

Ownership of Learning: Fostering Learners With Autonomy, Drive, and Endurance

What do we mean by ownership of learning?

Ownership of learning means a learner is motivated, engaged, and self-directed with a sense of autonomy, choice, and responsibility in their actions. All learners have a fundamental need to feel autonomy in what they do. Decades of research has shown that **when students feel autonomous, they have higher motivation to learn** and achieve stronger academic performance in school. Naturally, learners want to make decisions that matter, pursue directions that feel meaningful to them, and hold a sense of responsibility and control for both their successes and setbacks.



While choice is an important aspect of cultivating ownership and autonomy, **choice alone is not enough**. For students, having freedom to choose what and how they learn is not as important

as feeling that their learning reflects their personal goals, interests, or values. To achieve ownership, learners also need direction, support, and feedback along the way to help them know if they are on the right track and to give them confidence for the next learning challenge.



In fact, when learning opportunities are designed to be relevant and engaging, providing choice may

not always be helpful. Other aspects of the classroom environment are more critical than simply offering choices. **It is key that students' feel their perspectives, opinions, and questions are welcomed**. Students are more likely to develop ownership if they can contribute to the direction and design of their learning. Teachers support learners' autonomy and ownership when they provide a clear rationale for why a certain exercise or task is valuable and when they show how the learning is relevant. When possible, teachers should identify and respond to students' interests and cultures in what and how they teach. If students learn to reflect on their unique learning process and identify their own challenges and opportunities for growth, the sense of accomplishment and responsibility can cement a lasting sense of ownership.

What does it feel like for a learner to have ownership of learning?

When students feel ownership of their learning they are curious, empowered, driven, capable, and creative. They feel like they belong in the class and can succeed with effort. They feel in control and willing to take risks without being overwhelmed by fear of failure. **They see challenges in learning as worthy of their effort because those difficulties feel purposeful and valuable.** When they face moments of doubt or inevitable setbacks, learners with ownership identify the problem, take responsibility for what they can change, make a plan, and bounce back to tackle their goals. They see struggle as normal not as a sign they should quit. When students feel the sense of autonomy that comes with ownership, they also feel like their opinions, questions, and perspectives are valued by their teachers. Having ownership also means a student knows how to ask for help and feels capable and ready to state what they need to engage and be successful. Students feel welcome to express their unique opinions and creative interpretations with confidence and trust that others will make the effort to listen and understand.



What does a teacher do to promote and sustain ownership of learning?

For learners in a classroom environment, the sense of ownership and autonomy can come from three different aspects of their learning experience. Students develop a sense of autonomy and ownership through the way learning is organized, how the learning process unfolds, and how they are able to think about and apply themselves to what they learn. Teachers can enhance students' ownership and autonomy by removing themselves from the center of attention, decision-making, and authority.

When learning is **organized** to build ownership and autonomy, students...

- Choose aspects of how they will be evaluated
- Take responsibility for the timeline and workflow of assignments
- Participate in creating and implementing classroom norms and rules
- Contribute to decision-making about resources they will use
- Have ample time for decisions that affect their learning
- Face uncertain moments that demand their intellectual and creative risk-taking
- Experience less “teacher talk” time and more “teacher listening” time
- Have opportunities to present or share their work with an authentic audience

When the **learning process** allows for ownership and autonomy, students...

- Choose materials and modalities for class assignments
- Choose topics to pursue in class discussion and projects
- Choose aspects of how they will demonstrate their proficiency
- Serve as a source of feedback and insights for peers
- Express their opinions and wants
- Contribute opinions and perspectives, regularly
- Discuss multiple approaches and strategies
- Make sense of abstract ideas and concepts through their own creative process
- Receive informative and timely feedback
- Formulate personal goals

When they are able to **think** about and **apply** themselves to what they learn, students...

- Find and share multiple solutions and perspectives on an issue or problem
- Express their emotions productively
- Share their expertise and relevant experiences related to what they learn
- Expect, inspect, and respect mistakes as opportunities to learn
- Debate ideas and perspectives freely and respectfully
- Realign activities and assignments to correspond with interests
- Ask questions and share ideas, even if they appear divergent
- Have time to compare and contrast their ideas
- Come up with lots of ideas and choose the best
- Explain their thinking process to their peers
- Identify alternative approaches and try different methods
- Are asked probing questions rather than given answers
- Take risks together to experience shared vulnerability as a community of learners