What Does It Mean to Empower Students to OWN Their Learning in Higher Education?

Rhonda Christian
Durham College

Lynne Kennette
Durham College

Melissa Bosomworth
Durham College

Sue Hawkins
Durham College

Abstract
Student ownership of learning in higher education is paramount in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom. Organized in five themes (choice, accountability, control, engagement, and language), we provide advice on how to ensure students have the opportunity to own their learning, both inside the classroom and in other areas of campus life (e.g., advising and academic services). Possible barriers are also discussed.

Keywords
ownership; learning; choices; accountability; control; engagement; language

Introduction

Ownership in learning is a shift between compliance and engagement (student must follow rules and may get excited about their chosen content, curriculum, and activities) to empowerment (Spencer & Juliani, 2017). When students are engaged (learning in an environment that is both high in attention and high in commitment), they are more focused, persistent, and resilient (Schlechty, 1994). However, engagement alone is insufficient for students to truly OWN their learning. Engaged learning environments are attentive and focused on curriculum, designed to prepare students for specific future jobs following a specific path and a learning environment driven solely by the teacher or academic advisor. Empowered learning environments are attentive and focused on students' interests, with teachers and academic advisors working on tapping their unique interests, inspiring possibilities, and students making their own path with a more personalized approach to learning abilities and

styles. "It's not about what we want students to learn, it is about what they learn through their choices in what they do (create, build, design, make, evaluate)." (Spencer & Juliani, 2017, xxx)

In this essay, we discuss what this type of ownership might look like in higher education and propose five themes to consider in framing student ownership. Offering a unique perspective, we discuss ownership not only from the viewpoint of a classroom instructor, but also from that of academic services (e.g., academic advisor). We focus on specific ways to foster student ownership in our various roles in higher education.

Why is Empowering Students to OWN Their Learning Important?

"Our job is not to prepare students for something; our job is to help students prepare themselves for anything" (Spencer & Juliani, 2017, xxxiii). When students OWN their learning, they develop a growth mindset, they learn to think outside the box, they are self-directed, they become creative problem solvers, and they realize that mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth.

This definition of learning is not meant to apply solely to academics. We use the term learning in a more global and inclusive sense, referring to anything that relates to acquiring knowledge of any kind: knowledge about yourself, about resources that are available on campus (academic advising, mental health, writing skills, career development, etc.), among others. Students bring with them a lot of their own learning when they meet us for the first time. Through our various academic roles, we can bring so much more than what students are learning in the classroom. We can also ensure that we remove judgment (e.g., not scolding them for having waited so long to come seek help) as simply requesting to meet with us is an import step in their academic success.

Every student deserves the opportunity to discover their potential and when we give them choice, allow for inquiry, and foster their creativity, they see the amazing things they can do. In addition, empowering students to create and share their learning stories will shape their future. Empowered learners know their stories are the gateway to pursuing their passions and future.

The goal of students' ownership of learning is for students to regain the control over their own learning by giving them agency and choice. They must realize that they possess the knowledge (i.e., learning) that will allow them to be empowered and confident in controlling their own lives and engaging with their choices. When students OWN their learning THEY are making their own choices, asking questions and making decisions on their own. It is about them making a roadmap for learning with the support of another helping them to create their own map.

Student agency is also key. Agency refers to the level of control, autonomy, and power that a student experiences in an educational situation. Student agency can be visible in the choice of learning environment, subject matter, approach, and/or pace, or manifest itself in the belief in oneself, intrinsic motivation, resilience, and much more.

As referenced earlier, each student is a story waiting to happen, with faculty and advisors forming a team of guides to help them navigate the process. A key perspective is that there is no "right" way for a student to do this; there are no "correct" answers in life. As Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus* always says, "Take chances, make mistakes, get messy."

