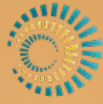




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NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL ISSUE

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS
IN MOTION

AGENCY - IDENTITY - THE LEARNER WITHIN





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FOR THE BETTERMENT OF ALL

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY



For three years, **EduVerse** has connected educators, amplified diverse voices, and shared ideas that inspire meaningful change. Thank you to everyone who has written, spoken, contributed, and grown with us. May the journey ahead bring even more learning, collaboration, and impact across classrooms and communities worldwide.

LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear EduVerse Readers

Who sits at the heart of education? Although the answer may appear self-evident, it remains one of the most significant questions confronting the teaching profession. Amid technological advancement, changing societal expectations, increasing cultural diversity, and global uncertainty, educational discourse often focuses on curriculum reform, assessment, accountability, and innovation. Yet these priorities have lasting value only when they strengthen students' learning, development, and wellbeing. It is our pleasure to welcome you to this edition of **EduVerse, Student-Centeredness in Motion: Agency, Identity, and the Learner Within**, which examines one of the defining priorities of contemporary education.

At its essence, student-centredness is neither a pedagogical trend nor a single instructional approach. Rather, it reflects a commitment to recognising learners as individuals whose identities, experiences, aspirations, strengths, and capabilities shape how they engage with learning. Effective teaching begins with understanding those we teach. Every decision—from curriculum design and assessment to relationships, feedback, and classroom culture—should be guided by this principle.

This commitment extends beyond academic achievement. Education is concerned not only with what students know, but with who they become. It nurtures agency, character, belonging, ethical responsibility, resilience, and the confidence to participate thoughtfully in society. When learners are genuinely prioritised, learning becomes more authentic because it recognises the whole person rather than viewing knowledge acquisition as an end in itself.

Such an approach elevates the work of teachers. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge; they are designers of learning, facilitators of inquiry, mentors of growth, and professionals who create the conditions in which every learner can flourish. This responsibility demands pedagogical expertise, professional judgement, responsiveness, and a sustained commitment to recognising the diverse needs, strengths, and potential of every student.

Throughout this edition, our contributors explore the many dimensions of student-centredness, offering research, perspectives, and practical insights into how educators can:

- strengthen learner agency through authentic participation and meaningful choice;
- support identity development through inclusive and culturally responsive practice;
- cultivate learning environments that foster curiosity, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking;
- build relationships that promote belonging, wellbeing, and academic growth; and
- prepare learners with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to thrive in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

One particularly meaningful feature of this edition is our Student Voices section, created in collaboration with The University Grapevine. While educators and researchers contribute valuable perspectives throughout these pages, we also believe that conversations about student-centredness should include the voices of students themselves. Their reflections remind us that learners are not only the focus of education but also important contributors to the dialogue about what meaningful learning looks and feels like.

Collectively, the articles demonstrate that placing learners at the heart of educational practice is not simply a matter of instructional design; it is fundamental to quality teaching. They remind us that success is measured not only by academic attainment, but by the capacity to develop thoughtful, capable, and compassionate individuals who contribute meaningfully to their communities and the wider world.

We extend our sincere appreciation to each contributor for sharing their scholarship, professional experience, and thoughtful insights. Their work reflects a shared commitment to advancing educational practice while underscoring the fundamental responsibility of the teaching profession: enabling every learner to realise their potential. The diversity of voices represented in this issue reflects the strength of our international learning community, reminding us that although educational contexts differ, our commitment to learners is shared across cultures, systems, and borders.

As you engage with this edition, we hope the ideas explored throughout these pages stimulate reflection, professional dialogue, and renewed commitment to placing learners at the heart of educational practice. In doing so, we affirm a principle that transcends policy, pedagogy, and circumstance: education fulfils its highest purpose when every learner is recognised, valued, challenged, and empowered to flourish.

Dr. Donna M. Velliaris - Special Guest Editor

Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc - Editor-in-Chief

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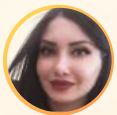
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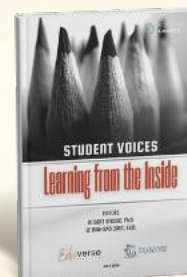
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STUDENT VOICES

LEARNING FROM THE INSIDE

SPECIAL RELEASED

YOU matter

by Dr Donna M. Veeltaris

多様性は力、
包摂は未来。

A blurry board, a screen too small,
A hearing aid, an easy fall.
A glare too bright, a chair too high,
A banging door, a startled cry.

The ramp is steep, the lift is slow,
The desk too wide, the locker low.
A ticking clock, a flashing light,
The seating's set, but not quite right.

A racing mind, a restless hand,
Instructions hard to understand.
Too many words that twist and blur,
A speech delay, a whispered slur.

The colours shift, the letters slide—
Confusion builds with no one to guide.
Too many voices, too much sound—
No space to think, unstable ground.

The quiet's too quiet, the loud too loud,
Alone in thought or lost in crowd.
Too fast, too soft, too sharp, too strong—
Each moment feels a little wrong.

The noise, the pace, the lack of rest—
Each school day feels a silent test.
The pressure mounts, the gaps expand,
And still, too few will understand.

Inclusion means we choose to see
Each learner in their dignity—
Not out of pity or saving face,
But honouring every student's place.

Each child arrives with gifts to share,
Unique in ways beyond compare.
We do not judge, fix, or mend—
We teach, we reach, we comprehend.

So may our classrooms always start
With open minds and open hearts.
To teach inclusively is to say:
"You matter here, every day".



A TALE OF TWO CLASSROOMS

Dr Donna M. Velliaris 

A LIFE-CHANGING DECISION

At 16 years of age, I was presented with an opportunity that would profoundly influence my understanding of culture, belonging, and the power of human connection. I had been selected for an international student exchange programme. While I greeted the news with excitement, my parents responded with enormous apprehension. The prospect of sending their teenage daughter overseas prompted days of careful deliberation.

Together, they examined the 18 countries listed on my preference sheet, weighing factors such as climate, culture, distance from home, educational quality, and safety and security. Family members, friends, and trusted colleagues were consulted before a final decision was reached. Their conclusion was definite: **Japan.**

At the time, I had never studied Japan and possessed zero Japanese language skills. I knew remarkably little about the country beyond a handful of stereotypes gleaned from *The Karate Kid*. Yet I was unconcerned by my lack of knowledge. Having already graduated high school, this would be my first journey abroad and, like many adolescents, I imagined international travel as an adventure filled with novelty, excitement, and endless possibility.

A WORLD *Apart*

Within hours of landing at Tokyo [Narita] International Airport, I was escorted to a local Municipal Ward Office to begin the formal process of registering as a foreign resident. Photographs were taken, fingerprints recorded, and documents completed before I was issued a Certificate of Alien Registration that I would be required to carry daily. I vividly recall studying the card, momentarily transfixed by the juxtaposition of my photograph and fingerprint.

For a 17-year-old arriving in a country I knew nothing about, the experience felt both confronting and surreal. I was still wearing the clothes in which I had travelled from Australia, dishevelled and exhausted after weeks of preparation, anticipation, farewells, and the thrill of my first international flight. It was an abrupt introduction to the realities of life abroad and a stark contrast to the romanticised expectations I had imagined.

The challenges extended beyond administrative formalities. Relocating to Japan in the 1980s meant complete immersion in a world unlike anything I had previously encountered. My host family spoke very little English and I spoke no Japanese. Everyday interactions that most people take for granted suddenly became sources of uncertainty and frustration. Simple tasks required patience, negotiation, and resilience. For the first time, I understood what it meant to be functionally illiterate—unable to follow conversations or communicate even the most basic needs. Although the orientation sessions in Australia had attempted to prepare exchange students for life abroad, they could not fully convey the scale of the transition that awaited. Nor could they prepare me for the profound sense of vulnerability that accompanies the loss of linguistic competence, cultural familiarity, and the reassuring certainty of knowing how to navigate everyday life.

FIRST DAY OF *School*

Despite my thirst for independence and adventure, the reality of life in Japan proved far more challenging than I had anticipated. Eager to begin school and intrigued by what lay ahead, I arrived expecting a relatively ordinary first day. Instead, I was ushered directly into the gymnasium of an enormous public senior high school with approximately 3,000 students; 1,000 students in each of Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12. Dressed in a sailor-style uniform, I barely had time to absorb my surroundings before being handed a cue card and informed that I would be delivering an introductory speech in Japanese. Although the monologue was written in Romaji [Japanese written in the Roman alphabet], I did not know what I was about to say and how it should sound.

Seconds later, I found myself standing alone on an elevated stage facing what seemed like an endless sea of students seated in perfect formation. The audience fell into a deathly silence. Thousands of eyes were fixed upon me. The cue card trembled in my hands. The microphone amplified every hesitant breath as its echo reverberated throughout the space. Never before had I felt so exposed and completely out of my depth.

I was acutely aware of my foreignness, my linguistic limitations, and my inability to fully comprehend the situation unfolding around me. I was equally aware that my freshly permed 80s hairdo, complete with a generously teased fringe, ensured I was visible from every angle. At that moment, I was not merely a visitor to another country. I was a 17-year-old standing solo before 3,000+ strangers, attempting to introduce myself to an entirely unfamiliar world. Indeed, I looked, felt, and acted like an 'alien'.

STARTING WITH *A-Class*

Following the assembly, I was escorted to my homeroom. The corridor seemed endless, lined with classes ranked according to academic performance from A-class, the highest-achieving students, through to Z-class. Each class had approximately 40 students, evenly divided between boys and girls. I was assigned to Year 10 A-class under the guidance of Mr Watanabe, Head of English, and graduate of Waseda University, one of Japan's most prestigious institutions. It quickly became apparent that my placement reflected his ability to communicate in English rather than my complete lack of Japanese proficiency.

The classroom setting was organised with military precision; in single desks 20 boys sat on one side and 20 girls on the other. Mr Watanabe chose to seat me: (a) alone; (b) in the furthest back corner; and (c) on the boys' side. I felt both invisible and conspicuous. Lessons lasted 50 minutes and were followed by a 10-minute break. Expecting the intervals to provide opportunities for social interaction, I soon discovered that the students of A-class focused exclusively on academic achievement. While my Australian peers would have been chatting, laughing, or moving around the classroom, in A-class, all 40 students remained glued to their desks, fervently reviewing their notes.

My sense of dislocation was made even more evident when one day Mr Watanabe unexpectedly posed a question. Looking directly at me and pacing up and down his raised stage area at the front, he asked, "Donna, what is your iken?" Faced with an unfamiliar word and an expectant audience, I sat in bewildered silence. I had no idea what he was asking. Animal? Vegetable? Mineral? And he repeated his question several times over for maximum 'humiliating' effect. Only later did I learn that iken meant "opinion". What seemed a simple question to everyone else became, for me, an unmistakable marker of how little I understood and exacerbated my feelings of ineptitude.



THE GREAT *Escape*

After several months, I contracted influenza yet was still expected to attend school. Feverish, physically depleted, and emotionally exhausted, I reached a point where I simply could not endure another day in A-class. Each morning felt like an exercise in survival. Every lesson reinforced what I could not understand. Every conversation reminded me of what I could not say. Even the simplest interactions required effort and courage. I had no friends in the class, no meaningful social connections, and little sense that anyone had either the time or inclination to engage with a foreign exchange student. The strain became overwhelming. Far from home and separated from everything familiar, I found myself carrying a loneliness unlike anything I had previously experienced. What had begun as an exciting adventure had become a daily struggle to make it through the school day.

Eventually, desperation eclipsed reason. Convinced that remaining at school served no purpose, I decided to leave. The school gates remained locked during school hours, turning what should have been a straightforward departure into a scene from a particularly bad coming-of-age film. In a blur, I made my way to the perimeter, scaled the fence, and headed for the home of a previous host family who had become a source of comfort and security. I did not stop to consider the consequences. At that moment, escape felt easier than facing another school day.

Over the course of my exchange year, I would live with six different host families, but this family occupied an important place in my life. They welcomed me without question, fed me, listened to me, and provided the care, reassurance, and acceptance that I desperately needed. For a teenager living thousands of kilometres from home, their kindness offered sanctuary at a moment when life in Japan had become overwhelming. In their home, I was not viewed as a struggling exchange student; I was simply treated as someone who mattered.

My great escape proved to be a turning point. Distracted by my stay in A-class, I made it abundantly clear that I would not be returning. Nothing was going to convince me otherwise. My reaction must have revealed the depth of my unhappiness because the school agreed to transfer me shortly thereafter. I was reassigned to S-class, a decision that would transform the remainder of my exchange year and, ultimately, my appreciation of issues pertaining to 'wellness' and 'inclusion'.

FINISHING WITH *S-Class*

My new teacher spoke no English whatsoever. A veteran and deeply respected teacher, she possessed a warmth and presence that seemed to draw students to her. She reminded me of a mother hen, constantly surrounded by a flock of energetic adolescents seeking advice, sharing stories, or simply enjoying her company. Although we lacked a common language, she never focused on what I could not do. Instead, she welcomed me as a valued member of her class from the outset. She expected me to participate, contribute, and engage alongside my classmates. There were no special allowances, no lowered expectations, and no inference that I was somehow a burden. Through her actions rather than her words, she conveyed a simple but powerful message: I was one of them.

What struck me most was that no one seemed concerned by my limited Japanese. Rather than drawing attention to my shortcomings, my classmates simply welcomed me into their world. They spoke with me during breaks, involved me in conversations, invited me to participate in activities, and patiently helped me navigate daily school life. They all practised inclusion rather than talking about it. Without consciously realising it, I became woven into the fabric of the class. Gradually, the isolation that had characterised my early months in Japan began to fade.

Over the coming months, I came to love my teacher and classmates who had welcomed me so unconditionally. This class became a place where I felt safe enough to take risks and make mistakes, without fear of judgment. Surrounded by people who expected participation rather than perfection, I developed confidence alongside language. Looking back more than three decades later, I remain convinced that my new placement transformed my exchange journey. By the end of the year, the country that had initially seemed so distant and incomprehensible had become a place where I could flourish.

FROM EXPERIENCE TO *Practice*

Although I did not fully appreciate it at the time, my exchange year provided an early introduction to many of the principles that would later underpin my work as an educator. The experience offered a unique perspective on what it means to be a learner operating outside familiar linguistic, cultural, and social contexts. As both a participant and observer, I encountered educational practices that highlighted the profound influence of belonging, relationships, expectations, and classroom culture on student engagement and success. While these concepts would later become familiar through professional reading, postgraduate study, and educational research, I first grappled with them not as theoretical constructs but as lived realities.

Nothing illustrated this more clearly than the contrast between A-class and S-class. Despite existing within the same school, they represented very different educational environments. One prioritised academic excellence, discipline, and quiet study; the other emphasised relationships, participation, and community. Yet both followed the same curriculum and operated within the same institutional context. My circumstances had not changed. My Japanese remained limited, and my academic abilities were no different. What changed was the social environment. In A-class, I felt disconnected and isolated. In S-class, I felt accepted, valued, and included. I began to thrive not because the curriculum changed, but because my sense of belonging changed.

This distinction proved transformative. The experience demonstrated that inclusion extends beyond physical access to education. Genuine inclusion occurs when learners feel accepted and able to participate meaningfully within a community. Equally, exclusion can occur even when students share the same classroom, curriculum, and opportunities as their peers. The difference between my two classrooms was not a matter of academic ability or language proficiency. Rather, it reflected the extent to which relationships, expectations, and peer interactions either facilitated or hindered participation in the life of the class.

Years later, educational theory provided a framework for understanding what I had faced firsthand. Maslow (1943) identifies belonging as a fundamental human need. My experience similarly showed that learning is shaped not only by curriculum and instruction, but also by whether students feel accepted, valued, and connected to their educational environment. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective emphasises that learning is shaped through interaction with others within supportive communities. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective further highlights the influence of social environments and relationships on human development, while Hattie's (2009) synthesis of educational research underscores the importance of positive teacher-student relationships, expectations, and classroom climate in supporting learner success. Wenger (1998) and Ainscow (2020) likewise highlight the importance of participation, inclusion, and community in fostering engagement and success. Together, these perspectives helped explain why one classroom left me feeling invisible while the other enabled me to flourish.

