

DUT Guide: Fostering student agency

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Abstract

A student agency perspective supports the development of teaching strategies that incorporate students' meaning-making and agentic actions. This guide outlines seven strategies for educators in supporting students' agency: (1) Support the students in becoming students, (2) foster autonomy in coursework, (3) be aware of power relations and cultivate an agency-supportive learning environment, (4) give attention to students' sense of belonging, during studies and in a futures perspective, (5) ensure that the physical and digital environment supports students' opportunities for agentic actions, (6) reframe expressions of resistance as agentic events and (7) examine how to encourage agentic reposition such as student persistence.

Practical Tips

1. Support the students in becoming students
2. Foster autonomy in coursework
3. Be aware of power relations and cultivate an agency-supportive learning environment
4. Give attention to students' sense of belonging, during studies and in a future perspective
5. Ensure that the physical and digital environment supports students' opportunities for agentic actions
6. Reframe expressions of resistance as agentic events
7. Examine how to encourage agentic repositions such as student persistence

Background

The purpose of this guide is to delineate strategies by which higher education teachers can promote student agency- a widely spread construct that is increasingly recognised for its importance in supporting students' learning, well-being, and transformative capabilities for future employment, lives, and civic engagement (OECD, 2024; European Commission, 2022). Further, student agency plays a key role in recent discussions on student-centred learning (Starkey, 2019; Klemenčič, 2017), advocating holistic approaches to learning beyond an extensive focus on student activation and learning as the output of carefully designed input (Glavind et al., 2023). Indeed, student agency literature highlights how 'students also have agency which they enact towards their own learning and educational goals, their own "self-formation" or to bring about changes in their higher education environments or beyond' (Klemenčič, 2023).

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Defining agency in educational contexts is far from straightforward (Jääskelä et al., 2021; Klemenčič, 2017; Nieminen et al., 2022), and the literature on higher education student agency remains limited (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022). This article refers to agency as the capacity of students 'to act upon their ideas and plans to transform current thinking or practice' (Damşa et al. 2021), informed by frameworks of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Virkkunen (2016). Following Vaughn (2020), it is useful to think of the construct as associated with three agency dimensions:

- **Dispositional dimension:** Students are willing to act, take initiative, and create opportunities (intentions and purpose)
- **Motivational dimension:** Students are able to regulate their actions and ideas in the face of obstacles (persisting and choice-making)
- **Positional dimension:** Students are able to negotiate and take (or not take) action across a variety of social contexts to exert influence (interactions and negotiations).

That student agency is a variable part, enabled under certain circumstances, rather than a fixed quality or personal attribute is well described in research. The sociocultural research perspective is devoted to understanding how 'a student's experience of having access to or being empowered to act through personal, relational, and participatory resources, which allow him/her to engage in purposeful, intentional, and meaningful action and learning in study contexts' (Jääskelä et al., 2017). In this view, the environment actively constitutes the development of students' agency. As suggested by Jääskelä et al. (2017), student agency is constituted by three interrelated resource domains: 1) Individual: meaning-oriented studying, self-efficacy, competence beliefs and participation activity, 2) Relational: power relationships, peers as resources for learning, emotional atmosphere, and 3) Contextual: opportunities for active participation, to influence and make choices.

While higher education contexts offer students some degree to act, students' agency is constrained by rules, learning environments, and cultures. Thus, fostering students' agency requires commitment on the teacher's part. Further, the ideal of designing constructively aligned courses, e.g., ensuring synergy between learning outcomes, strategies, and assessment, might constrain teachers from integrating individual students' meaning-making processes. Student agency is a shift in focus, but what does it mean, and how can it be supported in higher education? This guide outlines seven strategies for educators.

Tip 1: Support the students in becoming students

Novice students often need to transition from the role of a "pupil" (typically associated with primary and secondary school) to that of a "student," characterised by independent study and engagement beyond prescribed materials and schedules. Educators desire for students to develop what Vaughn (2020) refers to as student agency—the capacity to study autonomously with a sense of purpose and intention. However, this is something that, for many students, needs to be learned. Kivimäki (2024) has, as part of course design processes in a PhD project nested in Finnish higher education, identified several educational reflection artifacts supporting this aspect of student agency. For example, students can be supported in becoming students by working with individual study plans, which together with guidance processes, can prevent student dropouts by engaging them in personal goal-setting. Kivimäki (2024) additionally refers to structured learning diaries, which can promote self-awareness and help in identifying one's strengths and weaknesses, track progress, and facilitate goal setting, and exemplifies a strategy tried in particular with engineering students being offered a project management framework to facilitate project-based work during their studies. Often, supportive tools and resources, both general tools and subject-specific tools, are available from higher education websites. Here is a Danish example: <https://studerende.ida.dk/studieliv/effektiv-personlig-planlaegning-i-studietiden/>. The key

point is, as an educator, to discuss with the students various ways of structuring and planning the individual studies.