Themes

Our students come to us having spent 14,000 hours playing the game of school, following rules, and waiting for others to tell them what to do. It is a system that has taught them that education is about consistently being prepared for the next test, assessment, or grade level, and that there is often only one "right" answer. We'd like to challenge that way of thinking. Whether you are a faculty interacting with students in the classroom, an academic advisor helping students one-on-one, or any other student services support role, we can help students to OWN their learning.

We propose five themes to consider when attempting to increase student ownership in higher education: choice, accountability, control, engagement, and language. We will discuss each of these in turn, and provide examples of how to empower students both inside and outside of the classroom using these approaches.

Choice

Choice means giving students options in their learning. Doing so, however, also requires that they own the outcomes related to the choices they make. There is ample evidence to demonstrate numerous benefits associated with giving students choices in their academic journey. For example, for those following the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines, choice is a component of the third principles, multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2009). Offering choice has also been shown to increase intrinsic motivation (Patall et al., 2008).

Faculty

In the classroom, it is quite easy to allow students to choose the order of the class session; it also requires few changes to what is already being done in the classroom. In the simplest form of choice, students can vote (either prior to class or during the class itself) to determine the order of presentation of the topics of the day. If the three topics for that class session were the neuron, the brain, and the nervous system, the class could elect to be exposed to them in the order they choose. In an online class, it is likely already the case that students can tailor their learning by selecting which of the weekly tasks assigned they want to complete first.

With assessments, the simplest type of choice instructors can give to students is choosing the topic of their assignment. For example, instructors can assign a scientific paper related to the course content, but not assign a specific topic. A similar option would be assigning a specific topic but allowing students to choose the format of their assignment; the same assignment may be submitted as a video, oral presentation, or traditional written paper. For tests or exams, instructors may give students the choice of answering three of four essay questions on test, or even choice between two multiple choice questions for some of the questions on a test (note: if offering this option on a multiple choice test that uses a scantron for scoring, instructors must ensure that both questions from which the students are choosing have the same correct answer, e.g., "b").

More choice can be offered to students at the assignment level where they choose what their assignment(s) looks like in terms of the specific tasks or components they will complete; this example of choice (detailed below) can be done at the course level whereby students choose which assignments they will complete to earn their credit in the course, or at the assignment level where students select which components they will complete to earn their score on a particular assignment. It is ill-advised to leave choice completely open to students. Faculty,

however, can create documents which limit students' choices. For example, creating a tic-tac-toe grid requiring that students complete three assignments that form a line. This way, instructors provide a number of options to students, who are free to select those which they find most appealing. Alternately, creating a menu of assignment choices where students select one assignment listed under appetizer (perhaps this can be completed as a group assignment), one entree, one or two side dishes and possibly a dessert (which could be used as bonus points or a required element).

Academic Advisors and Others

All students are balancing academic and non-academic priorities. At a campus with over 10,000 students comprised of both domestic and international students, the vast diversity of life challenges which impacts their education is endless. Examples include caring for young children, physical and mental illnesses, loss and grief, financial strain, homelessness, acclimation, addictions, and countless other adversities. In addition to these factors, there is also the impact of internal factors which must be considered such as the level of grit and exceptionalities.

Given that faculty or academic advisors are not always in a position to be privy to the unique needs of all the learners in their classrooms, it is imperative that everyone views each learner non-judgmentally and provides opportunities for them to be autonomous in their learning. This does not negate the need for accountability from the learners; just as in the workplace, there are clear guidelines of expectation. However, there is autonomy within those guidelines.

As Academic Advisors, giving students options in their learning and supporting their choice about what their priorities are is key to the message of ownership (academics vs non-academic needs). We must help students discover all of their options, and give them the autonomy to own the outcome of their choices. We must also respect that students have the right to make choices that we do not need to agree with.

The following are several questions that advisors and staff can use to hand over some of the learning to students through the **choices** they make:

> When was the last time you handled a difficult situation well? What strategies did you utilize in handling it?
>
> Tell me about a time when you think you made the right decision. How did you do that? Who did you talk with to make that decision?
>
> What obstacles do you expect to face in executing the plan we created together? What are some strategies you can use when you encounter roadblocks? When your motivation starts to run low, what specific steps can you take to re-energize yourself?