The lessons learned in Japan have continued to influence my approach to teaching. They reinforced the importance of knowing students as individuals, recognising strengths rather than deficits, maintaining high expectations while providing appropriate support, and creating classroom cultures in which diversity is viewed as an asset. Most importantly, they affirmed that meaningful learning cannot be separated from human connection. I remain convinced that no student should feel so disconnected from their classroom, peers, or sense of self that climbing a locked school fence seems a more appealing option than remaining where they are.

THE TEN LESSONS *Learned*

The exchange year left me with many memories, but it also left me with a set of lessons that have guided my work as an educator ever since. Born from both struggle and success, they continue to influence how I view inclusion, belonging, and student-centred practice. In no particular order, the following ten lessons must be highlighted.

- 1 Belonging precedes learning.** Before students can fully engage with curriculum, assessment, or academic expectations, they need to feel accepted, valued, and connected to the learning community.
- 2 Inclusion is measured by participation, not proximity.** Simply occupying the same physical space as others does not guarantee meaningful involvement, contribution, or connection.
- 3 Students are more than their limitations.** Learners should be recognised for their strengths, potential, and possibilities rather than defined by what they cannot yet do.
- 4 Relationships matter.** The quality of interactions with teachers, peers, and caregivers can profoundly influence confidence, resilience, motivation, and wellbeing.
- 5 High expectations are most effective when accompanied by support.** Challenge without encouragement can overwhelm; support without challenge can limit growth.
- 6 Confidence and competence develop together.** As learners experience success and acceptance, they become more willing to communicate, participate, take risks, and persevere through difficulties.
- 7 Emotions shape learning.** Anxiety, uncertainty, isolation, acceptance, and connection influence educational outcomes as powerfully as intellectual ability.
- 8 Language and identity are closely intertwined.** Difficulties communicating affect not only academic performance but also confidence, relationships, self-expression, and a sense of self.
- 9 Cultural understanding enhances educational practice.** Appreciating diverse perspectives and lived experiences enables educators to respond more effectively to the needs of all learners.
- 10 Student-centred practice begins with understanding how learners experience school.** Effective teaching requires educators to see the classroom through their students' eyes and to recognise that every learner's journey is unique.

“*The lessons learned in Japan have continued to influence my approach to teaching. They reinforced the importance of knowing students as individuals, recognising strengths rather than deficits, maintaining high expectations while providing appropriate support, and creating classroom cultures in which diversity is viewed as an asset.*”

CONCLUSION

My experience revealed that inclusion extends far beyond access to classrooms, curriculum, and opportunity. At its core, inclusion is about whether individuals feel seen, valued, supported, and able to participate meaningfully within a community. More than three decades later, the lessons I learned as an exchange student continue to shape my work as an educator, researcher, and advocate for belonging.

Above all, I learned that effective teaching begins with people rather than content. It requires educators to recognise and nurture learners' strengths, identities, and potential rather than focusing on perceived deficits. While educational theory later provided a framework for understanding these principles, living them as a vulnerable young person in an unfamiliar culture offered lessons no textbook could fully capture. Today, I remain profoundly grateful to the teachers, classmates, and host families whose kindness, patience, and encouragement transformed uncertainty into confidence and isolation into connection. Their actions demonstrated the profound difference that acceptance, empathy, and genuine human connection can make in a person's life, because unequivocally 'Belonging is the heartbeat of inclusion'.

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Dr Donna M. Velliaris is a globally acclaimed educator, author, and thought leader whose work has shaped contemporary approaches to inclusive, high-impact teaching and learning. Her academic qualifications include three Master's degrees in Educational Sociology, Studies of Asia, and Special Education, together with a PhD in Education and a Postdoctoral Fellowship. Recognised as a Top 30 Global Guru in Education for four consecutive years—2023 (No. 30), 2024 (No. 22), 2025 (No. 9), and 2026 (No. 6)—she has established a strong reputation as one of the foremost contributors to contemporary educational practice and scholarship.

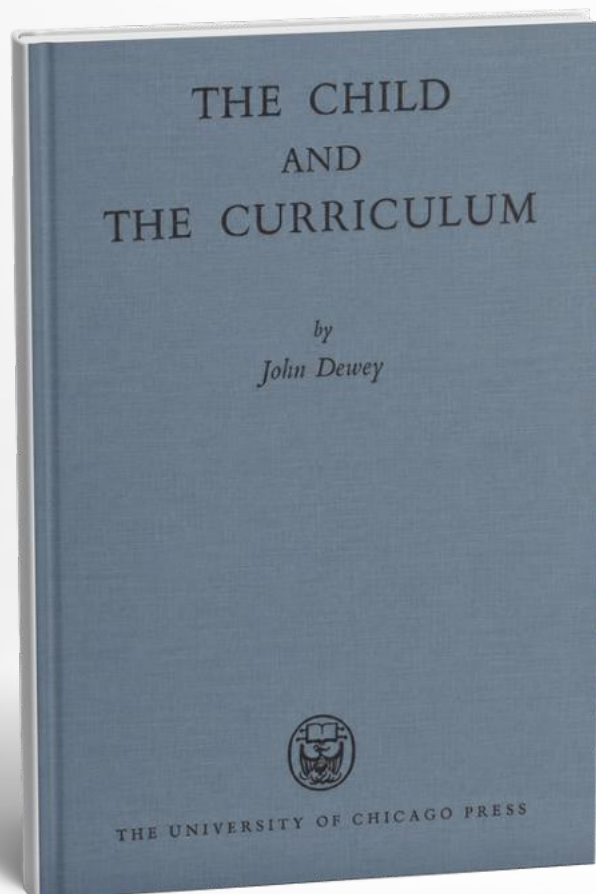
Dr Velliaris has authored eight books, with several more in production, and contributed over 40 book chapters. Her influence extends beyond traditional scholarship through a substantial international presence across professional networks, educational platforms, and social media, including the creation of original educational content that reaches millions of viewers each month.

THE CHILD AND THE CURRICULUM

More than a century after its publication, John Dewey's ***The Child and the Curriculum*** still speaks directly to one of education's most enduring questions: Should learning begin with the curriculum, or with the child?

Dewey refused this simple either-or choice. He argued that meaningful education grows from the relationship between learners' lived experiences and the knowledge, ideas, and possibilities that a curriculum can open. The child should not be treated as a passive receiver, yet student-centeredness should not mean leaving learners without direction. The teacher's role is to connect experience with knowledge, interest with growth, and the learner's present world with a wider one.

In an age of learner agency, personalized learning, and rapidly changing classrooms, this short classic invites us to return to a foundational insight: education becomes powerful when the child and the curriculum are not placed in opposition, but brought into meaningful interaction.





WHO GETS TO DECIDE IN AN AI-POWERED WORLD?

Stacy Kratochvil 

Earlier this school year, I had my high school students use AI to get feedback on their writing. They wrote a first draft, submitted their work to a custom chatbot I built using a district-approved K-12 tool, and received feedback on strengths and areas for growth. I asked them to read, revise, and try again.

But I also warned them about something important. AI would not tell them when they were "done." It would keep offering suggestions, and they would have to decide when the piece felt complete. I did not want students trapped in an endless cycle of revisions or obsessing over every tiny detail. I wanted them to practice judgment.

Then one student raised her hand and said something that stopped me: “It said I’m done. It’s perfect.” She had not decided she was done. The AI had decided for her. When I looked at the response on her screen, I realized the moment had become a gift. It gave us a reason to pause as a class and talk about agency: what it means to use AI as support without handing our power to it.

Together, we unpacked the tension. These tools can provide incredible support, while at the same time holding the potential to undermine agency if students are not empowered to stay in control. I left school that day knowing that conversation mattered far more than the writing assignment itself.

That experience helped me name something I had been feeling for a long time. Students need something more than engagement. They need more than motivation. They need meaningful opportunities to make decisions, exercise judgment, and recognize the power they already have as learners.

So what if, instead of focusing primarily on engagement or motivation, we designed for agency?

Engagement and motivation matter. But engagement can easily become about getting students interested, and conversations about motivation can sometimes make it sound as though the problem lies entirely with students rather than the conditions we create. Agency offers a different lens.

In many ways, this is the heart of student-centered learning – not simply giving students more choices, but helping them become thoughtful decision-makers who can shape their own learning with confidence.

When designing for agency, I ask myself where students have opportunities to practice judgment, ownership, and build confidence in their own thinking. And in an AI-powered world, that matters more than ever. Students do not simply need to care about the work. They need to see themselves as capable of shaping it.



And in an AI-powered world, that matters more than ever. Students do not simply need to care about the work. They need to see themselves as capable of shaping it.

✦ **WHAT DO I MEAN BY AGENCY?**

Agency is a student's ability to make meaningful decisions, act on them, and see that their thinking makes a difference. In the classroom, agency shows up when students are doing more than completing steps. They are choosing strategies, deciding what to revise and what to keep, asking better questions, deciding when work is ready, and explaining the thinking behind their choices.

That is different from surface-level choice, like picking a topic from a list or choosing a slide theme. Those choices may increase engagement, but agency develops when students repeatedly practice judgment, ownership, and self-trust. Over time, those moments also shape identity because students begin to see themselves as people whose ideas, decisions, and voices matter.

One question has become my own quick agency check:

Who gets to decide, and who gets to learn from that decision?

✦ MAYBE IT'S NOT A MOTIVATION PROBLEM

For a long time, we have described disengaged students as having a motivation problem. I have said it too. But that framing can make it seem like the problem lies entirely within the student.

"They do not care... They will not try... They are choosing the easy way out."

Agency gives us a different lens. It asks us to look at the conditions we are creating. Where do students get to make meaningful decisions? Or really see that their thinking matters? Where might they experience or feel the impact of their effort?

This is important to me because agency is an equity issue.

Not all students are given the same opportunities to practice meaningful decision-making at school. Some students are trusted, invited to create, and get to take on leadership opportunities. Others are more often given directions, corrections, interventions, and step-by-step support. Without enough room to make decisions, make mistakes, and make meaning, we can accidentally teach them to comply rather than contribute. They begin to believe that learning is about waiting for permission, looking for approval, and assuming someone else knows better.

In an AI-powered world, that becomes even more significant. There is now always a tool ready to answer, revise, recommend, and sound certain. When students have not developed strong agency, AI can quietly shift from being a learning partner to becoming the decision-maker.

If students rarely get opportunities to wrestle with uncertainty, justify their choices, revise their own thinking, and stand behind their decisions, AI has the potential to widen the gap between learners who trust their own judgment and those who assume technology must know better.

Why wouldn't they use AI simply to get the work done?

If school has taught them that success means collecting points, earning grades, and moving on to the next assignment, then using the fastest available tool is a logical response. Perhaps the issue is not a lack of motivation or engagement at all. Perhaps students are responding to a system that has asked them to complete more than it has asked them to own. That is what is truly at stake.

Agency is not an optional extra. It is how students learn to remain connected to their own thinking in a world that will constantly offer to think for them.



✦ FROM COMPLIANCE TO AGENCY

For many years, I taught high school physical education in California. Students were required to run a set distance, and their grades depended on how quickly they finished. Run fast enough and you earned an A. Walk too much or finish after the time limit, and your grade dropped.

It was difficult to watch some students give up before they even began. Some started by walking instead of running. Some laughed at themselves before anyone else could. Others would say, "I'm just bad at this," before they had even tried.

Part of me understood those reactions. But I also realized I was part of the problem.

The system measured performance, but it was not building confidence, ownership, or students' ability to take charge of their own health and fitness. That forced me to rethink what I was actually assessing. Was I assessing speed? Or was I assessing whether students understood how to raise their heart rates and improve cardiovascular fitness? That clarity changed everything.

I advocated for a class set of heart rate monitors because I needed a better way to align the assessment with the real learning goal. Once students could monitor their own heart rates, I could offer more choice in how they reached that goal. The challenge shifted from "Can you run fast enough?" to "Can you figure out what kind of movement helps your body work at the right intensity?"

Some students jogged. Others alternated power walking with jumping jacks. Some chose soccer or football. One student proudly told me, "I figured out that jumping rope gets my heart rate up faster than jogging."

That was exactly the kind of learning I was hoping to see.

The heart rate monitors were not the transformation; they simply made a different kind of learning possible. The real shift came from clarifying the purpose and designing for agency. Once the destination was clear, students could choose their own way to get there.

Agency is not an optional extra. It is how students learn to remain connected to their own thinking in a world that will constantly offer to think for them.

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Looking back, I can see why AI immediately captured my attention. I was already thinking deeply about student empowerment, self-belief, and agency. Generative AI simply brought those questions into even sharper focus.

More than ever, I believe we need to move beyond designing for compliance and begin designing for agency. But I also know this work asks something of us as educators.

I grew up in a school system that rewarded compliance. I learned to follow directions, wait for approval, avoid mistakes, and figure out what the teacher wanted. I was good at that kind of school, which means I have to pay attention to the ways I might unintentionally recreate it for my own students.

Helping students build agency begins with questioning the habits we may have inherited ourselves.

HOW TO DESIGN FOR AGENCY

I realized I had been designing for agency long before I had a name for it. Once I began thinking about my practice through that lens, I started asking myself different questions during planning. These five questions continue to guide my decisions.

1. WHAT IS THE REAL PURPOSE?

Before I think about the activity, I need to get clear on the learning goal. What do I actually want students to understand, practice, or be able to do? What kind of thinking does this task require? What decisions do I want students to become better at making?

If the goal is stronger arguments, then the assessment should not reward only a polished final essay. Students might also show how their thinking changed, explain why they chose certain evidence, or reflect on which part of their argument still needs more work.

When the purpose is clear, students have room to make purposeful decisions rather than simply completing a task

2. WHERE CAN STUDENTS MAKE A REAL DECISION?

Agency does not grow from superficial choices. It grows when students make decisions that genuinely influence the learning process, the final product, or both. That does not mean giving students unlimited freedom. It means creating meaningful choices within clear boundaries.

Before students revise, I might ask them to identify one change they are choosing to make and explain why.

Before they use AI, I might ask them to write down what they already know, what they are still unsure about, and what decision they want to make on their own before asking for support.

Afterward, I might ask them to describe what they accepted, rejected, or changed. These are small moves, but they matter. They remind students that they are not just following steps. They are making choices.

3. WHERE AM I DOING TOO MUCH OF THE THINKING?

This one is humbling. Sometimes my support is exactly what students need. Other times, I realize I have stepped in so quickly that I have taken away an opportunity for them to think for themselves.

I have learned to wait a little longer before jumping in, not to leave students struggling on their own, but to resist solving every problem for them. For example, when students receive feedback, it is easy for me to decide what they should fix first: "Start with your introduction," or "Add more evidence here."

Sometimes that level of guidance is appropriate. But if I always decide the next step, students never practice making that decision themselves.

Instead, I might ask: "Which piece of feedback do you think would make the biggest difference?", "Why that one?" or "What change are you choosing to make first?"

I am still guiding the process, but the student is doing more of the thinking and practicing judgment.

4. HOW WILL STUDENTS SEE THEIR OWN THINKING?

We often celebrate the final product, but agency grows when students can see the moves they made along the way. That does not require a long reflection form. It can be two minutes at the end of class. Some questions we might ask:

- What is one decision you made today?
- What did you change because of feedback?
- What helped you get unstuck?
- What did you choose not to use from the AI's response, and why?

Instead of only asking, "What did you learn?" we can ask "What choice helped you learn?" This small shift helps students notice they are capable decision-makers and that their decisions impact the learning outcomes.

5. WHERE CAN THIS HAPPEN AGAIN?

Agency does not develop through one choice board, one reflection, or one student conference.

At first, students may still ask, "Is this right?" or "Am I done?" because that is what school has trained them to do. We probably won't see independence or ownership appear overnight. We are planting seeds and watering them so that over time students develop judgment and confidence.

So we need repeatable routines. Questions such as:

- What is your plan?
- What decision are you making right now?
- How do you know this is ready?
- What will you do next, and why?

may seem simple, but used consistently they become part of the classroom culture. Over time, students begin asking these questions of themselves.

Designing for agency is not just doing less for students and hoping they figure it out. It's ensuring support doesn't prevent students from doing more of the thinking for themselves.

Perhaps our job as teachers is not simply to help students finish the assignment.

Perhaps it is to help them trust their own thinking enough to wrestle with their ideas before they hand that thinking to someone, or SOMETHING, else.

