Learner-driven Learning

Chris Watkins

THE LONDON CENTRE
for Leadership in Learning

what do we mean?

It's a matter of balance: shifting from classrooms which are full of "uninvited teaching", to classrooms where pupils are more crew than passengers.

We sometimes say that it is important to develop independent learners: we mean more independent from teachers. At the same time more interdependence between learners can develop.

So we want pupils to exercise greater *agency* - acting intentionally, making choices, making a difference and monitoring effects. In the process greater creativity also emerges.

what's learner direction to do with learning?

Self-direction and self-regulation is at the heart of being an effective learner. Teachers can teach as many skills and strategies as they like, but unless learners are involved in planning, monitoring and reviewing their learning it will not be fully effective.
Watkins C et al (2002) *Effective Learning*, National School Improvement Network

"When I'm stuck, I go back and check instead of guessing", says Vikesh (11 years) - a hallmark statement of the self-regulated learner.

"Choice and the opportunity for self-direction appear to enhance intrinsic motivation, as they afford a greater sense of autonomy"
Deci EL and Ryan RM (Ed.) (2002), *Handbook of Self-determination Research* Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press

how do we go about it in a classroom?

"Students in all classrooms have always had the power to make the most basic choice about their learning: they may choose to engage in learning or to disengage. We cannot remove that choice"
Starnes, B.A. and Paris, C. (2000) 'Choosing to learn', *Phi Delta Kappan* January: 392-397.

Students of all ages and levels are most engaged when they:
- help define the content
- have time to find a particular direction that interests them.
- create original and public products
- sense that the results of their work are not predetermined or fully predictable.
Perrone V (1994), "How to engage students in learning", *Educational Leadership*, 51(5): 11-13.

Pupils might make classroom choices on:
• what they learn
• how they learn
• how well they learn, and
• why they learn.
Each time a choice is made, engagement is likely to increase, and learners set themselves a level of challenge which works for them. Examples (starting small-scale):

Choices in what to learn.
- which of this set of problems will you begin with?
- where in this text will you start reading
- which story for the class to have read at the end of the day.

Choices in how to learn.
- which reading place to choose
- whether to present some recent writing
- whose questions to take on it
- whether to work alone, in small groups, or as a class.

Choices in how well to learn.

Choosing how best to demonstrate understanding, and devising questions to check understanding leads to depth and challenge. It also gives students more control, makes evaluation feel less punitive, and provides an important learning experience in itself.

Learner-directed assessment
Even young children (Year 2) are able to participate in developing rubrics for their learning and also in applying criteria to the assessment of that learning. The quality of these rises over time (Higgins et al, 1994) .

Pupil self-assessments agree well with teachers' assessments, although children can tend to under-assess. Students report that self-assessment and peer assessment makes them think more, and learn more (Stefani, 1994).

In later years of school, learners are able to plan and organise extended periods of learning, including that which is a preparation for mandated tests (Starnes & Paris, 2000).

Choices in why to learn.

Pupils are already making these choices. Some are resolving to "Do it to please their parents" while others will be operating a version of "Do it to avoid detention". Bringing these into the open and discussing many will bring other purposes into the discourse and help learners try out new purposes of their own.

what holds us back?

• the deep under-estimation of young people in our society?

• the fact that most of the practices of schooling are based on the idea that adults know best?

• talking about pupils in terms of their deficits ("they haven't got the skills") rather than in terms of their experience (we haven't helped them master this yet")

• it may feel difficult for teachers to promote autonomy in pupils if teachers experience little autonomy themselves

• voices against choice:

  "kids can't have absolute freedom" (Where did that extreme suggestion come from?)

  "they're not mature enough yet" (How long will we wait?)

• forgetting (or not knowing) that research demonstrates that learners who plan and reflect most get 30% better scores in public examinations

  Atkinson S (1999), "Key factors influencing pupil motivation in design and technology", *Journal of Technology Education*, 10(2): 4-26