Accountability

Students have responsibilities in their learning, and institutions typically outline these in a guide, policy, or other official document to ensure that students are held accountable for their actions. Motivating students to take responsibility for their learning and achieve their goals has challenged both new and experienced faculty, and student accountability is frequently described as lacking in today's students (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). But student responsibility is

important because it is correlated with increased student effort (Tyner & Petrilli, 2018), which ultimately leads to better outcomes. However, when students are seen as customers, they are less likely to actively engage in learning and remain passive consumers of education (Share, 1997). So making students accountable for their success is key to improving both the outcomes of the institution as well as those of the students.

Faculty

Typically, students are primarily accountable to the teacher (especially if they choose to attend class regularly). Perhaps some students are also accountable to their parents who may be paying for some or all of their education. However, in the classroom, students can also be held accountable by their peers if the instructor includes peers in the evaluation process. This may take the form of group evaluations, informally reviewing drafts of papers, or asking students to trade and grade smaller in-class activities.

Instructors can also encourage students to be accountable to themselves when they set up the course. For example, asking students to set goals for themselves (for the course and beyond) and list the small steps they need to take in order to reach those goals. Instructors can also create in-process assignments which may help students meet deadlines by breaking up the assignment into smaller chunks, as well as allow for some scaffolding.

Academic Advisors and Others

It is difficult for students to emotionally "own" the outcomes of their learning if they have not been empowered to make their own choices and have been advised or told what to do. Students are not always taught, either within the education system or at home, that they are resourceful and whole. Students have the power within themselves to process and understand situations, they have options, and can make choices; it is our job to support this. An important message in our role as Academic Advisors is to convey that it's acceptable to make a choice which can lead to undesirable outcomes, as some of the greatest learning is experienced through failure. A major part of an academic advising meeting should be on how the student plans to hold themselves accountable to their goals.

The following are several questions that advisors and staff can use to support conversations around students owning their learning and **being accountable**:

> Asking about progress: What have you done well since our last meeting? What is one thing your could have done even better?

> Attendance concerns: You say that your academic are a priority for you. What ideas to you have for addressing the concerns regarding your attendance and/or academic progression?

> What have you done well since our last meeting? What is one thing you could have done even better?

> What holds a person accountable to a specific outcome varies with each individual.

When considering accountability, the factors that contributes to a learners' motivation (for choosing their program, being successful etc.) is directly correlated. The more personal the

motivation, the more likely the student will be accountable when impeding factors present. To negate the impact of these factors is not taking the whole person into consideration. On a smaller scale than program success, accountability to prepare for each evaluation helps keep a learner aware of the importance of these things.

Control

We use the term control to evoke students' inclusion in decisions; that is, to allow students to control (to some extent) their learning by way of being given the ability to make some of these decisions themselves. As with choice, (which we discussed earlier), having a sense of control over any aspect of one's life is positive in a number of contexts, including the workplace, and results in increased engagement and motivation (Pink, 2009).

Faculty

Instructors do need to meet learning outcomes and teach students certain specific concepts or skills. That control may not be relinquished to students. However, students can be included in some of the decisions. For example, students can co-create (or completely develop) evaluations with the instructor. If that is not possible, students could be included in the creation of the rubrics for the assignments in the course.

Another way to provide students with some control is to include more flexible deadlines. For example, rather than weekly thought papers or quizzes, instructors could group them by month or by unit so that students can better manage their time across their many courses and other commitments. It may also be possible to implement student-proposed deadlines (either for each student individually or for the entire class). A final option we would like to propose is to have two deadlines: the first is the deadline you would like to have the assignment handed in, but the second deadline (perhaps 6 hours later, 12 hours later, or 24 hours later) is the penalty-free "extended" deadline after which no assignment will be accepted. This allows "life" to happen without having a detrimental effect on a student's performance; it may even help students get more sleep (Aldrich, 2018). This also offers a built-in extension, so students should not be requesting subsequent extensions; if students choose to wait until the second deadline, they cannot expect an extension as they were all already granted one.