”



WHY THIS MATTERS EVEN MORE NOW

The more I talk to other teachers about AI, the more I am reminded that this conversation is not really about AI. AI is simply helping more teachers see that too many students have been taught to look outside themselves for proof that they are right, capable, finished, smart, or enough. Some students learn to play the game beautifully. Others are never taught the rules, or quickly learn that the game was not created with them in mind. In both cases, students can leave school disconnected from their own judgment.

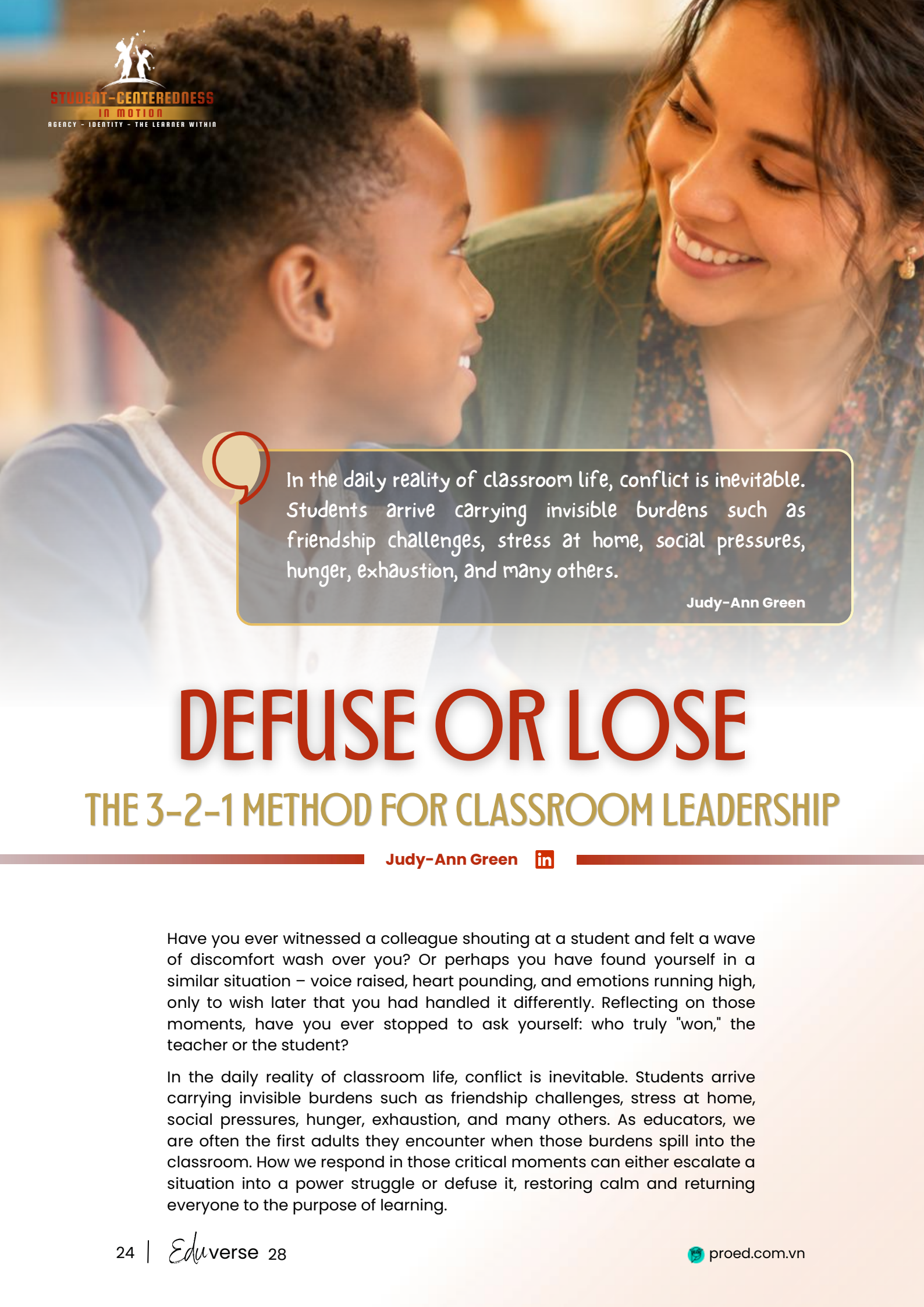
For years, compliance looked like waiting for the teacher to decide when you were done. Now it can look like waiting for the chatbot to decide instead. The tool has changed, but the risk is the same: students may hand over decisions they need practice making themselves.

Long after students leave our classrooms, they will still be surrounded by systems, algorithms, platforms, feeds, tools, and people trying to shape what they think, buy, value, and pay attention to. So perhaps part of the purpose of education now is helping students know what they actually think before AI tells them what to think.

And perhaps our job as teachers is not simply to help students finish the assignment. Perhaps it is to help them trust their own thinking enough to wrestle with their ideas before they hand that thinking to someone, or something, else.



Stacy Kratochvil is an educator from the San Francisco Bay Area (in California, USA) with experience teaching PE, Dance, and multilingual English learners at an IB World School. She supports schoolwide professional learning, coaches colleagues, advises student equity work, and writes and facilitates workshops on AI, education, and equity.



In the daily reality of classroom life, conflict is inevitable. Students arrive carrying invisible burdens such as friendship challenges, stress at home, social pressures, hunger, exhaustion, and many others.

Judy-Ann Green

DEFUSE OR LOSE

THE 3-2-1 METHOD FOR CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

Judy-Ann Green 

Have you ever witnessed a colleague shouting at a student and felt a wave of discomfort wash over you? Or perhaps you have found yourself in a similar situation – voice raised, heart pounding, and emotions running high, only to wish later that you had handled it differently. Reflecting on those moments, have you ever stopped to ask yourself: who truly “won,” the teacher or the student?

In the daily reality of classroom life, conflict is inevitable. Students arrive carrying invisible burdens such as friendship challenges, stress at home, social pressures, hunger, exhaustion, and many others. As educators, we are often the first adults they encounter when those burdens spill into the classroom. How we respond in those critical moments can either escalate a situation into a power struggle or defuse it, restoring calm and returning everyone to the purpose of learning.



One approach that has profoundly shaped my own practice is what I call the Defuse or Lose – 3-2-1 Method. Simple in design but powerful in practice, it is a three-step approach that helps educators de-escalate difficult situations and guide students back to learning, often within just a few minutes (Green, 2025).

Like any classroom strategy, it is not a magic solution, nor does it work perfectly every time. However, I have found it to be a practical framework that encourages calm, protects student dignity, and helps preserve positive relationships when emotions run high.

WHY “DEFUSE OR LOSE?”

The name itself carries a quiet urgency. When a student acts out whether through defiance, an emotional outburst, or disruptive behaviour, educators face a choice. One path leads toward confrontation: raised voices, public correction, and power struggles that often leave both teacher and student worse off. The other leads toward de-escalation: calm authority, respectful dialogue, and a swift return to learning.

The word “lose” is deliberate. When we escalate rather than defuse, we risk losing far more than a few minutes of class time. We may lose a student’s trust, their sense of belonging, and their willingness to engage. We may also lose our own composure and the positive learning environment that every student in the classroom deserves.

The 3-2-1 Method offers a practical alternative. It is neither passive nor permissive. Rather, it is a deliberate approach that places emotional intelligence and relationship-building at the heart of behaviour redirection.

THE 3-2-1 METHOD: STEP BY STEP

The method is built on three sequential steps. Each step builds on the one before it, creating a progression from physical positioning through vocal tone to the language of restoration. The entire sequence is designed to be completed within three minutes, though the art lies in reading the situation and adapting accordingly.

#1 STEP BACK

The first and most immediate action is physical: step back. Create space between yourself and the student. This single movement communicates volumes before a word is spoken.

From the student’s perspective, an adult moving closer during a moment of heightened emotion can feel threatening or confrontational. The amygdala – the brain’s alarm system – often interprets this proximity as a potential threat, increasing rather than reducing emotional arousal. By stepping back, you communicate the opposite: I am not your enemy. I am not here to fight. I am giving you room.

This physical gesture is also a signal to yourself. It slows the interaction down. It gives you a breath of space in which you collect your own thoughts and regulate your own emotional response. It is difficult to guide a student back to calm if you have not first found your own.

#2 LOWER YOUR VOICE

The second step is vocal: lower your voice. Not to a whisper, but to a calm, measured, and steady tone. This may seem counterintuitive. When frustration rises, our instinct is often to speak louder in an attempt to regain control. Yet a calm voice can be far more powerful.

By the time you have stepped back and lowered your voice, the student is beginning to notice that you are not reacting the way they may have expected. You are not the enemy. You are not angry. You are steady. You care. This shift in perception is the beginning of reconciliation.

At this point, take a moment to do a quick internal check. Evaluate your voice, your facial expression, and even your heart rate. Are you genuinely calm, or are you performing calm while still seething internally? The aim is alignment: your words, your tone, and your expression should all match. Students are remarkably perceptive. They will sense the difference between authentic calm and a thin veneer of control.

#3 USE A NON-THREATENING, EMPOWERING COMMENT

The third step is linguistic: speak with purpose. This is where empowering language becomes your most powerful classroom management tool. Rather than redirecting through correction, criticism, or command, you redirect through affirmation.

Empowering statements might sound like: "I'm here for you," "You're an important member of this class," "I enjoy teaching you," "You're normally quite respectful," or "You're destined for great things." These are not empty compliments. They are deliberate, truthful affirmations that remind the student of who they are beyond this moment of difficulty.

This step is rooted in a deeper philosophy of education. The great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire urged teachers to *talk with* students rather than *at* them (Freire, 1970). The 3-2-1 Method embodies this principle. It is a conversation, not a lecture. It is an invitation back into the classroom community, not a punishment that drives the student further away.

The goal of this step is threefold: restore calm in the student, provide a safe psychological space for quick reflection, and return to learning in the shortest possible time. Show the student you are willing to listen and support them, and not just manage them.

WHY "DEFUSE OR LOSE?"

The 3-2-1 Method is not simply a behavioural trick. It is grounded in what we know about how the human brain and the human heart respond to conflict and care.

When students experience emotional distress, the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for reasoning, decision-making, and self-control – becomes less active. Instead, the brain shifts into a survival response. Raising our voice, moving closer, or using commands feeds directly into this state, prolonging it. By contrast, when we create space, lower our voice, and offer affirmation, we send signals of safety that help the student's nervous system begin to regulate.

Equally important is the relational dimension of the method. Students who feel seen, valued, and respected by their teachers are more resilient, more engaged, and more willing to take the academic risks that real learning requires. Every time educators choose de-escalation over confrontation, they strengthen the trust that underpins positive classroom relationships.

This idea also aligns powerfully with the work of educators like Nadine Bernard, whose scholarship reminds us that empowering educators, particularly those working with students from the global majority, requires us to centre dignity, voice, and authentic care in every interaction (Bernard, 2025). The 3-2-1 Method is, in essence, a daily practice of that centering.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

Let us walk through a common scenario. A student suddenly pushes their textbook off the desk mid-lesson and mutters something under their breath. The room goes quiet. Every other student is watching.

◆ Without the 3-2-1 Method

An instinctive response might be to move toward the student, raise your voice, and demand an explanation or an apology in front of the class. The student, now embarrassed and cornered, doubles down. The power struggle begins. Five minutes are lost. The learning environment is fractured.

◆ With the 3-2-1 Method

You take one deliberate step back. You lower your voice to a calm, quiet tone and continue the lesson briefly while moving closer to the student at an unhurried pace. When the moment is right, you lean slightly toward the student, but still at a non-threatening distance, and say quietly: "I notice you seem a bit unsettled. You are one of the most capable students in this room, and I want to make sure you're okay. I'm here for you. We can do this together. Let me know if you would like to talk after class or outside now." Then you give them space to regroup.

In most instances, the student re-engages within three minutes. No shouting. No standoff. No casualties.

It is worth noting that the three-minute benchmark is a guide, not a rule. Some situations may be resolved more quickly, while others require more time. The method is flexible. What remains constant is the intention: to defuse, restore, and return to learning as quickly as possible without sacrificing the student's dignity in the process.

THIS METHOD IS FOR EVERY EDUCATOR

One of the most common questions educators ask when I introduce the 3-2-1 Method is, "But what if the student doesn't respond?" It is a fair question. Not every interaction will resolve smoothly, and not every student will be immediately receptive. Some students have built strong emotional walls, and a single empowering comment will not bring them down in an instant.

But here is the deeper truth: every time you apply this method, even when it does not produce the immediate result you hoped for, you are building something that extends beyond a single lesson. You are building consistency, trust, and the kind of classroom culture where students know they will not be judged solely by their most difficult moments.

Behaviour redirection in the classroom is not simply about controlling behaviour. At its best, it is about creating the conditions in which every student can learn, grow, and experience their own capacity for greatness. The 3-2-1 Method is one practical way to do that, every day, in real time.

Beyond the classrooms, the same principles extend to many educational settings. Whether we are teachers, school leaders, mentors, coaches, trainers, or even parents, moments of tension are inevitable. Choosing to step back, respond calmly, and preserve another person's dignity can strengthen relationships wherever learning and growth take place.

A CLOSING INVITATION

As educators, we have more power to shape the trajectory of a student's day and life than we sometimes allow ourselves to believe. The moments that test us most are also the moments that define us. How we show up in those moments, whether we choose to escalate or to defuse, whether we choose to talk to students or with them, matters enormously.

The Defuse or Lose 3-2-1 Method is an invitation to pursue “win-win” outcomes in the classroom. Not the hollow win of a teacher who silenced a student through fear, but the lasting win of an educator who reached a struggling young person, restored their dignity, and kept the door to learning open.

Step back.

Lower your voice.

Speak with power and purpose.

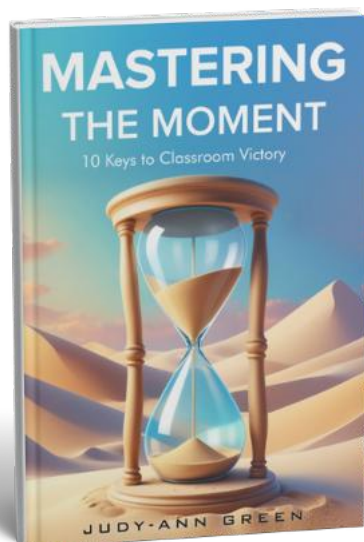
And watch what happens.



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Judy-Ann Green is an internationally acclaimed educator, speaker, author, and School Advisor whose transformative impact spans three continents. A recipient of prestigious awards including Teacher of the Year and Outstanding Leadership, she has established herself as a pioneering force in global education across the UAE, USA, UK, and Jamaica as an IB specialist, Curriculum Framework Theorist, Pastoral leader, Professional Development Leader, Literacy Coach, and Master Teacher. She holds degrees from Wilberforce University, Wright State University, and Mico University College.



EduVerse Newsletter was delighted to interview Judy-Ann Green, who shared powerful insights on teacher empowerment, learner inspiration, and the stories behind her book *Mastering the Moment*.

Read the full interview in **EduVerse Issue #22** (August 2025).



FINDING THE LEARNER IN THEIR ENGLISH

Blanka Pawlak 

WE'RE NOT HERE TO FIX YOUR
ENGLISH. WE'RE HERE TO FIND
YOU IN IT.

There was an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) student, Luke, who was by every visible measure doing everything right. His emails were clean. He attended every session and was meticulously prepared. His vocabulary was solid and his grammar was improving steadily.

On paper, he was a model learner.

And yet something was missing. I didn't know it at the beginning; however, I discovered it in the process.

Luke was an IT specialist, technically fluent in his domain, analytically sharp, professionally confident in LI and a natural-born brainstormer. But the moment he entered English sessions, something changed. He would produce a sentence, then immediately check: Is this right? How would you say this better? Is that too direct? He translated too often, and not just words, but judgements. He was waiting for my approval, for a sympathetic nod that confirmed he was correct. More than meaning, he was seeking permission. He was a man who solved complex infrastructure problems for a living, yet waited for someone to tell him he was allowed to be correct in English, or even allowed to make mistakes and rephrase himself.

He wasn't struggling with the language in the way most teachers think. He was struggling with himself in it. I know it now, let me tell you how it all came to be the breakthrough case in my teaching.

WHAT THE NEEDS ANALYSIS COULD SEE AND WHAT COULD NOT

At the beginning of our work together, I ran what I considered a thorough needs analysis. Communication contexts. Proficiency self-assessment alongside my own diagnosis. Some writing tasks, meeting scenarios, presentation demands, confidence by skill type. It was detailed, professionally mapped, and genuinely student-centred in the sense that every question pointed toward Luke's and the whole group's real working world.