However, taking control of one's studies is not just an individual endeavor. Jääskelä et al. (2017) point to 'using peers as resources' as a key element in student agency. Hence, this tip is also about developing collaborative study processes. Educators should put an effort into facilitating student awareness of group dynamics, e.g. in study groups or collaborative work (Jääskelä et al., 2020). Indeed, educators' awareness and support in the balancing of expectations, goal-setting etc., is one of the determining factors for study groups to reach their full potential in terms of student learning and thriving (Buch et al., 2022). Research into socially shared regulation of learning in collaborative learning environments offers additional insights and strategies on this matter, among others, Schunk and Greene (2017) and, for digital learning environments, Sharma et al. (2024). The key point is that educators, in support of student agency, can utilise study groups as resources for individual student learning, e.g., by gradually handing over the negotiating control of the shared goal-setting to the students. Further, thriving in the study groups can benefit from a focus on agency.

Tip 2: Foster autonomy in coursework

Are students motivated to act upon their ideas and plans to transform current thinking or practice? Not always, it seems. One way to motivate students to act is by supporting student autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2000, p. 231) define autonomy as 'volition—the organismic desire to self-organize experience and behavior and to have activity be concordant with one's integrated sense of self.' Competence refers to the experience of effectance—a propensity to have an effect on the environment as well as to attain valued outcomes within it.' Relatedness refers to 'the desire to feel connected to others—to love and care, and to be loved and cared for.'

What does this mean for teachers? An older study by Reeve and Jang (2006) offers some good examples of ways in which teachers can support student autonomy and become aware of students' motivational resources. These strategies are still useful to keep in mind:

- Listen to students
- Allow students to talk
- Ask what students want
- Allow sufficient time for students to work in their own way
- Invite students to be near the learning material
- Provide rationales as to why a particular action might be useful and hints about how to progress
- Frequently communicate effectance-relevant feedback and encouragements
- Offer replies to student comments acknowledging their contribution
- Offer emphatic replies to expressive statements from students.

Additional strategies include opportunities to influence the learning progress and the object of engagement, such as choosing which problems to address or how to address these problems in project work. Voluntary participation in activities, minimal adverse consequences for non-participation and unsuccessful attempts, non-controlling feedback, and student-driven customisation have also been found to support autonomy (Kam & Umar, 2018). Formative self-assessment, where students actively reflect on their learning and studying during their learning process, is also a means to give students control over their learning (Nieminen & Tuohilampi,

2020). It is found to develop students' self-regulation skills, particularly if connected with cycles of systematic feedback (Panadero et al., 2017).

Competence is supported by short feedback cycles, constructive feedback, and optimal challenges, taking students' levels of competencies into account (Bandura, 2006; Kam & Umar, 2018). To offer an example, Lindgren and McDaniel (2012) included student-directed progression and opportunities for students to narrate their knowledge through storytelling techniques in a course on digital media. The changes promoted students' interest, understanding, subject-specific skills, and perceived relevance of the course material.

Finally, opportunities for peer collaboration and social persuasion (Bandura, 2006), such as feedback and encouragement from peers and teachers, cultivate experiences of relatedness. That being said, we also know that creating peer learning opportunities that are meaningful from a student perspective is far from simple. While we cannot predict students' reactions, it seems sensible to ensure that students can discern signs of peers' engagement, that the collaborative task is sufficiently challenging and requires an extra set of hands or eyes, and that students have sufficient time to interact and real possibility to influence peers' work and comprehension (Stenalt, 2021a).

