

Chapter 1

Fostering Learner Agency Through Intentional Learning Design: Six Principles

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the conventional approach to education systematically inculcates passivity and strips learners of the capacity for meaningful and informed choice. Rather than promote student agency and self-direction, the prevailing model remains focused on teaching, namely what “instructors” impart, not what students learn. This attitude inevitably treats learners as empty vessels to be filled rather than as fundamental co-creators of their own education. However, the solution is not for educators to abdicate from the responsibility of educating. Instead, they can and should intentionally foster learner agency with a coherent approach to learning design that is based on six principles: relevance and transparency, active learning, authentic assessment, staging and scaffolding, actionable feedback rather than grades, and a commitment to equity.

By any measure, higher education in the United States is in serious need of rehabilitation, if not a complete overhaul. Outcomes are generally dismal, whether measured by completion rates, readiness for the workplace, cost, student debt, or equity. At two-year degree-granting institutions, only 30% of first-time, full-time undergraduates earn a degree or certificate within three years, 150% of the “normal” time required for completion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Nonselective four-year institutions fare little better: only 32% attain a degree within six years. An even smaller proportion of students graduate within four (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). And, according to repeated employer surveys, those who do graduate too often lack the skills that the workplace requires (Flaherty, 2021). Such failures do not come cheap. Both the cost and price of higher education are prohibitive:

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student loan debt in the U.S. has skyrocketed to \$1.747 trillion (Hanson, 2022), higher than the total amount of U.S. debt for both credit cards and auto loans (Friedman, 2021). Student debt profoundly constrains the choices of the debtors, especially those who have not earned a degree. First-generation students, lower-income students, and students of color are disproportionately affected (Looney, 2021).

Given this situation, it may be tempting to believe that learners would be better off if they bypassed institutions altogether and curated their own education from the myriad sources available for free or at low cost. Such options have only proliferated since the publication of Kamenetz's *DIY U* (2010). After all, if home design shows are to be believed, do-it-yourself (DIY) is not that complicated. You select your own materials, design your own home, and then reap the rewards of your accomplishments. Yet, as anyone who has ventured into a cavernous home improvement store can attest: DIY is much simpler in theory than in practice. To do-it-yourself successfully, you need to know what you are doing. Having the relevant skills, equipment, and a clear plan for action is also key. Without expertise, experience, and the necessary toolkit, the results can be both dangerous and expensive. This holds as true for higher education as for home renovation.

BACKGROUND

The Problem of Passivity

But why are learners ill-equipped to exercise meaningful choice when it comes to how and what they learn? This chapter argues that the conventional approach to education, prevalent at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels, systematically inculcates passivity and strips individuals of the capacity for meaningful and informed choice. Rather than promote student agency and self-direction, the prevailing model remains focused on teaching, namely what “instructors” (sic) impart, not what students learn. This attitude inevitably treats learners as empty vessels to be filled rather than as fundamental co-creators of their own education. The solution is not for educators to abdicate from the responsibility of educating, however. Instead, they can and should seek to foster learner agency. Accomplishing this goal requires a coherent, systematic approach to learning design, one that embodies relevance and transparency, emphasizes active learning, integrates authentic assessment within learning, stages and scaffolds learning experiences, eschews grades, and strives to ensure equity.

Unfortunately, even those who agree that learning agency is paramount may not know how to promote it. I once met with the leader of a much-praised public charter high school that was heralded for its innovative approach to developing human skills in the curriculum, including learner agency. He was proud of the school's reputation in this area; however, when I asked how they went about developing learner agency, he responded, “We give the students worksheets.” It should go without saying that worksheets do not enable learners to exercise agency. While this example may be particularly egregious, it is neither unique nor confined to K-12. The dominant model of education in the U.S. is characterized by inflexibility, rigidity, and a disregard for learner agency. Term structure, class schedules, assignments, and assessments all testify to the pervasive lack of meaningful choice. Most learners' experiences in this regard stand in sharp contrast to their experiences as consumers, which, in turn, inform their expectations about higher education. In many areas of their lives, they have opportunities to create, customize, tweak, and produce (typically mediated through technology). In higher education, however, too often the expectation is that one size does, or should, fit all.

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