Yet it somehow missed him.

Now I see the reason – every question asked what he needed to do in English. I asked the core question of the Business English (BE) and ESP field: How do you use the language to get the job done? But none of my questions asked who Luke needed to be in it. The analysis captured his communicative landscape and said nothing about the person trying to navigate it.

Bonny Norton calls this the difference between motivation and investment (Norton, 2013). A learner can be fully committed to a language and still withhold themselves from it – if they cannot yet imagine their identity as legitimate within it. Luke was motivated. He was not yet invested. And no skills-based needs analysis could have seen that gap, because it wasn't looking for a person. It was looking for a profile.

Student-centred design that centres skills but not selves will reliably produce learners who are technically engaged and quietly absent. Luke was both.

This is not a failure of methodology. It's a failure of framing. And I had been using that framing for years.

FIVE THINGS

I STOPPED DOING

The shift didn't happen because I found a better framework. It happened because I stopped looking for one, and started looking at the person in front of me instead. I started researching. Mindfulness practices, self-reflection questions, coaching approach and honest curiosity helped tremendously.

I STOPPED BEING THE ANSWER KEY

When all feedback and decisions flow from the teacher, learners do what classrooms have always trained them to do: they look outward. They develop exquisite sensitivity to external approval and almost no relationship with their own judgement. Luke's constant checking wasn't a character trait. It was a learned response to years of education that rewarded right answers over developed thinking. Henri Holec defined learner autonomy as simply "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981) but that capacity, as David Little observed, is frequently suppressed by the very institutions meant to develop it (Little, 1991). I had been one of those institutions.

I STOPPED EQUATING PARTICIPATION WITH COMPLIANCE

Learning Sciences helped me to reconsider my instructional design. A learner sitting quietly, processing carefully, is not always disengaged. A learner producing fluent, accurate language on demand is not necessarily present. Agency is not an activity. It is ownership, the human experience of making meaningful choices within clear boundaries and knowing those choices matter.

I STOPPED OVER-SCRIPTING

I wish I had stopped earlier. I began distinguishing deliberately between production time and interaction time – the former structured and purposeful, the latter genuinely open and responsive. Sometimes a bit messy and with less management but more thinking. When learners are not constantly being directed, something shifts: they start directing themselves and enjoying language as a connection tool.

I STOPPED CONFUSING CONTROL WITH RIGOUR

This was perhaps the hardest to unlearn.

Now I see the bigger picture – high standards do not require a controlled room. Rigour lives in the quality of thinking, not the tightness of the script. Working in a corporate environment as a BE and ESP teacher, I confused these too often.

I STOPPED BEING THE ONLY VOICE

Because when the teacher is the only valid source of language in the room, the student never learns to trust their own. I also started treating what students brought into the room – their instincts, phrasing and their way of making meaning – as material worth working with, not errors that needed constant correction.

PROFESSIONAL PERSONAS

NOT PERSONALITY TYPES, BUT MODES

When Luke and his colleagues were promoted, we started the needs analysis again. But this time, I remodelled the questions.

Instead of asking, *What do you need to communicate?*, I began asking, *Who do you need to be when you communicate?*

James Paul Gee describes professional Discourses as "identity kits", the bundled language, values, behaviours, and ways of being that allow a person to be recognised as belonging to a particular community (Gee, 2013). What many learners of professional English are missing is not vocabulary. It is the kit itself: the moves, the tone, the stance that signal this person belongs here. That insight shaped everything I built next.

I introduced the concept of English professional personas however not as personality categories but communicative modes. Most professionals need more than one. The person who writes technical documentation is not the same person who chairs a difficult client call or challenges a senior colleague's assumptions. The language may not change greatly, but the stance does.

Challenge, hedge, redirect or maybe invite? What do they avoid – over-apologising, taking too long to reach the point? What is their signature tone– direct-but-warm, precise-but-not-cold or confident-but-open? And critically: what is their failure mode in L2 – to name a few – sounding aggressive when they mean assertive or sounding passive when they're being polite?

That final question changed everything because it named the gap without pathologising it. The message I wanted to convey was simple: your instinct is right. Your English is getting in the way of your intent and not because of a language problem, but because you haven't yet found the moves that let your professional self come through.

Here is the example I share with every participant when we prepare the course structure:

- Who am I? The one who challenges ideas.
- Who do I need to be in English? The one who challenges ideas.
- Where is the gap? I don't know how to do this without sounding rude.
- With the promoted team we also explored honest questions, with no right answers, only truthful ones.
- Have you ever felt like a different person in English – smaller, less precise and less you?
- Is there anything about your professional identity in English that you actually don't want to change?

And we rewrote their goals. The original ones weren't wrong but they were pointing at the language instead of the life. Etienne Wenger wrote that the most personally transformative learning involves membership – becoming someone who is recognised as belonging (Wenger, 1998). When a goal shifts from "sound more fluent" to "stop losing the floor in meetings when I need a second to think," it is no longer a language goal. It is a membership claim.

"Improve my writing" became "Write emails that get a response from people more senior than me."

These are not the same goals. The second version puts the learner in the sentence. They are owned, not merely aspired to.

THE MOMENT LUKE ARRIVED

It happened during an onboarding practice. Luke simply stopped.

Not because of an error. He neither wanted to check vocabulary nor ask for better phrasing. He simply paused, looked up, and said: *"Let me do that again because it's not how I want to be seen, felt and understood. I want you to see that I am informing and advising you, and still I am a friendly guy. I don't want to sound so formal and tight."*

That sentence contains everything student-centred learning is supposed to produce. Luke knew his intention. He also recognised the gap between intent and impact. And my heart melted because he had the confidence to name it and the agency to close it himself. He didn't need the answer key because he had become his own.

After fifteen years of having the privilege to be a teacher, trainer, educator and facilitator, I believe that the classroom which centres student skills but not student selves will always find learners who perform beautifully and flourish only partially. The change doesn't lie in a method. It lies in a decision to treat the person's professional identity, their communicative self, and their need to be recognisable in a second language, as the real curriculum.

*We are not here to fix their English.
We are here to find them in it.*

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Blanka Pawlak is an ESP and Business English teacher and trainer, and a material writer. She also works as a public speaking and communication coach, and is the founder of For English Sake - a professional development lab inspired by research-based approaches to teaching and learning, created for teachers, students, business professionals and academic practitioners. It covers insights from learning sciences, educational psychology, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, coaching, philosophy, and mindfulness to design learning experiences that foster critical thinking, autonomy, and deep understanding.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNING THAT LASTS

Penélope Pareja 



(Image source: SGU's website)

WHAT DOES EFFECTIVE TEACHING REALLY MEAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

If we ask educators around the world, we might hear about technology integration, differentiation, innovation, or engagement. Yet when we look beyond the surface, effective teaching today is less about tools and more about mindset. It is about designing learning that is meaningful, visible, and transferable. It is about developing learners who can think deeply, collaborate thoughtfully, and regulate their own growth long after they leave our classrooms.

Three educational perspectives help illuminate this vision: Nottingham's (2017) work on feedback that develops self-feedback, Murdoch's (2015) emphasis on cooperation and collaboration as lifelong competencies, and Ritchhart's (2015) focus on cultivating thinking through routines and purposeful questioning.

When brought together, these approaches help us move from delivering content to developing capable, reflective learners.

FEEDBACK THAT BUILDS THINKERS, NOT DEPENDENCE

Feedback has always been central to teaching. However, not all feedback leads to growth. In many classrooms, feedback is primarily corrective, telling students what is wrong and how to fix it. While this may improve performance in the short term, it does little to develop independence.

James Nottingham reminds us that effective feedback should be meaningful, manageable, and motivating. More importantly, it should gradually build learners' capacity for self-feedback. The ultimate goal is not teacher correction, but student self-regulation.

In practice, this means shifting from telling students what needs to change to inviting them to think about the quality of their own work. Instead of asking: "Here is what you did wrong," we might ask: "How do you know this works?", "What makes this effective?", or "What would you improve, and why?"

When students are encouraged to reflect on success criteria, evaluate their own work, and identify their next steps, they begin to develop their own understanding of quality. Rather than relying on the teacher to judge every piece of work, they become increasingly capable of monitoring and improving their own learning.

This shift requires intentional classroom culture. Learning intentions must be visible and understood. Success criteria must be co-constructed and unpacked. Students need regular opportunities to verbalize their thinking before writing, especially in early years and lower primary. Oral reflection often precedes written reflection.

Self-feedback is not an add-on strategy; it is a mindset. It communicates to learners: "You are capable of evaluating and improving your own work." In a rapidly changing world, this may be one of the most essential capacities we can nurture.

COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION: SKILLS THAT WILL LAST FOREVER

Kath Murdoch frequently emphasizes that the competencies we develop in inquiry classrooms are not temporary academic skills; they are life skills. Cooperation and collaboration fall firmly into this category.

In many schools, group work is common. However, cooperation and collaboration are not the same as simply sitting students together. True collaboration requires explicit teaching, modeling, and reflection. Students need opportunities to learn how to listen actively, build on one another's ideas, disagree respectfully, negotiate meaning, and reflect on how effectively they work together. Like literacy and numeracy, these competencies develop through intentional practice.

One powerful way to develop these competencies is through structured talk routines. When students use consistent protocols for discussion – such as “I agree with because...”, “I would like to add...”, or “Can you explain further?” – they learn language structures that support collaborative thinking.

Inquiry-based environments also create authentic reasons for collaboration. When students are exploring big ideas, solving real problems, or generating questions together, cooperation becomes purposeful rather than procedural.

Importantly, collaboration also strengthens equity. Structured dialogue ensures that all voices are heard, not only the most confident. When we design learning experiences where thinking is shared, built upon, and made visible, we create inclusive spaces where diverse perspectives enrich understanding.

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to work effectively with others across cultures, perspectives, and experiences is no longer an optional skill. It is an essential one.

MAKING LEARNING MEANINGFUL THROUGH THINKING AND QUESTIONS

If feedback develops self-regulation and collaboration builds social capacity, meaningful thinking ensures depth. Ron Ritchhart argues that effective classrooms are cultures of thinking. In these environments, thinking is valued, visible, and actively promoted. Learning is not measured by task completion but by the quality of understanding.

One of the most accessible ways to build such cultures is through thinking routines. Routines such as See–Think–Wonder, Think–Puzzle–Explore, and I Used to Think... Now I Think... provide simple, repeatable structures that encourage learners to move beyond surface responses. Their power lies not in the routines themselves, but in their consistent use. As students regularly reflect, question, and explain their reasoning, these ways of thinking gradually become habits of mind.

Thinking routines can be embedded throughout a lesson. Before beginning a new unit, students might generate questions about a central idea. During an investigation, they can document how their thinking evolves. After receiving feedback, they might reflect on what has changed in their understanding and why.

Questioning plays a particularly transformative role. Open-ended, authentic questions act as provocations. They invite curiosity rather than compliance. They shift the classroom dynamic from “teacher as answer holder” to “community of thinkers.” In inquiry classrooms, questions are not decorative. They drive the learning. Students learn to craft, refine, and pursue their own questions. This fosters agency.

Meaningful learning occurs when students connect new ideas to prior knowledge, articulate their reasoning, and apply understanding in new contexts. Thinking routines make this process visible. They allow teachers to assess conceptual growth rather than memorization.



CREATING EMPOWERED LEARNERS

Meaningful feedback, purposeful collaboration, and visible thinking are powerful on their own. Together, however, they create something even more important: learner empowerment. Students gradually become more confident in evaluating their own work, contributing to the learning of others, asking thoughtful questions, and taking responsibility for their own growth.

This shifts our attention from whether students are simply engaged to whether they are becoming increasingly capable of directing and improving their own learning. Engagement remains important, but engagement alone is not enough.

Effective 21st-century teaching moves beyond engagement toward empowerment. Empowered learners understand the purpose of their learning, reflect on their progress, contribute meaningfully to group work, and adapt their strategies when they face challenges.

Creating these conditions requires intentional planning. It asks teachers to plan not only what students will learn, but how they will think, interact, and reflect throughout the process. Questions such as How will students practice self-assessment?, Where will structured talk be embedded?, and Which routines will deepen understanding? help shift planning from content coverage to the design of richer learning experiences.

This does not reduce teacher expertise. On the contrary, it demands deep pedagogical knowledge. It requires understanding developmental stages, anticipating misconceptions, and scaffolding independence strategically.

Effective teachers in the 21st century are intentional about making thinking visible. They listen carefully to student dialogue. They treat mistakes as opportunities for growth. They create environments where curiosity is protected and challenge is welcomed.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The world our students are entering is uncertain and complex. Information is abundant and answers are increasingly easy to access. What remains less common is the ability to evaluate information, synthesize ideas, collaborate effectively, and adapt when circumstances change.

By prioritizing meaningful feedback, collaboration, and visible thinking, we equip learners with capacities that transcend subject boundaries. These approaches are not trends. They are foundations. They help students reflect on their progress, work productively with others, ask stronger questions, and respond thoughtfully to new challenges.

Effective teaching in the 21st century is not about doing more. It is about focusing on what matters most: developing thoughtful, capable, and collaborative human beings.

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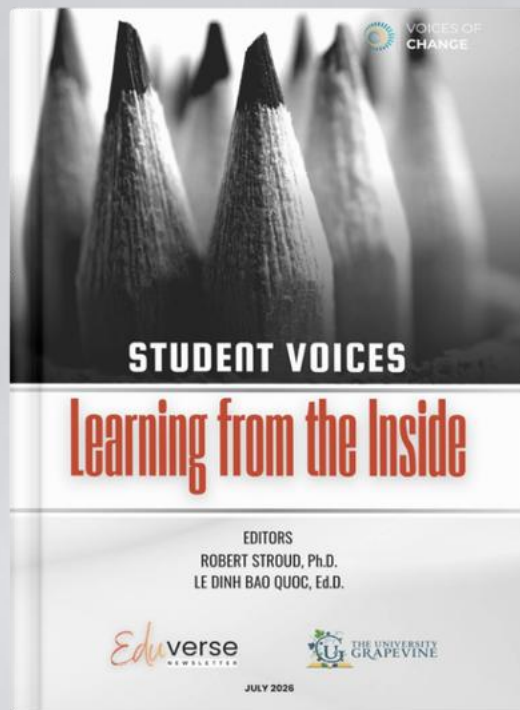
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Penélope Pareja is a PYP educator and workshop facilitator passionate about inquiry, oracy, and visible thinking. She supports teachers in designing meaningful learning experiences that promote agency, collaboration, and deep understanding. Her work focuses on developing thinking routines and reflective practices in early and primary years classrooms.



STUDENT VOICES



STUDENT VOICES

Learning from the Inside



Education is often shaped in meeting rooms, research papers, and policy discussions. Yet its most immediate truth is carried by students themselves, through the questions they ask, the pressures they face, the choices they make, and the hopes they continue to hold.

For this special edition on student-centeredness, **EduVerse** and **The University Grapevine** invited learners from around the world, including teenagers, university students, and adult learners, to bring those experiences forward. We looked for voices that felt honest, personal, and rooted in real learning lives. We valued identity, agency, motivation, reflection, and context above polished language or perfect form.

From the many submissions received, five selected articles are featured in this joint issue of EduVerse Newsletter and The University Grapevine.

Fifteen more appear in a companion booklet released alongside it, together creating a wider portrait of how learners across ages, countries, and educational settings are growing, adapting, and finding their voices.

To preserve the originality and authenticity of each contribution, the articles are published as submitted, with no editorial changes.

Co-Publication note

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INFORMATION & UNDERSTANDING

Aoshima Sumika 

16 years old

Mita International School of Science, Japan

In the midst of AI, the word “education” has practically lost its meaning. What was once described by Nelson Mandela as “the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” has now become a numbing blur of instant information and endless innovation. Now, data can transcend across the globe with a single click; a quick Google search can generate all the relevant answers, translate languages, and retrieve information within seconds. But here's the thing: with all this access and growing stereotypes, people start to wonder, is education just about obtaining information?