Tip 3: Be aware of power relations and cultivate an agency-supportive learning environment

Student agency also invites reflections on power relations in education. A good example is that students are subordinate to the teaching and assessment practices of the institution. Other examples include teachers' conceptions of the implied student and default settings in education infrastructures, preferencing some students and not others. Researchers have explored the voices and agency of different student groups related to issues of equality, including those of financially disadvantaged students (Luckett & Luckett, 2009), students with weaknesses in language proficiency (Hayes & Mansour, 2017), and international students (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007). Further, agency calls for paying attention to power relations within the classroom (Kumpulainen et al., 2018), focusing, among others, on the interactional spaces created by educators (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011) and the causal powers of disciplinary knowledge recontextualised into the curriculum (Case, 2015).

To overcome constraining power relations on the student's part, it seems essential to critically reflect on the ways students might experience the learning environment. The following questions can guide the reflection (Jääskelä et al., 2017):

- How is equal treatment of students by the teacher and among students operationalised in practice and ensured?
- What possibilities do students have for receiving support from and providing support to other students?
- What opportunities do students have to approach teachers with curriculum concerns and similar issues?

Further, it seems obvious to try to minimise the use of controlling instructional strategies. Controlling strategies include: Allocating a significant portion of the time available for teacher-student interaction for the teacher to talk, prioritising that the teacher is near the learning material, asking controlling questions, uttering directives, praising as a contingent reward, and criticising the student (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

Tip 4: Give attention to students' sense of belonging during studies and in a future perspective

Becoming a student (Tip 1) is closely connected to the sense of 'belonging' both during the studies and in

relation to potential futures. Tinto (2017) discusses the sense of belonging in terms of supporting students' persistence, elaborating that a sense of belonging is about seeing yourself as a member of a community of faculty, staff, and other students who value your participation.

Sense of belonging in a future perspective is elaborated by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and in the positional dimension of agency (Vaughn, 2020). They find that students' desires and thoughts on the future have an impact on how they act in the present. To foster a sense of belonging, educators should focus on practical strategies that connect current experiences to future aspirations. Here are some actionable steps:

- Encourage reflection: Facilitate activities where students reflect on their current experiences and how these can shape their future projects. This helps them see the relevance of their present actions to their future goals.
- Promote future thinking: Create assignments that require students to imagine and plan for various future scenarios. This can include career planning exercises or envisioning their roles in different professional contexts.
- Create a supportive environment: Build strong, supportive relationships with students. Show interest in their aspirations and provide emotional support. A caring learning environment enhances students' sense of belonging and motivation.

Case (2015) highlights that the 'end goal of any true higher education' is that students/graduates can formulate ultimate concerns and enact projects towards that end, reflecting on their developing professional and/or subject-specific identity. While the sense of belonging as a professional identity perspective is mainly highlighted in research in professional education (Nielsen et al. 2023), Edwards (2017) emphasises that students' predictions about future professional identities hold true whether students are preparing for professions such as medicine, social work or teaching, or are studying in a broader subject field.

To develop a sense of belonging to and explore professional identities, students need to gain expertise in the knowledge practices of the disciplines (Edwards, 2017). Hence, actionable steps include:

- Support identity development: Help students articulate their personal, professional, and academic identities. This can be done through mentorship programs, where students discuss their goals and receive guidance on how to achieve them.
- Integrate real-world connections: Bring in guest speakers from various professions, organise field trips, or use case studies that relate to students' fields of interest. This makes learning more tangible and relevant to their future careers.
- Encourage community engagement: Involve students in community projects or service-learning opportunities. This helps them see the impact of their work beyond the classroom and fosters a sense of belonging to a larger community.

Asikainen and Gijbels (2017) refer to educating 'work-ready graduates who are prepared for a life as lifelong learners', but as emphasised by Nielsen et al. (2023), it can be 'just another stressful demand' if the students are expected to have a clear career plan from day one. Thus, the important issue is to include opportunities for students to express and discuss *many* possible futures. This can be supported by facilitating reflective rooms where students examine subject issues with professionals in practice, on campus, or in various kinds of internships. In a concrete example from Whitney et al. (2021), musician students' agency was developed through ePortfolio reflections, which include future career perspectives.

Developing students' capabilities for imagining possible futures is also discussed in a broader perspective referring to transformative agency (Haggstrom & Schmidt, 2021; Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022) or change agency (Koskela & Käirrkainen, 2021). To achieve this:

- Address epochal key problems: Focus on issues such as social justice, ecological sustainability, and critical awareness.
- Stimulate critical thinking. Encourage students to question and analyse these key problems deeply.
- Create opportunities for student agency: Provide platforms where students can actively engage with and address these issues.

