

Student and Teacher Inter-Agency: Negotiated Learning Environments

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Abstract

Realising exciting new opportunities for students' learning and fulfilment calls for curiosity, creativity, empathy and the ability to negotiate, and re-negotiate, learning environments. This negotiation requires a degree of agency on the part of students and adults who take active roles in co-constructing learning trajectories in line with students' aspirations. Student agency does not involve students re-inventing wheels in laissez-faire fashion or self-serving demands for resource at the expense of others. The concept of student agency is described in this presentation as a finely balanced negotiation between the students and the social environments that support learning. The framing of learning environments is described as an inter-agentic activity, requiring the active contribution of all participants. Agency is invariably related to the social and cultural milieu in which it is exercised and supported; it is not a static quality that people have per se. Students can be encouraged and supported to take agency by agentic teachers who inspire them to innovate and collaborate. Discussed in this presentation are seven ways that teachers can encourage and nurture student agency and four dimensions on which students' agency can be explored and understood.

Keywords: Student agency, teacher agency, negotiated teaching and learning

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Introduction

What types of learning prepare young people to envision positive futures and make the most of opportunities that present? How can teachers and families support students to create fulfilling niches in a changed and changing world? Although to fully answer these questions there remains much to discover, it seems that students' options can be broadened by developing curiosity, creativity, empathy and skills to negotiate their learning journeys (see Cobo, 2012; Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010; OECD, 2013; Weng, 2015).

A burgeoning field of 'yet-to-be-packaged' technological opportunities suggest that schools might fruitfully foster agentic and creative graduates. Hannon (2017) has suggested that focusing on equipping students with the prescribed knowledge and skill that, in the past, prepared them well for industrial work is no longer justified or applicable. The means of social connection have transformed, the ripple effect being felt in all aspects of life. Social connections are increasingly global, complex, often immediate and less predictable (see Klemenčič, 2015). Hannon observes that "today, education has to be about learning to thrive in a transforming world" (p12).

Agency as a social interaction

Student agency is depicted in this presentation as dynamic, created within social contexts and mediated by the understandings and beliefs of those who support students' learning. It is not a static or inherent quality. As student agency is context-determined, it cannot be understood through analysis of either personal or social situations alone but by consideration of the particular circumstances in which it occurs. Klemenčič (2015) has suggested that student agency comprises processes that relate to students' past, present and notions of future, the choices they have made, or will make, and their perceived power in these situations. Cultural, social and political influences on students' interactive experiences all have a bearing on students' sense of agency. Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen, and Virlander (2015) have described agency as an interaction among students' "capabilities, aspirations and perceived opportunities and limitations" (p.2) to take action in particular situations. Both of these descriptions direct attention to the various aspects of student agency; the latter relating to the qualities students bring to situations and the former considering the experiences and interactions that have created or underpinned these qualities.

Teachers and parents who value agency as a quality that contributes positively to fulfilling lives are most likely to actively support students to engage agentially in learning activity. As Hannon (2017) noted, what is taught, how it is taught and the possibilities adults predict for students' futures are strongly influenced by their views of the most fundamental aspect of education, its purpose. Teachers, parents and students themselves all bring to teaching and learning situations their own personal and professional perspectives on learning and these have powerful effects on actions taken. Although each may hold a dominant view, the perceived locus of responsibility for learning may vary depending on their position or investment in the particular situation. That is, the theories of learning to which teachers and students subscribe are not entirely fixed but also respond to the environment around them.

The diagram below (Figure 1) shows the Matrix of Perspectives that comprises possible views that participants may take about who or what is most active in learning (Bowler, Annan & Mentis, 2007). The quadrants of the Matrix of Perspectives are illustrated by some popular theories that are represented at some point within each space. The dynamic notion of student agency is represented in the Interactive quadrant where both environment (including teaching practices, classroom routines and community influences) and student (learner) take active roles in negotiating learning and teaching. In the Learner Active quadrant, the student is viewed as being most active in the learning process, with the environment playing a lesser role. In the Environment Active quadrant, the student is seen to be more passive and the environment playing the major part in students' learning. The fourth quadrant, Passive, represents the less common view that neither learner nor environment have a strong influence on learning.