Growing up in an international school here in Tokyo, where I was surrounded by different cultures, I frequently held festivals that celebrated diverse backgrounds and interpretations of the world. Thus, when I transferred to a Japanese school, I felt complete culture shock; no one seemed to care about global perspectives or the stories behind our food and customs. Instead, students memorized textbooks, listened to lectures, adhered to stereotypes, and marched to the same beat.

Moving between these two educational environments taught me that in a world shaped by globalization, our true learning begins from the interpretation of the culture beyond simple narratives.

Now, modern learning systems have become increasingly centered around grades and standardized tests. In contrast to the encouragement of individual thinking and meaningful discussions, students are pressured to produce carefully memorized answers. I began to realize that some of the important things students learn are never on a piece of paper; they are through experience and communication.

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For me, the turning point came as I traveled across China. Despite being ethnically Chinese, I had always felt distant from my roots.

Aoshima Sumika



For me, the turning point came as I traveled across China. Despite being ethnically Chinese, I had always felt distant from my roots. It was not until I immersed myself in the culture that I realized how much of my understanding had been shaped by media portrayals, economic competition, and politics. Unconsciously, I pictured China through images of sprawling factories and mass production, similar to those depicted in Edward Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes*.

Consider Chinese food, for instance. A fortune cookie has somehow become the global symbol of Chinese culture. But what if I told you it was not Chinese and, in fact, from a centuries-old Japanese Kyoto senbei? For the first time, I understood that complex cultures are often reduced to simple and familiar symbols despite their true significance.

Aoshima Sumika

When I returned to Japan, I came back with not only a new perspective on China but also a new perspective on education. What if I could find a way to recreate the experience I had in China within my school? Inspired by this, I founded a youth group called FIESTA, short for Fostering International Exchange and Sharing Traditions Around the World. One of our first projects was a one-week event held to celebrate the diverse cultures of Greater China, including mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. We invited live erhu musicians, martial arts performers, and face-changing artists, and collaborated with the cafeteria to create special Chinese-inspired menus. Instead of negativity and controversy, the cafeteria sold out in minutes. It was the talk of the entire school. But more importantly, students were curious. The outcome was as clear as day; over 75% of the students reported that they gained a significant understanding of Chinese culture. This response not only shows how well our initiative worked but also that people are eager to learn.

As the internet continues to grow and give us instant answers, education has to give us something that technology can't; facts can't simply be a Google search or AI-generated, but something that is lived. Looking back, the most important lessons I've learned never began because I wanted to find the right answer; they were about learning to go beyond the story that meets the eye. Education is not defined by how much information we access but by our ability to learn, interpret, and question the information.

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Education is not defined by how much information we access but by our ability to learn, interpret, and question the information

Aoshima Sumika

FROM DUST TO DREAMS

MY JOURNEY TOWARD BECOMING A TEACHER



John Cedrick Colesio

20 years old

Occidental Mindoro State College,
Sablayan Campus, Philippines

Before I ever stepped into a classroom, life had already begun teaching me through sunburnt fields, quiet sacrifices, and dreams that refused to stay small.

I didn't grow up with much, but I grew up with purpose. In our home, every meal came from hard work and patience. My father, a farmer, spent long days under the sun, quietly tending the land. My mother held our family together with strength, discipline, and love. We lacked material things, but we were rich in values.

At a young age, I learned that life does not simply give opportunities. You have to work for them. I carried a quiet promise within me: one day, I would help lift my family out of poverty. That dream became my reason to keep going, especially in my journey as a student.

Lessons from Home and School

My parents were my first teachers. From my father, I learned perseverance. Farming showed me that effort does not always bring immediate results, but it is always necessary. From my mother, I learned discipline and compassion. She reminded me that education is something no one can take away.

As a student, I began to see learning not only as something that happens inside the classroom, but as something shaped by life itself. Every struggle, every responsibility, and every lesson from home became part of how I understood what it means to learn.

Leadership, Voice, and Growth

In school, I stepped into roles that challenged me to lead and serve. Becoming the Supreme Student Government President was more than a title. It was a responsibility. Balancing academics and leadership were not easy, but it taught me time management, accountability, and the value of serving others.

Through this, I realized that learning goes beyond textbooks. It grows when students are trusted, when they are given responsibility, and when their voices are heard.

On the volleyball court, I learned teamwork and resilience. As a team captain, I saw that success is never achieved alone. Every win and every loss became a lesson in discipline and growth.

Journalism became my strongest voice. As a radio broadcaster from Grade 8 to Grade 12, I found confidence in speaking and purpose in storytelling. It allowed me to share ideas, tell stories, and connect with others. In those moments, I began to see the kind of teacher I want to become. Someone who listens, understands, and gives others the courage to speak.

“ These challenges did not break me. Instead, they became part of my growth, not only as a person, but also as a learner.

John Cedrick Colesio

Trials that Strengthened Me

Life was not without hardships. Financial struggles were part of our daily reality. There were times when my mother had to borrow money just to provide for us. These moments were difficult, but they pushed me to work harder in my studies.

One of the most painful experiences in my life was when my sister became pregnant at an early age. Seeing my mother cry is something I will never forget. It brought fear and uncertainty into our home, but it also taught me responsibility and the importance of making wise choices.

These challenges did not break me. Instead, they became part of my growth, not only as a person, but also as a learner. I came to understand that education is not only about lessons in books, but also about learning from life and choosing better paths.

Hope Through Education

Despite everything, hope never left our home. My parents made sure we continued our education, even when it was difficult. Their sacrifices pushed me to do my best, not just for myself, but for them.

Receiving a scholarship became one of the greatest blessings in my journey. It was more than financial support. It was proof that my efforts mattered. It allowed me to continue my education with less burden on my family.

As a student, I learned to take initiative. I sought opportunities, applied for summer jobs, and looked for ways to support myself. These experiences taught me independence and responsibility, lessons that no classroom alone could fully teach.

My Voice as a Learner

As a student, I have realized that learning becomes more meaningful when students are heard. There were moments when I felt empowered, when I was trusted to lead, to speak, and to contribute. But there were also times when students like me were expected to simply listen and follow.

If there is one thing I hope to see in education, it is more space for student voice. When learners are given the chance to express themselves, they become more engaged, confident, and motivated. Education should not only teach students what to think. It should also allow them to think, to question, and to grow.

A Dream Rooted in Purpose

My journey is far from over, but every step has shaped who I am today. From the fields where my father worked to the classrooms where I now learn, I carry with me the lessons of hard work, resilience, and hope.

One day, I will stand in front of my own students, not just as a teacher, but as someone who understands their struggles and believes in their potential. I want to create a classroom where students feel seen, heard, and valued.

Because if there is one thing my journey has taught me, it is this: even the roughest paths can lead somewhere meaningful, if you have the courage to keep going.



My journey is far from over, but every step has shaped who I am today.

John Cedrick Colesio

John Cedrick Colesio

GROWING UP UNDER PRESSURE

Melis Saba Okudan



16 years old

Serik Bilim ve Sanat Merkezi,
Serik Center for Gifted and Talented Students
Türkiye

High school years may look like they are only about school, friends, and exams from the outside, but for many young people, this period is full of uncertainty about the future.

Even before we fully understand who we are, we are expected to decide what we want to become, and our parents are often insistent about this. Because of this, the expectations around us create a weight on our shoulders without us even noticing it. Our families want us to have a good profession, our teachers say that exams will decide our lives, and society constantly reminds us what it means to be “successful.” When all of these come together, it feels like there is only one right path, and leaving that path feels like a mistake. Because of this, many young people start to feel lost.



The expectations around us create a weight on our shoulders without us even noticing it.

Melis Saba Okudan





I usually get good grades, but even then, I sometimes feel like it is not enough for my family, which makes these expectations feel real. Social media also makes this feeling stronger. When we see other people's success, it becomes easy to compare ourselves with them. I sometimes scroll through my phone and feel like everyone already knows what they are doing, while I am still unsure about my future. Over time, this turns into stress and self-doubt. At some point, it starts to feel like the problem is us, but maybe it is actually the expectations placed on us.

Everyone's understanding of life, future plans, and success is different. Some people find what they want to do early, while others discover it later. This is completely normal. So, young people should be given more time to understand themselves. Without so much pressure, we should be allowed to make mistakes, try different things, and discover who we are. Understanding what we want is a process that takes time, and mistakes are a natural part of it.

However, instead of learning from our mistakes, we are often taught to avoid them. This can make us insecure, afraid of trying, and hesitant to take risks. Over time, not only external pressure but also the pressure we create inside ourselves becomes stronger. We start to be more strict with ourselves, make small mistakes look bigger, and judge ourselves for what we cannot achieve. Even when we try our best, it can still feel like it is not enough. After a while, we become our own biggest critic.



Even so, everyone's path is different. Some people discover what they want to do early, while others realize it years later, and some change direction when they are not happy. None of these are failures; they are part of getting to know yourself. Yet we are often taught that there is only one correct path. For this reason, maybe what we need most is to take a break. Without always rushing somewhere, we should ask ourselves what we really want and notice the things that make us happy. Because most of the time, while trying to meet others' expectations, we cannot hear our own voice.

In conclusion, we are not just exams, and our grades or achievements do not define who we are. We are also not defined only by the jobs we will have in the future, because we are still developing, changing, and trying to understand ourselves. Our feelings and thoughts are just as important as our achievements. That is why, instead of always asking young people "What will you become?", it would be much more meaningful to ask "How do you feel?" or "What do you really want?", because sometimes, before knowing what a person will become, it is more important to understand how they feel. Being understood is more valuable than being directed, and maybe the most important thing is not just raising successful individuals, but raising people who know themselves, are not afraid of making mistakes, can take risks, and can build their own path.



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Instead of always asking young people
“What will you become?”, it would be
much more meaningful to ask “How do
you feel?” or “What do you really want?”

Melis Saba Okudan

FINDING SELF-RELIANCE IN A WORLD OF DISCONNECTED KNOWLEDGE



Mauricio Ferreyra

22 years old

National Technological University of Cordoba Argentina

After finishing my second year in college, I started thinking about how to transfer all my academic knowledge into practical applications in the real world. Over the years, I have realized that the academic system would not teach me how to connect all the knowledge listed on the university study plan. So, it's my responsibility to establish an inter-relatedness among the concepts taught in my career.

Even though I was not influenced from childhood to be curious, my approach to life has changed entirely over these last few years. While growing up and transitioning between different contexts, I explored various incentives, wishes, and mentors who helped me decide what kind of person, student, and friend I aspire to be. Through my social circle's perspective, I have been able to learn and nurture myself from those whose experience and advice are valuable for me.

”

At university, it's common to hear that the main focus of passing every subject is to meet the requirements to get a degree.

Mauricio Ferreyra

At university, it's common to hear that the main focus of passing every subject is to meet the requirements to get a degree. That widespread mentality pushed me to explore a different mindset. This shift was solidified by a teacher who deeply inspired me by citing Albert Einstein's quote: "It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education." The way I started developing my curiosity is by reading books with interesting topics for me (such as self development, financial management, python, etc) and by learning tools without anyone who guides me. That's the way I started diving into self-development.

Furthermore, my dear friend Augusto taught me the value of self-reliance; his personality inspired me to start reading titles that captivate my personal curiosity such as "Humanocracia" from Gray Hamel, "If you believe it, you create it" from Bryan Tracy and many others. On the other hand, he pushed me to start practicing English by having conversations together as I do it with my teacher and he also inspired me to develop self-learning.

As with everything meaningful in one's life you will need to find the right motivation and determination to keep focus, to stay curious and to achieve those objectives. After exploring different options, I found focus by diving into a systemic thinking which I learned from a university course. Systemic thinking is a holistic type of thinking based on a logic used by systems in which every component is connected, dependent and reliant on each other. A simple example can be found in our domestic life. In every house, we take part in a system called "House Maintenance" which we are part of as an element. In this system, each component has a specific function to achieve. These functions can be: the contribution with the house maintenance and functioning.

This same logic is the one which I try to apply into my studies. When studying my college's subjects, I started to connect topics and new knowledge into chains which later let me interrelate those pieces of information holistically. That's how I stay away from applying the idea of throwing scattered knowledge into my mind.

Today, this way of thinking is even more necessary. The constant acceleration of technology and the pressure to learn new skills can make many people feel stuck, even when they are working hard. To manage that pressure, I try to prioritize and filter the information I receive from social media, university, and my surroundings.

In order to conclude this article, what I shared with you is my personal perspective about: How education is shaping my mind; how to take care of our surroundings and rely on ourselves when we talk about self learning; and how important it is for me to keep being curious specially in a context of pervasive social media which is creating addictive dependence in our society.

It is my hope that no one else decides what you should achieve in life.



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The constant acceleration of technology and the pressure to learn new skills can make many people feel stuck, even when they are working hard.

Mauricio Ferreyra

THE PART OF LEARNING WE IGNORE



Dinh Nguyen Minh Khoa

15 years old

INS English Phuoc Hung
Vietnam

Hi, my name is Khoa, you can refer to me as Rick. I'm here today to talk about how I feel the education system really limits freedom—more precisely, how I feel school is limiting our choices of what to study and how students adapt to this. These problems have been bothering me for a while now, and this is the chance for me to give my honest opinions.

Here is a quick fact about schools in my situation: some subjects like Math and Literature are graded on a scale of 1 to 10, but others like Music and Art are simply marked as pass or not pass.

To me, that shows how some subjects are blatantly disregarded.

Sure, I get that future jobs linked to those subjects, e.g., musicians, artists, and athletes, are often considered less academically important than those who study math and physics, but downright undervaluing them is just not the right thing to do. To students, that decision is just the same as telling us not to participate in them with our full capability, since spending time and effort to get a perfect mark and barely doing the job to get a 5 still results in a simple, yet cold "pass".

This directly shapes student mentality, removes freedom, and rewards those who work mindlessly, which both kills the inner child inside us by slowly suppressing curiosity and reducing our exposure to building creative skills.



Instead of learning because they are curious or interested, many students study simply because they are afraid of failure.

Dinh Nguyen Minh Khoa



Here's what I can confidently confirm based on my observation: in my class of 38 people, there are fewer than 10 people who actually enjoy any of the "unnecessary" subjects, and undeniably, that's a very low amount. As children, we have always wanted to become singers, astronomers, actors, etc. But now, due to the limited options, combined with stress, most of us have likely buried those dreams deep down in our hearts. Maybe, just maybe, they are already unrealistic from the start. But I think that schools should help students to explore their passions, instead of unintentionally shutting them down. Creative subjects are still an important part of many students' identities and self-expression.

Also, on the problem of how some subjects "matter" more, I think that may have caused students to start learning for grades instead of for meaning. Students naturally start to prioritize the main ones over the sub ones, since spending more time on them actually rewards their efforts. I get that simple grade numbers are the fastest way to reflect one's capability, but it doesn't show their full strengths, and the fact that some teachers and parents treat grades like an absolute measurement consequently forces students to chase better grades.



The problem is, tests always follow certain rules or structures, so opting for grades means not studying everything you should know, but rather mastering the set patterns. By doing so, students slowly become more focused on memorizing methods than actually understanding the subjects themselves. Instead of learning because they are curious or interested, many students study simply because they are afraid of failure. Over time, learning starts to feel less like discovering something new and more like repeatedly following instructions. I personally think that this is one of the biggest reasons freedom disappears in education: students are no longer encouraged to think differently, but rather to think correctly according to a fixed structure.

In conclusion, while I understand that the education system exists for understandable reasons, I still think that some parts of it unintentionally limit students' freedom, creativity, and curiosity. As a student still on my own learning journey, I know my perspective may not be well thought out or fully complete, but I hope schools and adults can spend more time understanding how students truly feel instead of only focusing on grades and academic performance. Education should not only prepare students for work, but also help them discover who they are as individuals.