Academic Advisors and Others

Choosing the way students demonstrate the outcome of their learning allows them to tap into their strengths. Learning how to be flexible shows compassion for different life circumstances. It is important to note that flexibility does not mean there are no limits. For example, rather than imposing a penalty to punish an undesirable action, could there be an incentive to reinforce a positive behaviour?

When students come in for an appointment, reserve judgement if they chose to wait longer than they should have before coming in for help. Control means that the decisions are made by the student once they understand all of their options, with academic advising playing a pivotal role in supporting the exploration of those options.

The following are several questions that advisors and staff can use to support students having **control** in owning their learning:

I have some ideas about how you could improve your academic habits, study skills and grades. However, I am interested in your ideas. What can you suggest?

Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge but felt you had control over the outcome. In what ways did you exercise that control?

Let's think about several ideas and strategies about your education plan; what might be a few of the barriers that would keep these ideas from being successful?

Engagement

Student engagement is key to empowerment. Engagement means encouraging and/or maintaining students' attention, curiosity, and passion for what they are learning. Engaged students are more interested, focused, persistent (especially during challenges), and happy with their accomplishments (Schlechty, 1994).

Faculty

Engaging students can simply mean making the content fun. As previously discussed, this might mean using tic-tac-toe or menus to introduce choice in assignments. Gamification is another way to engage students; gaming elements which can be used in the classroom include competition, achievements/badges, games, and rewards. Some instructors choose to develop these at the class level (e.g., competition between students to earn the top mark) or set it up at the student level (e.g., grating badges to students privately).

Another example is to use authentic assessments (those which mirror real-life contexts) as they are motivating to students (CAST, 2009). Taking this idea a step further is to show students that their learning is making a difference in the world by including renewable (or non-disposable) assignments. Examples may include creating a learning object such as a video explaining a course concept, developing a pamphlet related to something learned in the course which can be distributed through a local health centre or non-profit group, proofreading a real website for a non-profit organization, editing a Wikipedia page for accuracy and currency, etc. Another way to increase student engagement is to include project-based learning or service learning in the course.

Incorporating additional universal design for learning (UDL) principles will also encourage engagement; the third principle of UDL is "multiple means of engagement" which engages students' affective networks related to learning (CAST, 2009), so interested readers should consult the CAST website (cast.org).

Academic Advisors and Others

Begin each meeting with a student by establishing their desired outcome. If a student identifies many, ask them which one they would like to start with. Align the student's motivation and goals during the appointment with their intended outcome.

The following are questions that advisors and staff can use to support **student engagement** in owning their learning.

Tell me about a current goal. What is one thing you have done in the past week/month to move toward reaching that goal?

What is the best part of being a college student?

Let's brainstorm on the steps you will need to take to accomplish your dreams/goals. Identify people in your life who can help you reach your goals and campus resources you can utilize to help you make this possible.

Language

Finally, it is also important to consider how the tone and the specific words used to communicate with students may affect their ownership of learning. This may be especially true in light of some of the previous themes we discussed (is your tone or language use giving them some choice, promoting accountability, and including them in decisions?) Linguistic influences on our behaviours and perceptions are everywhere, but we seldom recognize their influence. For example, a line of research by Elizabeth Loftus has demonstrated the influence of leading questions. In a classic experiment, Loftus and Palmer (1974) demonstrated that our perception of a vehicle's speed is significantly affected by the verb we use to ask the question: "How fast were the cars going when they collided/smashed/hit/crashed into each other?" Language is surprisingly powerful.

Faculty

From the very first class, instructors can set the tone for the course to encourage student ownership of their learning. Reminding students that they are responsible adults and that your expectation of them is that they will take their learning seriously and really own the journey is setting students up for empowerment.