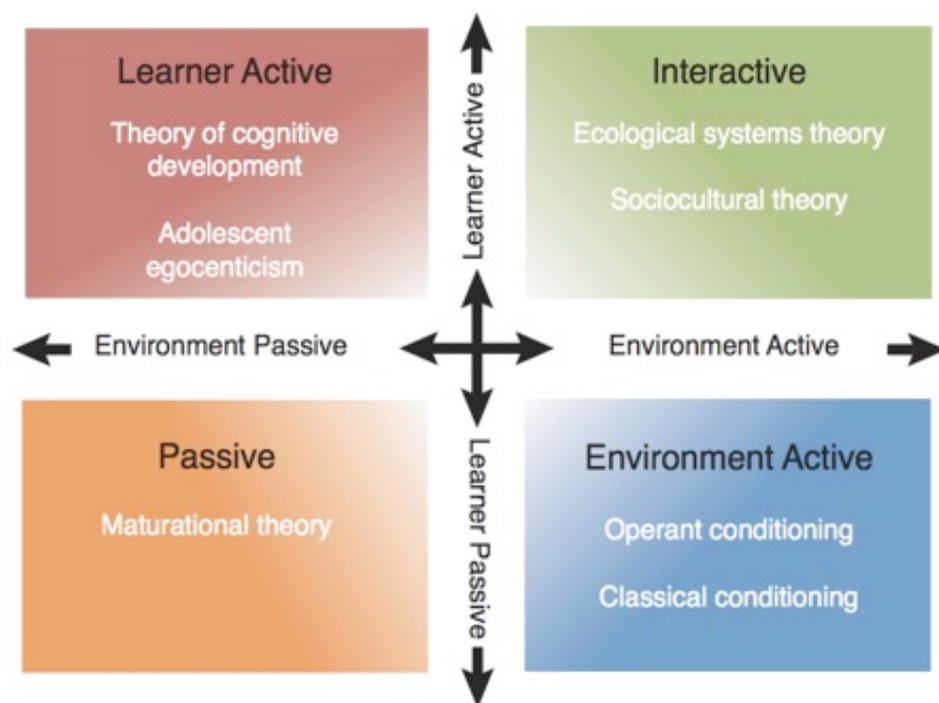


Figure 1. The Matrix of Perspectives (Bowler, Annan & Mentis, 2007)

Contemporary pedagogies tend to reflect the interactive view of learning and align with the notion of learning being negotiated between agentic students and teachers. However, the environment active view, dominant in teaching and learning for the greater part of the last century, may still hold in some quarters (Pinker, 2016). Traditional schooling beliefs involving active teaching and passive learning may continue to influence interpretations of agentic behaviour, impeding the application of new interactive pedagogies in practice, and consequently, student agency.

Understanding agency

As mentioned earlier, exploring the interactive phenomenon of student agency calls for the simultaneous analysis of each of its parts, such as students' perceptions of their agency, teachers' and parents' beliefs about the role of agency and the aspirations and expectations that each participant has for the future. Agency is understood through

analysis of personal or social structures together, including the relationships between students and their worlds (Klemenčič, 2015). Rainio and Hilppö (2016) have suggested that a broad analysis of the interactive context may result in deeper understanding of the location of agency in teaching and learning through the illumination of existing tensions. The authors noted the way that research had often endeavoured to simplify the components of interactive contexts in order to render them comprehensible. In effect, controlled research has worked to isolate and decontextualize variables, obscuring the very aspects that were most relevant to understanding interactions.

Constructive agency

When students take agency they exercise a measure of power, making choices about the topics they study, the people with whom they work, the rate at which they complete tasks and the nature of interactions within collaborative inquiry. This does not mean that teachers assume laissez faire approaches to teaching or that students act without regard for others. Student agency, understood in a social context, requires positive connections with others and activity negotiated in good faith. In a teaching and learning environment, every participant is constantly learning and consequently acting in new ways. The emergence of tensions between agency and control among participants is inherent in the social context, calling for genuine negotiation of roles, tasks and participation.