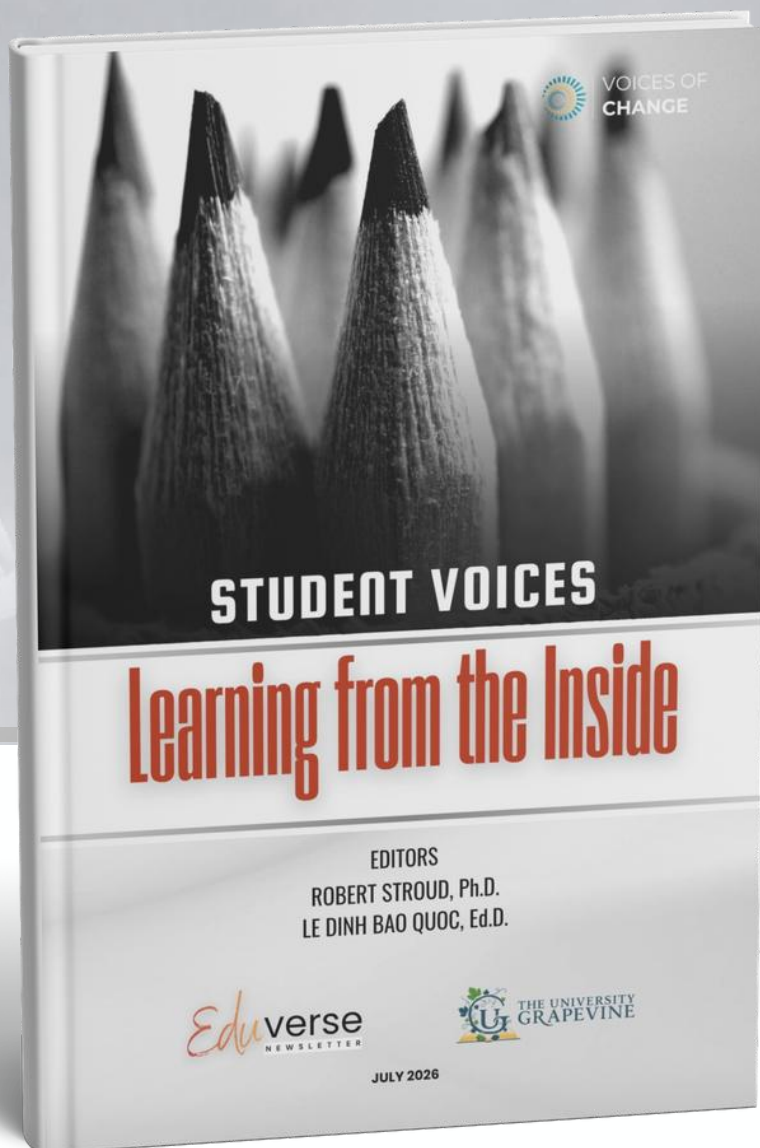


Education should not only prepare students for work, but also help them discover who they are as individuals.

Dinh Nguyen Minh Khoa



STUDENT VOICES



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Download the full booklet to explore all 20 student voices and discover how learners across different contexts are experiencing, questioning, and shaping education today.

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Welcome aboard!!



HIEN THU NGUYEN VIETNAM

Hien Thu Nguyen is an educator, researcher, and global learning advocate with nearly 18 years of teaching experience. Founder of the Vietnam Global Classroom Project and a Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert, she is passionate about AI-enhanced teaching, intercultural learning, and teacher professional growth. Hien will bring energy, global perspectives, and a strong commitment to innovative, inclusive, and future-ready education to the EduVerse community..



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MAKING STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING WORK IN OVERCROWDED CLASSROOMS



Kompeo Pompeo Uwendo

Imagine standing in front of 100 students in a classroom with few desks, limited learning materials, and a syllabus that must be completed before examinations. In such conditions, student-centred learning can sound less like a teaching approach and more like an unrealistic ideal.

Yet this is the reality for many teachers in South Sudan and other developing countries. The question is not whether student-centred learning is valuable, but whether it can work in overcrowded classrooms where resources are limited and pressure to prepare students for examinations is constant.

I believe the answer is yes, but perhaps not in the way many people imagine. Student-centred learning does not begin with technology, expensive resources, or small class sizes. It begins with everyday teaching decisions that give students more opportunities to think, participate, and connect learning to their own lives.

Across many education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, large class sizes remain a significant challenge, with pupil-teacher ratios in some contexts exceeding 50:1 (UNESCO, 2016). Even so, research consistently shows that active participation and engagement remain among the strongest influences on student learning (Hattie, 2009).

In overcrowded classrooms, student-centred learning can be built around four simple principles:

- **Voice** – giving students opportunities to express ideas and ask questions.
- **Relevance** – connecting learning to students' everyday experiences.
- **Responsibility** – encouraging students to take an active role in learning.
- **Reflection** – helping students think about what and how they are learning.

These principles do not depend on ideal conditions. They depend on deliberate teaching choices.

MOVING BEYOND SURFACE PARTICIPATION

Students are often described as "active" when they answer questions or copy notes from the board. However, this is often participation without ownership. The teacher still directs nearly every aspect of the lesson.

Deeper learning begins when students are encouraged to think, question, and connect new ideas to their own experiences. As Freire (1970) argues, learning becomes limited when students simply receive information instead of engaging with it critically.

For example, when teaching about flooding in South Sudan, students do not need only a textbook definition. Many have experienced flooding firsthand. Some walk through floodwater to reach school, while others lose valuable study time because of it. When they are invited to share these experiences, the lesson becomes more meaningful and easier to understand.

Too often, we teach about life inside the classroom without bringing students' real lives into the lesson. As a result, they may remember information long enough to pass an examination but struggle to apply it beyond school.

Learning is also a social process. Students frequently understand ideas better when they discuss them with one another. A learner who struggles to follow a teacher's explanation may grasp the same concept when it is explained by a classmate using familiar language. Peer learning does not replace the teacher's role, but it creates additional opportunities for understanding. In overcrowded classrooms, where individual support is limited, well-structured discussions can help more students engage with lesson content and clarify misunderstandings.

BUILDING OWNERSHIP THROUGH SMALL CHOICES

Student-centred learning does not require dramatic changes. Often, small adjustments can make a significant difference.

One simple strategy is to give students different ways to demonstrate their understanding. A teacher might say, "Show what you understood in your own way." Some students may choose to write, others may prefer to speak, draw, or work collaboratively. The learning objective remains the same, but students have greater ownership of how they demonstrate what they know.

Ownership also grows when students take on small responsibilities during lessons. They might summarize key ideas, facilitate brief discussions, report group findings, or explain concepts to classmates. These roles encourage learners to see themselves as contributors rather than passive recipients of information.

When students are trusted in this way, they often become more invested in learning. Sometimes improvement comes not because teaching becomes more sophisticated, but because students are finally given space to think for themselves.

CONNECTING LEARNING TO DAILY LIFE

Learning becomes more meaningful when it connects to students' everyday experiences. The OECD (2019) notes that students learn more effectively when they can relate new ideas to real-world situations.

In mathematics, teachers can use examples such as market prices, transport costs, or everyday transactions. In science, lessons can connect to water, sanitation, waste management, weather, or environmental challenges found in local communities.

I once taught a lesson on environmental issues to Grade Eight students. Without much prompting, they began discussing water pollution in their own communities. The conversation developed naturally because the topic reflected experiences they encountered every day.

The same principle can be applied to other topics. Instead of asking students only to copy notes about sanitation, teachers might invite them to create posters, discuss hygiene challenges in their communities, or explain good sanitation practices to others. The syllabus objective remains the same, but the learning becomes more connected to students' lives.

When learning connects with students' realities, they move beyond memorizing information for examinations. They begin to understand the world around them and recognize why what they are learning matters.

Some teachers worry that student-centred learning may reduce classroom control, especially in large classes. This concern is understandable. However, student-centred learning does not mean removing structure from teaching. Effective participation still requires clear objectives, clear instructions, and careful guidance. Students are given opportunities to think and contribute within an organized learning environment. In many cases, participation actually improves classroom engagement because students become more interested in the lesson and more invested in their learning.

GIVING STUDENTS A VOICE

Many students complete years of primary and secondary education without ever being asked how they learn best or what helps them understand.

Simple questions at the end of a lesson can provide useful insight:

- What did you understand today?
- What was difficult?
- What helped you learn?

Even brief responses can help teachers improve instruction while showing students that their ideas matter.

Giving students a voice also helps build confidence. Many learners become accustomed to speaking only when called upon. Over time, they may hesitate to ask questions or express opinions. When students are encouraged to reflect on their learning and contribute their perspectives, they gradually become more comfortable participating in academic discussions.

The confidence developed in the classroom can also extend beyond school into communities, workplaces, and civic life.

NO PERFECT CONDITIONS NEEDED

Student-centred learning is often presented as something that requires technology, modern facilities, or small class sizes. While such resources can help, they are not prerequisites for meaningful participation.

Even in overcrowded classrooms with limited materials, student-centred learning can succeed. It begins with simple teaching decisions: asking better questions, using relevant examples, encouraging discussion, giving students choices, and listening carefully to their ideas. As the OECD (2019) notes, learning depends not only on available resources but also on how students are engaged in the learning process.

This perspective is especially important in education systems where resources remain limited. Discussions about educational improvement often focus on infrastructure, technology, and materials. These investments are important, but waiting for ideal conditions can delay meaningful progress. Teachers can still make a significant difference through their everyday classroom practices.

A thoughtful question, a relevant example, or a well-guided discussion may cost nothing, yet they can strongly influence learning.

Students are not empty minds waiting to be filled. They think, question, imagine, and experience life beyond the classroom. When teaching ignores this reality, learning becomes mechanical. When teaching connects with it, learning becomes meaningful.

As Freire (1970) reminds us, education should not simply transfer information but help learners think critically about their world. This becomes possible when students are given opportunities to speak, question, reflect, and participate actively in learning.

The importance of student-centred learning extends beyond academic achievement. Education prepares young people not only for examinations but also for the challenges they will face in society. Communities need individuals who can communicate clearly, evaluate information, solve problems, and work effectively with others. These abilities rarely develop through memorization alone. They grow when learners are encouraged to think, question, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

MOVING FORWARD

If education continues to treat students only as listeners, we will continue producing learners who can repeat information without fully understanding it. But when students are trusted to think, question, discuss, and connect learning to their own experiences, classrooms begin to change.

This change does not require perfect conditions. It does not require expensive technology or small class sizes. It begins with small decisions made every day by teachers who believe that students are more than recipients of information.

Student-centred learning is not about ideal classrooms. It is about making learning meaningful in the classrooms we already have.

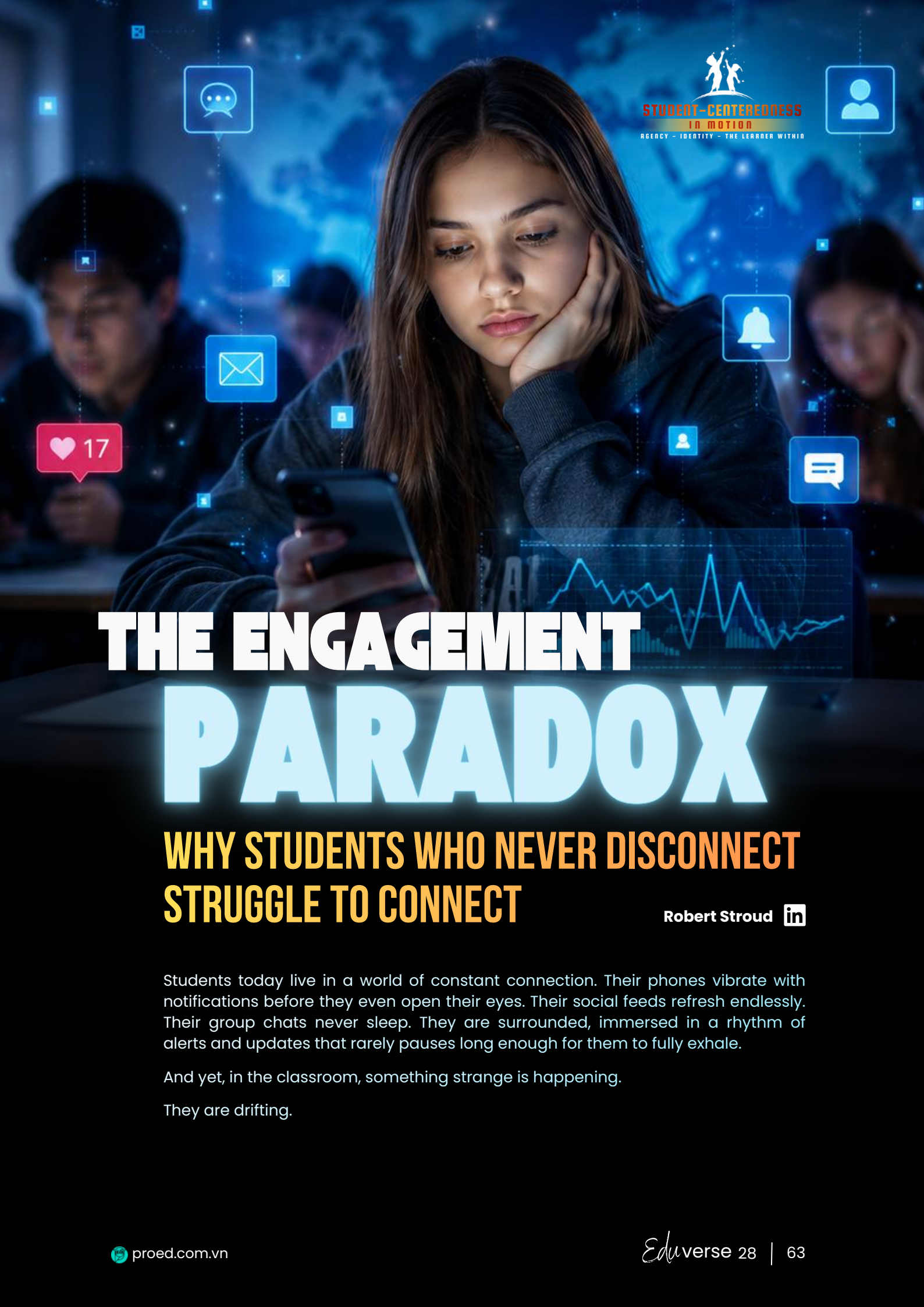
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THE ENGAGEMENT PARADOX

WHY STUDENTS WHO NEVER DISCONNECT STRUGGLE TO CONNECT

Robert Stroud 

Students today live in a world of constant connection. Their phones vibrate with notifications before they even open their eyes. Their social feeds refresh endlessly. Their group chats never sleep. They are surrounded, immersed in a rhythm of alerts and updates that rarely pauses long enough for them to fully exhale.

And yet, in the classroom, something strange is happening.

They are drifting.

Not because they do not care. Not because they are lazy. Rather, the very technologies that promise connection are fracturing their attention, overwhelming their emotional bandwidth, and reshaping what it means to be present. Recent research on technostress among Gen Z students shows just how widespread this phenomenon has become. Sharma and Singh (2025), for example, found that younger students, especially those aged 18–20, experience significantly higher levels of technostress, and that this stress directly undermines behavioral engagement. Their findings echo what many educators observe daily: students are connected to everything except the task in front of them.

This is the engagement paradox of 2026: hyper-connection paired with deep disengagement.

To understand what student-centeredness really means today, we need to begin here.

THE NEW TEXTURE OF PRESENCE

A few months ago, during a virtual exchange session, a student from Japan and a student from South Korea were discussing the idea of "home." The conversation was warm, thoughtful, and unhurried. They leaned in, listened carefully, and gradually built a shared moment of understanding. Then, almost imperceptibly, the Japanese student's eyes flicked down to her phone. A notification. A tiny vibration. A brief moment of divided attention.

She returned to the conversation. She smiled. She continued. But something had shifted, even if only slightly.

This is the new texture of presence. Students are physically in the room, but cognitively elsewhere. They are listening, while also monitoring. Participating, while also scanning. Engaging, while also buffering, constantly buffering.

This is not their fault. It is the environment they live in. And it is reshaping learning in ways we can no longer ignore.

FRACTURED ATTENTION THE COGNITIVE COST OF DIGITAL LIFE

We often talk about attention as though it were a moral quality, something students should simply "try harder" to maintain. But attention is not a character trait. It is a cognitive state shaped by design, and today's digital platforms are designed for interruption.

Every notification is a small interruption. Every alert competes for attention. Every algorithm is designed to keep students scrolling, checking, and refreshing.

The result is not multitasking. It is constant task-switching. Students move rapidly from one task to another, often without realising it. Multilingual learners, who already carry a higher cognitive load, can find this especially demanding. When every task requires linguistic processing, each interruption increases the effort needed to regain focus. A single notification can derail a fragile thread of comprehension.

One student described it perfectly during a discussion about technology in everyday life: *"I want to focus, but my brain feels like it is always waiting for something else to happen."*

This is not a lack of motivation. It is cognitive overload.