When meeting with students, scaffold their problem-solving by asking questions of them: "What do you want the outcome to be?"; "What resources are available to you?"; "What could you do differently next time you have to complete a group project?"

Academic Advisors and Others

Help students weigh options and make good academic decisions, but also challenge them to grow by asking questions that support their ability to think more critically about who they are and how your institution can help them reach their goals.

The following are several questions that exemplify the **language** that can be used to support a conversation with students owning their learning;

If I challenged you to become the best person (student) you could possible become, what do you do differently?

When was the last time you thought you could not accomplish a goal but completed it anyway?

Tell me about a current goal. What is one thing you have done in the past week/month to move toward reaching that goal?

Concluding Thoughts

There is no magic solution to increased student learning, student success, and student completion. Instead, it is a series of well-designed, proactive, and intentional initiatives of which teaching and academic advising are central. Reaching excellence in teaching and academic advising is an aspirational process focused on data driven decision making regarding all aspects of the experiences of students.

Our goal is to shift the mindset in higher education from compliance (students must follow rules) to engagement (getting our students excited about their content, curriculum, and other activities) and then to empowerment, so that they may OWN their learning. We should continually ask ourselves what decisions we are making for students that they could be making for themselves. It is as much about what we want them to learn in their courses and advising interactions as it is about what they will learn about themselves through their choices.

It is also imperative to address possible barriers to implementing this approach. The best advice to pass along for implementation is that you should start small. There is no need to overhaul your entire approach to student interactions to implement these practices, but tweaking a couple of components can encourage student ownership of their learning. Start by creating a welcoming and supportive environment free of judgement. Just using the language of ownership is a starting point. Consider just using the word "owning your learning" as a starting point to empower the student. Let students choose to fail with low-stakes (or no-stakes) and learn from those failures. Collaboration is still important, but let the student take the wheel. After all, part of our role in higher education is to help our students prepare themselves for whatever is to come.

References

Aldrich, H. (2018, March 4). Help your students get more sleep: Set TWO due dates for assignments. *The Scholarly Teacher,* Retrieved from https://www.scholarlyteacher.com/blog/helpstudentsgetmoresleep

CAST, Center for Applied Special Technology. (2009). *About Universal Design for Learning.* Wakefield, MA: CAST. http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html

Drake, J. K., Jordan, P., & Miller, M. A. (2013). *Academic advising approaches*. Jossey-Bass.

Folsom, P., Yoder, F., & Joslin, J. J., (2015). *The new advisor guidebook: Mastering the art of academic advising*. Jossey-Bass.

Grites, T. J., Miller, M. A., & Voller, J. G., (2016). *Beyond foundations: Developing as a master academic advisor*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Hassel, H. & Lourey, J. (2005) The dea(r)th of student responsibility. *College Teaching, 53*(1), 2–13. https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.53.1.2-13

Loftus, E. F., & Palmer, J. C. (1974). Reconstruction of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, *13*(5), 585–589. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(74)80011-3

Patall, E. K., Cooper, H., & Robinson, J. C. (2008). The effects of choice on intrinsic motivation and related outcomes: A meta-analysis of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin, 134*(2), 270-300. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.2.270

Pink, D. H. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us.* Penguin.

Schlechty, P. (1994). Increasing Student Engagement. *Missouri Leadership Academy, 5.*

Share, C. (1997). Implications of considering students as consumers. *College Teaching 45*(4), 122. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567559709596211

Spencer, J., & Juliani, A. J. (2017). *Empower: What happens when students own their learning*. IMPress.

Tyner, A., & Petrilli, M. J. (2018). The case for holding students accountable: How extrinsic motivation gets kids to work harder and learn more. *Education Next*, *18*(3), 26–33. https://www.educationnext.org/case-for-holding-students-accountable-how-extrinsic-motivation-gets-kids-work-harder-learn-more/

Corresponding Author

Lynne Kennette, School of Interdisciplinary Studies, Durham College, 2000 Simcoe St N. Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, L1G 0C5. Email: lynne.kennette@durhamcollege.ca