The agentic environment

The agentic environment comprises multiple components, two of which are outlined in this section. These are student agency and teaching practices that support agency.

Student agency: Dimensions

Through an analysis of contemporary publications related to student agency, four dimensions of students' sense of agency have been identified (Annan, 2016). There are voice, strategic agency, personal agency and connected agency.

1. Student voice

Students' sense that their voices are heard and that they perceive that changes result from what they say.

2. Strategic agency

The skills and strategies required to take agency, such as envisaging the future, creating new ideas and reflecting on learning.

3. Personal agency

Qualities that students have developed and can apply in a range of environments (including resilience, self-efficacy, responsibility and motivation).

4. Connected agency

Skills and understandings that support effective interaction with others.

Social connections and ability to collaborate, access, create and share information with others, help others learn and transfer social learning skills across environments.

These four dimensions provide information about students' experience of agency in specified circumstances at given a point in time. Learning about students' perceptions on each of these dimensions provides part of the information required to understand student agency in context. A brief student-teacher interview schedule, designed for students in Years 7-8, can be found at

<http://positivelypsychology.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/STUDENT-SENSE-OF-AGENCY-DISCUSSION-GUIDE-1-July-2017-V1.pdf>

Teaching practices that support agency

The review of contemporary publications indicated that a range of teaching practices support student agency and these have been organised into seven emerging categories (Annan, 2016). The seven categories are listed and outlined below (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Teaching practices that support student agency (Annan, 2016).

1. Negotiated learning

Teacher negotiation of learning involves viewing young people as unique and individualising their learning (Yoon, 2015). It means generating options so that students have real choice with fine-tuned support from more experienced people as they travel their learning journeys (Keeffe, 2015, Klemenčič, 2015). Negotiated teaching and learning involves teachers and students together examining students' aspirations, expectations, beliefs and competencies (Hilppö, Lipponen, Kumpulainen & Virlander, 2015; Sadeghi, 2014). For much of schooling's history, students have not been expected or invited to take active roles to the extent they are today.

Accordingly, negotiating learning may involve teachers reframing students' questioning and sharing viewpoints as constructive rather than unhelpful or disrespectful (see Rajala, Kumpulainen, Rainio, Hilppö, & Lipponen, 2016). Negotiating learning may require as much challenge to theory and belief as it does to practice.

2. Linking learning to real life

Students are more likely to take active roles in tasks that have real meaning to them (see Evans, M. & Boucher, 2015; Fullan, 2013; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, Shernoff, 2014). Where teachers understand the broad contexts of individual students' development, they are better positioned to link learning activity to the interests, challenges, values and beliefs of their home, school and community environments (Jackson, 2003; Klemenčič, 2015; Rainio & Hilppö, 2016; Yoon, 2015).

3. Creating and supporting learning connections

Teachers can support the extension of learning connections by facilitating chance encounters with relevant knowledge. This may include extending learning activity beyond the classroom and creating opportunities for exchange of information with a range of people and environments (Klemenčič, 2015). Acquiring and creating relevant knowledge may be increased when teachers facilitate conversations between students and community members, allowing the conversations to meander into areas that interest both parties (Arnold & Clark, 2013).

4. Nurturing positive and optimistic attitudes

If students are to actively engage in learning, they need to envision exciting futures and understand the relationship between their learning and vision. They need to have optimism and hope for the future and trust in teaching and learning to support them to realise their goals (Marques, Lopez, Rose & Robinson, 2014). Appreciative approaches to teaching encourage students to focus on their next steps and build on their current knowledge. They free students to value learning activities and the contributions of those who support them (Anderman & Levitt, 2014; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkings, 2009).

5. Supporting reflecting on learning

While the role of reflection in learning has been well established, it cannot be assumed that all students naturally acquire effective practices and develop schemata that support them to reflect in meaningful and productive ways. Students can reflect and build practice using processes that make sense to them when they are supported to develop reflective skills and create or acquire frames that help them organise and process information. Teachers can provide opportunities for students to reflect on and apply new knowledge (Arnold & Clark, 2015; Klemenčič, 2015).