Hybrid learning environments add another layer of complexity. Daud (2025) found that hybrid technology can itself become a source of technostress when students must navigate multiple platforms, shifting learning modes, and inconsistent expectations. These tools can expand learning opportunities, but they can also fragment attention, leaving students in a constant state of partial engagement.

This is one of the greatest threats to meaningful learning today.

THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT OF CONSTANT CONNECTIVITY

But fractured attention is only part of the story. The other part is **emotional**.

Many students live with a constant sense of pressure created by digital connectivity. They are always reachable, always visible, and constantly comparing themselves with others. This creates a new form of technostress: the pressure of feeling permanently available.

Students worry about missing messages, responding too slowly, falling behind in group chats, or being judged online. They carry this emotional load into the classroom, where it quietly affects their willingness to speak, take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes.

This emotional exhaustion extends beyond education. A recent systematic review of quiet quitting among Generation Z (Noviekayati & Oktavia, 2025) found that disengagement often develops as a response to anxiety, stress, and overwhelming expectations. Although the study examined workplace behaviour, the parallels with student life are striking. When young people feel overloaded and unsupported, they often withdraw, not because they lack motivation, but because they are trying to protect themselves.

My own research and teaching on learner autonomy reflect a similar pattern. When students lack clarity, anxiety increases. As anxiety increases, engagement declines.

We cannot talk about student-centeredness without recognising the emotional load many students carry every day.

WHEN ENGAGEMENT BECOMES PERFORMANCE

Another dimension of the engagement paradox is that digital life has turned participation into performance.

Students are accustomed to being watched, rated, compared, and judged. Every post, comment, and message contributes to a visible online identity. They often bring this mindset into the classroom, where speaking up can feel less like contributing to learning and more like performing in front of an audience.

This helps explain why many students hesitate before answering questions, sharing opinions, or taking intellectual risks. They are not disengaged. Often, they are afraid of being wrong, misunderstood, or judged by others, particularly when communicating in a second language.

My work with **Culture Club**, an international virtual exchange programme, has shown a different possibility. When students learn in an environment where mistakes are accepted, conversations slow down, and listening is valued, they become more willing to ask questions, explore ideas, and participate authentically.

Student-centeredness is not about asking students to perform more confidently. It is about creating learning environments where they no longer feel they have to perform at all.



AI: A NEW LAYER OF ENGAGEMENT ANXIETY

The rise of generative AI has added another layer to this changing landscape.

AI was supposed to make learning easier. In some ways, it has. But it has also introduced a new form of engagement anxiety, one that is subtle, pervasive, and rarely discussed.

Students worry about using AI “wrong.” They worry about being accused of cheating, becoming dependent, falling behind peers who use it more effectively, or losing their own voice. These concerns shape engagement in different ways. Some students rely too heavily on AI, using it to avoid the discomfort of thinking. Others avoid it entirely because they fear crossing an unclear ethical boundary. Some use it secretly and hide their process.

My recent research on chatbot-mediated preparation for virtual exchanges (Stroud et al., 2026) offers a more encouraging perspective. Students reported greater confidence, less fear of making mistakes, and a stronger willingness to communicate after practising with a chatbot in a low-pressure environment. This suggests that AI is not inherently anxiety-producing. The fear often comes from unclear expectations, limited guidance, and a lack of emotional support.

When AI becomes a source of uncertainty, engagement can collapse. When it becomes a structured tool for preparation and thinking, engagement can grow. The difference is design.

THE COLLAPSE OF SHARED ATTENTION

Classrooms once relied on a simple assumption: if students were in the same room, they were sharing the same experience.

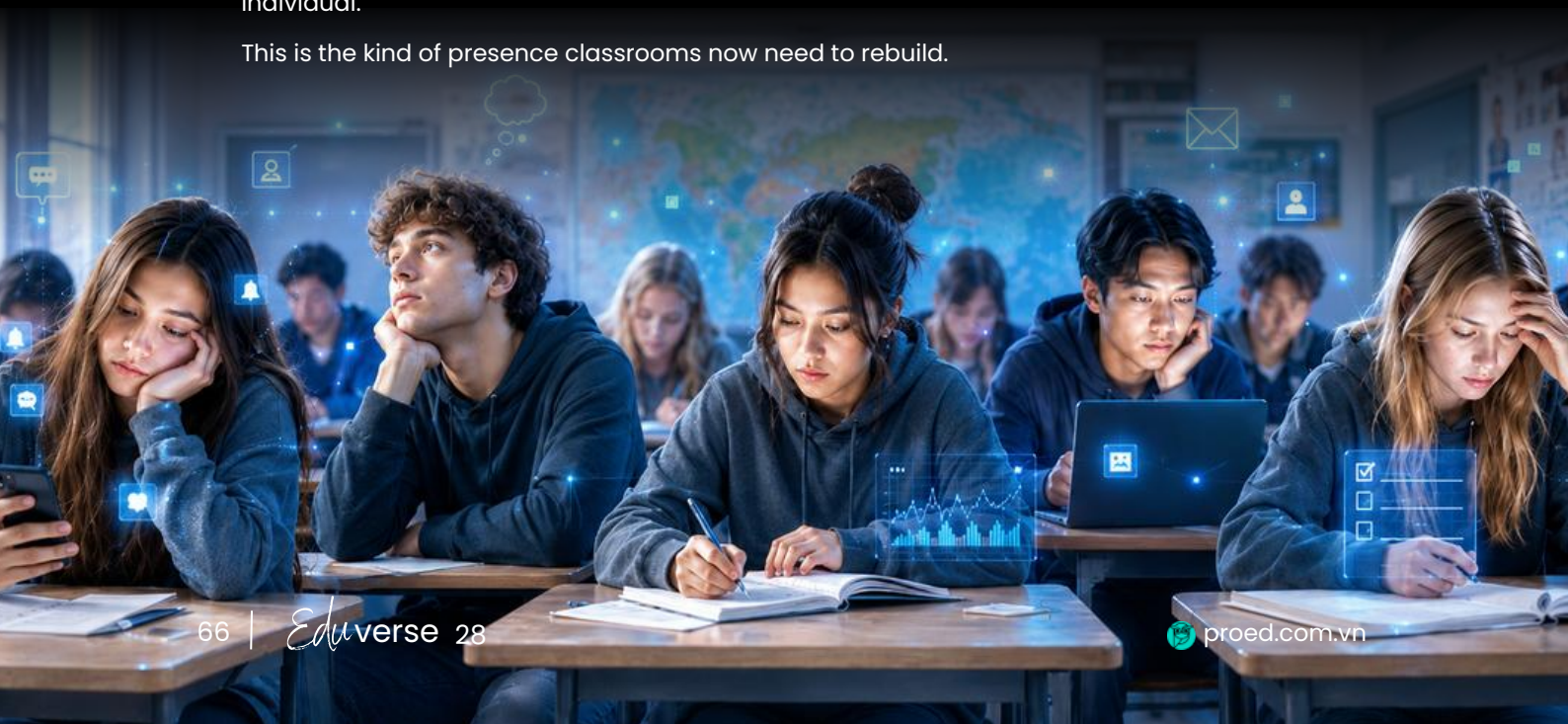
That assumption no longer holds.

Students may sit together while occupying very different cognitive worlds. One is checking messages. Another is scrolling. Someone else is still thinking about a notification from five minutes earlier, while another student is worrying about an unfinished assignment. Physical proximity no longer guarantees shared attention.

This fragmentation makes it harder to build community, sustain discussion, create momentum, or generate the collective energy that makes learning feel alive.

Culture Club sessions offer a different picture. When students slow down, listen carefully, and give one another their full attention, engagement becomes communal rather than individual.

This is the kind of presence classrooms now need to rebuild.



DESIGNING FOR PRESENCE

WHAT STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS REQUIRES NOW

If engagement is fracturing, what do we do? We redesign, not by adding more technology, increasing surveillance, or demanding greater attention, but by creating environments where presence becomes possible again. The following five student-centered approaches show how they work in practice.

1 REDUCING COGNITIVE LOAD

Mina, a first-year student, opens an English assignment and immediately feels overwhelmed. The page is dense, the instructions are long, and the layout is difficult to follow. She reads the opening sentence several times but still cannot identify the task.

Now consider the same assignment presented on a clear page with shorter instructions, simple steps, and one example. Mina can begin without first having to decode the design.

Clarity is not a luxury. When materials are visually calm and linguistically accessible, students can focus their energy on learning rather than navigating unnecessary complexity.

2 CREATING LOW-VISIBILITY PARTICIPATION STRUCTURES

Leo is thoughtful but afraid of speaking in front of the class. Each time he considers raising his hand, he imagines everyone turning to look at him. The fear is not about the content but the visibility.

Then one day, the teacher introduces an anonymous digital question box. Students can submit ideas without names. Leo types a question. Then another. Then a comment. By week three, he volunteers aloud.

Pair work, anonymous polls, reflective writing, and small-group discussion can help anxious students re-enter the conversation. It shifts engagement from performance to exploration.

4 USING CO-DESIGN TO REBUILD OWNERSHIP

Jun was a student who rarely participated. He completed assignments, but without energy or ownership. Everything felt predetermined, and he felt like a passenger in his own learning.

One day, the teacher invited the class to help design the assessment rubric for their final project. Jun suggested adding a category for “creativity in presentation.” The class agreed. For the first time all semester, Jun leaned forward. His contribution was accepted, and his interest increased.

Co-design can involve inviting students to help shape topics, tasks, criteria, or forms of participation. When learners influence meaningful aspects of their work, compliance can become collaboration.

3 DESIGNING TASKS THAT REQUIRE THINKING, NOT JUST PRODUCING

Sara used to write essays the night before they were due. She was not lazy. She was scared. The blank page felt like a test of her worth, and the pressure to produce something “correct” made her avoid the process entirely.

Then her teacher introduced a process portfolio. Instead of submitting a final product, students documented their drafts, decisions, questions, and reflections. Sara discovered something surprising: she liked seeing her thinking evolve. She was not performing. She was learning.

More process-focused assessment models are starting to show us that when students document their thinking, they engage more deeply. They become agents, not performers.

5 TEACHING AI LITERACY AS A WELLBEING SKILL

Aisha avoided AI completely. She was terrified of being accused of cheating. The fear kept her from experimenting, learning, or asking questions.

Then her teacher introduced an AI sandbox, a space where students could experiment with AI openly, safely, and without grades attached. They learned how to prompt, how to critique outputs, how to use AI for brainstorming rather than writing. Aisha’s fear dissolved. Her confidence grew, and her engagement soared.

AI literacy is not just a technical skill. It is a wellbeing skill. When students understand how to use AI ethically and effectively, their anxiety drops and their engagement rises.

TEACHERS CAN DO THIS

The engagement paradox can feel overwhelming. The forces shaping students' attention and wellbeing, from digital culture and technostress to hybrid learning and AI, are complex and often invisible. Yet the responses remain remarkably human.

Teachers do not need to fix the entire digital world. They only need to shape the small worlds they share with their students. A calmer page. A clearer task. A safer way to participate. A chance to co-design. A guided path through AI.

These may seem like small changes, but they are transformative. Together, they create the conditions for meaningful engagement. When we design for presence, students return. When we design for curiosity, students open. When we design for safety, students take risks. When we design for humanity, students engage.

The engagement paradox is real, but so is our ability to respond. And in 2026, student-centeredness means exactly this: **creating the conditions where students can be fully, courageously, wonderfully present again.**

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BEYOND ENGAGEMENT

THE FIVE RADICAL TRUTHS

ABOUT BUILDING STUDENT AGENCY

Robert Martínez 



A recent professional learning course on teacher autonomy prompted me to reflect on a question that has shaped much of my own teaching: How do we move students from participation to genuine ownership of learning?

Many educators have imagined the "perfect" classroom. Students sit quietly, eyes fixed on the whiteboard, carefully recording every word. The room is orderly, focused, and free from disruption. Yet something is missing.

If the teacher stopped speaking, would the learning continue?

Research by Işık and Balçıkanlı (2020) describes this as the Compliance Trap. Even experienced teachers can find themselves working within teacher-directed learning cultures where students become highly skilled at following instructions but have few opportunities to take ownership of their learning. Engagement becomes compliance rather than agency.

In many ESOL classrooms, the picture is often different. Learners are expected to speak, collaborate, and construct meaning while teachers guide the learning through carefully scaffolded activities. Regardless of the teaching context, however, the same challenge remains: how do we help students become increasingly responsible for their own learning?

Answering that question requires a shift in how we see our role. Rather than directing every aspect of learning, teachers become designers of the conditions that allow learner agency to develop.

Drawing on research into learner autonomy and my own reflections from the course, this article explores five key ideas for moving beyond passive engagement towards meaningful student agency.

1 AUTONOMY IS BUILT NOT BORN

One of the most persistent misconceptions in education is that learner autonomy is a personality trait. Some students appear naturally independent, while others seem content to wait for direction. Research, however, suggests otherwise. Henri Holec (1981) and David Little (1991) argue that learner autonomy is an acquired capacity that develops gradually through experience and purposeful support.

Viewing autonomy as a skill rather than a personality trait changes how we teach. Instead of expecting students to "show initiative," we create opportunities for them to practise it. When a student struggles to work independently, the question is no longer, *Why are they unmotivated?* but *Which aspect of autonomy still needs to be developed?*

The framework presented here (Self-AARMoReD) organises learner autonomy into six interconnected capacities:

- **Self-awareness** – recognising personal strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Self-assessment** – evaluating learning progress rather than relying solely on external judgement.
- **Self-regulation** – planning, organising, and managing learning effectively.
- **Self-monitoring** – tracking progress and adjusting strategies over time.
- **Self-reliance** – working independently while evaluating the quality of information and resources.
- **Self-direction** – making informed choices about learning goals and pathways.

Together, these capacities provide a practical way of understanding learner autonomy, not as something students either possess or lack, but as something teachers can intentionally nurture over time.





2 TEACHERS BUILD THE CONDITIONS FOR AGENCY

A common misconception is that fostering learner agency simply means stepping back and allowing students to work independently. In reality, autonomy requires thoughtful design and purposeful support. Teachers play an essential role in creating the conditions that enable students to become increasingly independent.

This is the central idea behind the Self-AARMoReD ARChiTectS framework. It brings together two complementary dimensions of learner autonomy: Self-AARMoReD, the learner capacities that develop over time, and ARChiTectS, the forms of support teachers intentionally design to help those capacities grow. Together, they remind us that learner autonomy is built through the interaction between student development and thoughtful teaching.

This support extends beyond academic instruction. It includes helping students develop the confidence, strategies, resources, and relationships they need to manage their own learning. The framework presented here groups that support into five complementary areas.

◆◆ Affective support

Learners are more willing to take ownership when they feel capable of succeeding. Reducing unnecessary anxiety and building confidence can encourage students to attempt increasingly challenging tasks. For example, an AI tool that simplifies a complex text can lower the initial barrier to reading while allowing students to build the confidence needed to tackle more demanding materials later.

◆◆ Resource support

Teachers also help students identify resources that match their goals. Rather than relying solely on a textbook, learners may be guided towards speaking clubs, online communities, graded readers, or other materials that support their individual learning needs.

◆◆ Capacity support

Developing autonomy requires students to manage their own learning. Providing the syllabus at the beginning of a course, encouraging goal setting, or using a flipped classroom model helps learners plan, monitor, and take greater responsibility for their progress.

◆◆ Technology support

Technology becomes valuable when students learn how to select and use digital tools critically and responsibly. By modelling thoughtful use of AI and other technologies, teachers can strengthen both learner autonomy and AI literacy.

◆◆ Social support

Autonomy does not mean learning alone. Purposefully structured peer learning, such as pairing students with complementary strengths, encourages collaboration, peer feedback, and shared responsibility for learning.

These forms of support are most effective when they work together rather than as isolated classroom strategies. Over time, they create an environment where learner agency becomes an intentional part of everyday teaching rather than an occasional outcome.

3 FROM COOPERATION TO COLLABORATION

The terms *cooperative* and *collaborative learning* are often used interchangeably, yet they represent different levels of learner agency.

Cooperative learning is carefully structured by the teacher. The task, roles, and process are clearly defined, ensuring that every student participates. Collaborative learning, by contrast, gives students greater responsibility for organising their work, making decisions, and constructing knowledge together.

