)

One way to build student agency, is to make sure the space represents the learners and their individuality. One way to do this, is to have students interview each other and create a space for them somewhere in the room. This could be a portable space for older students who leave the classroom throughout the day, or a more permanent one for primary grades. This could also be a model of a space, a drawing or an actual design of a physical space. The idea is that the students get to know one another and how they best learn and under what conditions. Students need to walk into a space that they feel ownership in somehow. A space that is both shared, and also individualized. Students can pause in the middle of the design process for feedback and revisions. They can incorporate elements of the content area where the design is taking place as well. Math could easily connect to the architecture process, science might focus on habitats, language arts might focus on the feel and emotion of the space and so on. At the end of the design, the class could have a reveal party or design exhibition and invite other classes, administrators, parents, etc. to learn more about how the environment can impact learning.

Student Agency

QFT

- Question Focus Technique
- How might you use this technique in math, science, social studies, etc.?

One way to build student agency, is to find questions that the students are interested in. To learn more about the Question Focus Technique, click on the link to the left. To begin this activity, think of a provocative statement to be a *Q (question) Focus* for the theme or unit of study. This could be an image, graphic, statement, phrase, video or some other artifact that will elicit a strong response. It can not be a question. For example, in a high-school government class, maybe the artifact is a news headline after the January 6th riot on the Capital before a related unit. The artifact would be placed in the middle of the room (or on a screen) where everyone can see it. Then, around the room have 4 large pieces of paper for students to gather around in small groups. Give each group member a marker. Ask them to write only questions that relate to the given artifact. The questions should be open-ended (a conversation about open-ended vs. close-ended may need to take place prior to the activity). After about 3 minutes, have the students rotate to a new paper. Each group is rotating around the room clockwise. Now, ask the students to first read what classmates wrote previously and then add new questions they have based on what was written before them. Then rotate again and repeat. On the last rotation, have the students read all of the previous questions written on the paper. This time, since it is the last rotation, they are not writing any questions. They need to decide, as a group, the top 3 most interesting questions written on the paper. *(They don't write questions on the last paper, because they may feel inclined to pick their own questions)* This activity is a great way to uncover what the students are genuinely interested in, about a given topic or unit of study. This helps build student agency, while also helping ensure the content aligns with student interests and curiosity. This also helps students create meaning and explore concepts from a place of interest, as opposed to a more typical place of compliance and conformity. What artifact would you choose to elicit powerful questions from your students in your context?

Student Agency

ARTICLES

[This is the one skill that will future-proof you for the jobs market](#)

[From Evaluation to Inspiration](#)

[In times of uncertainty, our most creative thoughts can happen through play](#)

[What is Imagination? Three Perspectives](#)

[Always Remember to Ignite Imagination When Creating Learning Experiences](#)

[Why Business Schools Need to Teach Experimentation](#)

[How learning through play as a child can help you succeed as an adult](#)

[Educators as Futurists: A Conversation with Stanford d.school Leaders](#)

[Better Living Through Noticing](#)

[Better conversations: The 7 essential elements of meaningful communication](#)

[How Can Teachers Nurture Meaningful Student Agency?](#)

[How Student Agency Can Ease the Pain of Remote Learning and Teaching](#)

[Why Kids Care More About Achievement Than Helping Others](#)