6. Creating emotionally secure climates for change

Students feel safe and secure when the people who help them show genuine concern for their learning and life (Sadeghi, 2014). They learn in environments in which there are familiar cultural practices, values and sense-making. Teachers, parents and others who work to support students' learning can foster secure environments by exchanging their views about learning and actively engaging with students' learning activity. Emotionally secure classrooms have climates characterised by consistency and fair practices, safety to invite new challenges and provision of personalised scaffolds for learning.

7. Teacher Agency

Teachers who foster student agency are active in their own professional learning and active in the facilitation of students' learning. As suggested above, there are many simultaneous practices to consider and these require deliberate focus. Teachers actively negotiate and personalise students' learning, know their students well, understand and connect with the cultural perspective each brings to learning and create overlap between students' school and home cultures (Jackson, 2003). They carefully gauge the level of scaffolding required to help individual students learn new skills and create safe and caring learning environments in which students can exercise agency in constructive and considerate ways. These tasks can be experienced as either onerous or exhilarating, depending on the context in which they are carried out and the perceived purpose of the interactive, agentic approach to teaching and learning. Below are some key understandings that support teacher agency.

a. Teacher beliefs and perceptions

Possibly the greatest support for teacher agency is their ability to envision a positive future for young people in the transforming world (Hannon, 2017). Understanding how education can prepare students for this new world requires agentic teachers who find out what young people need to learn and how to support this learning. With a genuine concern for students' futures and faith in the efficacy of agency to support students' learning in the future, teachers may experience new activity as exciting and meaningful.

b. Teacher choice

The level of choice teachers experience in their professional work is a determinant of teacher agency (Sadeghi, 2014). Sadeghi observed that when teachers had choice in the shaping of educational systems they felt valued and were consequently more likely to actively support student agency. Teacher autonomy is facilitated, in part, by school structures and management. Leaders who recognise and value interactive new pedagogies are most likely to encourage teachers to actively negotiate teaching and learning with students and families. Teacher agency is also indirectly influenced by the wider layers of education systems. For example, a narrow or prescriptive curriculum may restrict teacher agency while a principle and value led curriculum with a clearly articulated vision for young people's learning such as the New Zealand Curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007) can provide clear direction and purpose, allowing teaching and learning activity to be actively personalised and contextualised.

c. Reconciliation of the contradiction between agency and guidance

Teacher support for student learning can be viewed as an ever-shifting scaffold that provides just-the-right-amount of support required to optimise students' learning and active engagement in learning activity. Adults have much experience in the world and one of their roles is to make their knowledge and skill available to those for whose learning they have responsibility. As noted, student agency is not without boundaries; it is actively negotiated, meaningful and relevant, taking into account the positions of others. As in any negotiation, there will be inherent tensions. However, these tensions offer opportunities for reflection and growth. Analysis of these tensions provides active teachers with information about the conditions and interactions that will support and actively engage students (see Rajala, Kumpulainen, Rainio, Hilppö, & Lipponen, 2016).

Conclusion

There are exciting new opportunities for young people who are active in learning, engage in relevant learning tasks and connect with others across the globe. Promoting student agency requires that teachers, students and others who support students' learning become active agents in the teaching and learning process. Agency involves using power thoughtfully, collaborating and helping one another learn rather than meeting immediate personal needs at the expense of others. Agentic teaching and learning comprises negotiations between students and students, students and teachers and among students, teachers and family. This presentation has reported several teacher practices and student perceptions associated with agentic interactions.

Taking agency means having a degree of choice in the topics selected, the partners with whom students collaborate and timeframes for their particular tasks. Agentic teachers know their students' learning sufficiently well to provide just-enough support. This sensitive portioning of support provides the less experienced students with information from more experienced teachers while ensuring that the students' drive to pursue learning remains intrinsic. Students vary in their readiness to take agency in different circumstances as it is influenced by personal, social, cultural and political factors. Pivotal influences on students' agency are teachers, schools', parents' and students' beliefs about how people learn, where they learn and why they learn. Various writers have suggested that agency emerges within specific social and cultural environments and encompasses aspirations, openness to new opportunities and perceived power within interactions. Understanding interactive agency in specific circumstances, therefore, must take into account the broad, dynamic contexts in which actions take place.

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