Tip 5: Ensure that the physical and digital environment support students' opportunities for agentic actions

As the interest in student agency is increasing, we should also be aware of the ways the physical and digital learning environments contribute to student agency. Physical spaces and resources for learning and course management influence students' opportunities for action. For example, digital resources that assist in teaching and learning emphasise certain conceptions of power, learning, and interaction. They might depict students as anonymous users by default, limit students' expressivity by restricting certain actions, distribute students' contributions and digital footprints to other stakeholders, and obscure students' access to information about who has accessed their contributions. Caring for student agency involves paying attention to these aspects through technology choices and meticulous management of digital settings to align with students' preferences. Frameworks for analysing how digital tools position student agency are offered in Brod et al. (2023) and Stenalt (2021b). Also, UNESCO (2024) aims to develop human-centered AI frameworks that take human agency and ethics into account.

The concern extends to the physical environment and resources. It is important to ensure that there are supportive facilities for students' influence and work, whether that work is individual or group-based, dialogue-based, design-based, lab-based, field-based, and so forth. New facilities such as maker spaces can challenge the traditional teacher-centered activity patterns with the possibility of supporting student-centered modes of teaching and learning (Kumpulainen, Kajamaa & Rajala, 2018).

Tip 6: Reframe expressions of resistance as agentic events

Student agency literature encourages educators to view instances of students challenging instructional activities as expressions of agency. Such oppositional practices may include disputing instructional content, questioning procedures like time arrangements and instructions and the purpose of instruction, as well as disrupting activities or refusing participation (Rajala et al., 2016).

Resistance also appears in *assessment situations*. For example, Harris and colleagues (2018) observed students asserting their agency through assessment dishonesty (e.g., copying from others and lying), purposeful underperforming (e.g., procrastination and investing little effort), and doing it alone (e.g., avoiding help and avoiding assessment resources). These maladaptive assessment practices were, however, rooted in strategies of protection (e.g., from negative consequences or from admitting shortcomings), strategic prioritising (e.g., competing time pressures and prioritising other sources of authorities than teachers), and exercising mini-max (e.g., exercising the least possible effort for a personally acceptable return).

Stenalt (2020, 2021a) studied a high-enrollment Social Sciences course, which had introduced elective peer assessment tasks with short feedback cycles to help students prepare for formal evaluations. To participate

successfully, students had to submit an assignment online, followed by an anonymous online peer assessment marking the presence of specific elements. Despite this, student participation declined throughout the semester. Inquiries revealed student experiences of high investment with low outcomes, low levels of social interaction and expressivity, and insufficient authority and subject knowledge. To bolster students' experience of effectance in evaluating peers' work, on-site small group sessions were added, led by a teaching assistant who reviewed the assignments before the peer assessment. To enhance autonomy and relatedness, an option for providing personalised written feedback to peers was included. The second run maintained consistent student engagement levels.

Tip 7: Examine how to encourage agentic repositions such as student persistence

With this last tip, we want to encourage the development of local context-sensitive knowledge about student agency. Certainly, the range of student agency dimensions and influence of contexts and cultures calls for local context-sensitive knowledge.

Edwards (2017) and Robertson et al. (2020) suggest that *educators work together* to develop the teaching and systematically examine how to encourage students' agentic reposition in the specific context, e.g., situating learning in the actual classrooms with a reflexivity that is consistently focused on, i.e. student agency and the context-embedded curricular goals.

Another piece of advice is to *identify which aspects of student agency to develop*. For example, educators could explore how to support the motivational dimension of student agency. Here, it is possible to study the self-determination conditions described in Tip 2 or questions about if and to what degree students are able to regulate their actions and ideas in the face of obstacles (*persisting* and taking a deep-learning strategy), as stressed by Vaughn (2020). An additional aspect worth pursuing is the subject context, which differs across higher education, student characteristics– as an example, the increasingly diverse student population in higher education is often discussed (Glavind et al., 2023), and the relationship between students' sense of agency in courses and deep versus surface *approaches to learning* (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017).

Conclusion

Higher education infrastructures are not always designed with student agency in mind; however, this guide outlines features of a formal learning context that educators can select to promote student agency. Examining student engagement from a student agency perspective can contribute to the further development of teaching strategies and the identification of additional features to foster student agency.

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