Feature	Cooperative Learning	Collaborative Learning
Structure	Highly structured and teacher-led	More open and student-led
Process	The teacher defines the task, assigns roles, and guides the process.	Students organise their work and determine how to approach the task.
Best suited to	Practising specific skills or supporting younger learners	Solving complex, open-ended problems and developing learner agency

Both approaches have value. Cooperative learning provides the structure many learners need when developing new skills. Collaborative learning extends that responsibility by asking students to negotiate ideas, make decisions, and take shared ownership of the learning process.

The difference is subtle but important. In cooperative learning, the teacher continues to shape the pathway. In collaborative learning, students begin shaping it themselves.

BRIDGING THE FEASIBILITY GAP 4

Even the most committed educators can struggle to implement learner autonomy in practice. This is what Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) describe as the feasibility gap – the distance between recognising the value of learner autonomy and believing it is achievable in everyday classrooms. Similarly, Işık and Balçıkanlı (2020) found that teachers often view autonomy as desirable but difficult to implement consistently.

Much of this challenge comes from balancing different expectations.

- Administrators need teachers to follow the curriculum and meet assessment requirements.
- Students often want clear guidance and reassurance that they are preparing for examinations successfully.
- Teachers want learners to take greater ownership, yet they also face limited time, crowded curricula, and the pressure to complete the syllabus.

Recognising these realities is important because they are not personal failures. They are the conditions within which teachers work.

The challenge, therefore, is not to transform teaching overnight, but to make gradual, intentional changes that increase learner responsibility while still meeting curriculum and assessment requirements. Small steps can gradually narrow the gap between what we value as educators and what we feel able to achieve in practice.

5 AGENCY IS INTERNAL NOT SITUATIONAL

One of the most important insights about learner agency is that it does not come from a particular classroom layout, technology, or activity. Flexible seating, choice boards, and digital tools may support learning, but they do not, by themselves, create learner agency.

Agency develops when students gradually internalise the capacity to make decisions, solve problems, monitor their own progress, and take responsibility for learning. This perspective also changes how we look at everyday lesson design.

Consider a typical reading lesson. During a vocabulary activity, the teacher often selects the target words and designs the learning tasks. Students participate actively, but the decisions remain with the teacher.

The same activity can be redesigned to increase learner agency. Instead of providing the vocabulary, students identify the words they find most challenging, explain why they chose them, and create learning activities for their classmates. The learning objective remains the same, but students now exercise greater self-awareness, decision-making, and responsibility.

The highest level of agency extends beyond the lesson itself. Learners begin making connections between classroom learning and their own lives, applying strategies independently and continuing to learn without waiting for teacher direction. Ultimately, learner agency is not defined by the classroom environment. It is reflected in what students are able to do when the teacher is no longer directing every step.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE FUTURE

Building student agency is not an overnight transformation. It is a deliberate and systematic process that moves teaching beyond directing learning towards creating the conditions in which learners can think independently, make informed decisions, and take increasing responsibility for their own progress.

The Self-AARMoReD ARChiTectS framework brings this relationship together. Learner autonomy is not an inherited trait but a capacity that develops over time. As students strengthen their Self-AARMoReD capacities, teachers intentionally provide the affective, resource, capacity, technology, and social support represented by ARChiTectS. Together, these two dimensions create the conditions in which learner agency can flourish.

The goal is not to remove teacher guidance. Rather, it is to ensure that students become increasingly capable of learning with confidence, purpose, and independence. Ultimately, building learner agency is less about providing answers and more about helping students develop the knowledge, strategies, and confidence to find their own.

Perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves as educators is this:

If our support were gradually removed, would our students know how to continue learning on their own?

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ASK

THE EXPERTS

Welcome to **Ask the Experts**, the ultimate column dedicated to professional development in the field of education. In this dynamic and ever-evolving field, continuous growth and learning are paramount. In each issue, we explore the most commonly asked topic by interviewing invited experts for their insights, experiences, and strategies.

PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS

Exclusively with DR LE DINH BAO QUOC 



EduVerse: Welcome to **Ask the Experts**, our EduVerse interview series spotlighting voices shaping the future of education. Today, we are delighted to feature **Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc**, educator, author, and founder of EduVerse. With over two decades of experience in teaching, teacher education, curriculum design, and educational leadership, he has worked with schools and educators across Asia and beyond to promote more purposeful, learner-centered approaches to education.

In this conversation, Dr. Quoc shares ideas from his forthcoming book, *AI for Purposeful Learning*, and reflects on what it truly means to place learners at the center. He explores purposeful learning, learner agency, evidence of thinking, and the role of AI as a support for learning rather than its driver. He also considers how teachers can protect student judgment, choice, and growth while using new technologies thoughtfully, keeping educational purpose at the heart of classroom design.



BEYOND STUDENT-CENTERED TEACHING

PART 1

1

Welcome, Dr. Quoc. Student-centeredness has been one of the most influential ideas in education for decades, yet classrooms still vary enormously in what it actually looks like. Why do you think the idea continues to attract so much attention, while also being interpreted in so many different ways?

I'm glad you started there because I think this is an important place to begin. One reason is that student-centeredness speaks to something educators care deeply about: helping learners participate more actively in their own education. At the same time, it is a broad idea, so teachers naturally interpret it through their own students, subjects, cultures, and school settings.

For some educators, it may mean giving students more choice. For others, it may involve group work, project-based learning, technology, or more engaging activities. These can all contribute to a student-centered classroom, but none of them alone defines it.

What I have noticed is that we often pay close attention to what the lesson looks like from the outside. A classroom may be lively, collaborative, and full of activity, yet students may still be following a path decided almost entirely for them. In another classroom, students may be working quietly, but they are asking questions, making judgments, connecting ideas, and taking responsibility for their next steps.

So, for me, student-centeredness is less about whether a lesson appears active and more about what is happening in the learning. Are students thinking? Are they making meaningful decisions? Are they developing a clearer sense of themselves as learners? Once we begin with those questions, student-centeredness becomes more than a set of classroom techniques. It becomes a way of designing learning around the learner.

Student-centeredness is less about whether a lesson appears active and more about what is happening in the learning

- Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc -

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That's an interesting perspective. Building on that idea, many educators associate student-centered teaching with active learning, group work, or giving students more choice. In your view, what is the difference between student-centered teaching and truly student-centered learning?

Your question reminds me of a classroom observation I conducted many years ago. It was one of the most energetic lessons I had seen. Students were constantly moving, playing games, working in teams, using technology, and cheering one another on. The classroom was full of excitement, and the teacher had clearly put a tremendous amount of effort into designing the lesson.

When the lesson finished, I said to the teacher, "My only advice is this: try not to make your lesson a game show."

The teacher looked surprised because everything had gone exactly as planned. Students had been engaged from beginning to end. But I explained that engagement alone is not the goal. When students become so focused on winning points, completing activities, or simply having fun that they lose sight of what they are learning and why, the activity becomes the destination rather than the vehicle.

That experience captures the distinction between student-centered teaching and student-centered learning. Student-centered teaching is about creating engaging opportunities for learning. Student-centered learning asks a different question: What is happening within the learner? Are students making sense of new ideas? Are they asking questions, making decisions, connecting concepts, and becoming more capable learners?

I often remind teachers that activities do not create learning by themselves. The same game, project, or discussion can lead to very different outcomes depending on how students think during the experience. So rather than asking, "Will this activity make my lesson more engaging?" I encourage teachers to ask, "What kind of thinking does this activity invite?" That small shift changes the way we design lessons and, ultimately, the way students learn.

3

Your observation story makes me wonder: if an engaging activity is only the vehicle, what should the destination be? I understand that you're preparing to publish a new book, *AI for Purposeful Learning*. What exactly is purposeful learning, why do you see it as a fresh way of thinking about student-centeredness, and is this really a conversation about AI—or about good teaching more broadly?

For me, purposeful learning means that every learning experience has a clear purpose that goes beyond completing a task or achieving a score. Students understand not only what they are learning, but also why it matters, how it connects to their growth, and what they should be able to do with it afterwards. When learners understand that purpose, they become more likely to think deeply, make informed decisions, monitor their own progress, and take greater ownership of their learning.

This is also why I see purposeful learning as a fresh way of thinking about student-centeredness. We have spent many years discussing how to make classrooms more student-centered, but perhaps we have spent less time asking what should remain at the center of those classrooms. My answer is not the activity, the technology, or even the amount of choice we give students. It is the purpose behind the learning.

Although my forthcoming book is titled *AI for Purposeful Learning*, I don't see this as an AI conversation. I see it as an education conversation. AI simply makes the question more urgent because it can now generate explanations, solve problems, produce essays, and even provide feedback within seconds. When technology can do so much, we need to become even clearer about what learners should still experience, decide, and understand for themselves.

So the book is not really about putting AI into education. It is about making sure that, whatever tools we use, learning purpose remains the starting point for every educational decision. I believe that principle is just as important in a classroom with no technology as it is in one filled with AI.



THE LEARNER BEHIND THE LEARNING

PART 2

When learners can make a genuine choice and connect a task with something they already know, value, or hope to experience, the purpose is no longer held only by the teacher. It begins to belong to the learner as well.

– Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc –

4

Purposeful learning is often associated with clear goals, but learners also bring their identities, choices, and sense of agency into the process. How do these dimensions shape whether learning becomes genuinely purposeful for the learner?

To answer your question, let me tell you a story about my eight-year-old daughter. One day, she came home from school with a project board about a country she had chosen: Japan.

Like many school projects, the board had colorful pictures, labels, and carefully arranged information. I asked her why she had chosen Japan.

She did not talk about history or geography. She simply said, “Because I love the kimono. One day, I want to go to Japan and wear one.” Then she added that she had first learned about the kimono in her school’s Culture Club.

What struck me even more was that the teacher had not assigned the country. She had been free to choose.

The project was about Japan, but it was also about her: her choice, her interest, her prior learning, her imagination, and the small future she pictured for herself. The school had left room for personal connection, and the final product carried the learner.

For me, that is an important part of purposeful learning. Students’ work should carry traces of their thinking, voice, choice, judgment, and growth. Agency and identity are not additions to the task. They help give the task its purpose. When learners can make a genuine choice and connect a task with something they already know, value, or hope to experience, the purpose is no longer held only by the teacher. It begins to belong to the learner as well.

Of course, not every assignment needs to become highly personal. A mathematics explanation does not need a childhood memory, and a science report does not need to begin with, “Ever since I was three years old, I have felt emotionally connected to evaporation.” But the learner should not completely disappear behind the product.

5

You've just shared a beautiful story about your daughter. It also brings us to another important idea in your work. You encourage teachers to look beyond the final product and pay closer attention to the learning taking place along the way. What kinds of evidence can show that students are thinking, making judgments, and moving toward the intended learning purpose?

One question I often ask teachers after observing a lesson is, "How do you know your students were thinking?"

The first response is often, "Because they finished the task," or "Because they gave the correct answer." But completing a task and thinking are not always the same thing. A student can produce an excellent presentation, a polished essay, or a perfect worksheet with very little independent thinking. Today, with AI becoming part of many classrooms, that distinction is even more important.

So I encourage teachers to look for evidence beyond the final product. Listen to the questions students ask. Notice the choices they make when there isn't only one correct answer. Ask them why they changed an idea, why they rejected one solution and chose another, or what made them revise their work. Those moments often reveal much more about learning than the finished product itself.

Ultimately, I think we should spend less time asking, "What did students produce?" and more time asking, "What evidence do we have that they were thinking?" When we begin to notice those traces of thinking, we gain a much richer understanding of learning, and we are in a much better position to support student learning.

Many teachers want students to become more independent learners, yet they also worry about giving up too much control. How can teachers gradually build learner agency while still providing the guidance students need?

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I don't think the question is whether teachers should give up control. The better question is, which decisions should remain with the teacher, and which can gradually be handed to the learner?

Agency develops step by step. It might begin with something as simple as letting students choose a topic, decide how to present their ideas, or justify which strategy they think is best. As learners become more confident, those decisions can become increasingly meaningful.

The teacher's role does not become smaller; it becomes different. We move from directing every step to creating the conditions in which students can think, decide, and learn with increasing independence. That's the kind of agency that prepares learners not only for school, but for life.

7

So learner agency grows through carefully chosen decisions rather than by removing teacher guidance altogether. But those decisions may look very different from one classroom to another. Across ages, subjects, cultures, and learning contexts, what principles of purposeful learning remain important?

Whether we are teaching young children or adults, mathematics or literature, online or face-to-face, I always return to a few simple questions: Do learners understand why they are learning this? Are they thinking? Do they have opportunities to make meaningful decisions? Can we see evidence of their growth?

What changes is how those principles are expressed. Agency for an eight-year-old may mean choosing a topic or explaining a preference. For an older learner, it may involve evaluating sources, challenging an AI response, or deciding how to improve a piece of work. The form should fit the learner and the context.

Purposeful learning is therefore not a particular teaching method or a checklist. It is a way of thinking that helps teachers make sound decisions in their own classrooms while keeping learning purpose and the learner at the center.



PURPOSEFUL LEARNING IN AN AI WORLD

PART 3

8

Throughout our conversation, one message has remained consistent: the learner should stay at the center, regardless of the context. Today, however, that context is changing rapidly because of AI. AI can now explain concepts, write essays, solve problems, and even provide feedback. In your view, what should remain unmistakably human in learning, even as AI becomes increasingly capable?

I believe the most important things to protect are not the tasks themselves, but the human experiences that those tasks are meant to develop.

AI can generate answers, summarize information, and even produce impressive pieces of work. But it cannot replace the experience of grappling with an idea, making a difficult judgment, changing your mind after new evidence, or discovering something through your own curiosity. Those moments shape how people think, not just what they know.

This doesn't mean we should keep AI out of education. Quite the opposite. We should use it wisely, but with a clear understanding of what belongs to the learner. If AI takes over every meaningful decision, learners may become more efficient, but not necessarily more capable. The goal is not simply to produce better work. It is to develop better thinkers, better learners, and ultimately, better human beings.

That leads perfectly to my next question. Your forthcoming book, *AI for Purposeful Learning*, introduces the LEARN-AI framework—not as another AI toolkit, but as a learning design compass. What gap in today's conversations about AI were you hoping the framework would address?

9

Thank you for mentioning the framework as a learning design compass. Yes, it really is. That is how I hope teachers will use it – not as another framework to memorize or another checklist to complete, but as a guide for making thoughtful decisions about learning.

As I visited schools and spoke with teachers, I noticed that many conversations about AI began with the same question:

“What can this tool do?”

It is an understandable question because AI is developing incredibly quickly. But I felt we were beginning in the wrong place.

The first question should not be, “What can AI do?” It should be, “What kind of learning are we trying to create with this tool?” Once we are clear about that, we can decide whether AI adds value, whether another approach would be better, or whether students should first work through the task themselves before receiving support.

That thinking led to the LEARN-AI framework. I designed it as a flexible compass that helps teachers keep learning purpose, student thinking, agency, reflection, and growth in view when AI is involved. It does not prescribe one correct way to use AI. It helps teachers judge when, where, and how AI should support learning.

You will notice that AI does not lead the framework. Learning does. Technology enters only after we have considered what students need to understand, experience, decide, and improve.

I often say, “AI may generate content, but teachers generate the conditions for learning.” That captures the spirit of LEARN-AI. It is there to support teachers’ professional judgment and help keep the learner at the center as classrooms continue to evolve.

Many teachers see both the opportunities and the risks of AI. They want to use it to support learning, but they also worry that students may become too dependent on it. From the perspective of LEARN-AI, how can teachers use AI in ways that genuinely strengthen learning rather than replace it?

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I believe the key is to remember that support is not the same as substitution.

There are moments in learning when students need support, and AI can provide that support remarkably well. It can explain an idea in different ways, generate examples, offer immediate feedback, or encourage students to consider another perspective. Used thoughtfully, these forms of support can help students move forward without always having to wait for the teacher.

But there are also moments that belong to the learner: forming an initial idea, making a judgment, deciding between alternatives, reflecting on feedback, or explaining why something makes sense. These experiences should not be outsourced because they are part of how learning develops.

When teachers plan with that distinction in mind, AI becomes much less threatening. We no longer expect it to teach instead of us or think instead of our students. Instead, it becomes another resource that teachers can use professionally, with purpose and sound judgment.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As we come to the end of our conversation, one idea has remained central: education should begin with the learner and a clear purpose for learning. If readers take away just one message about purposeful learning and student-centeredness, what would you hope it would be?

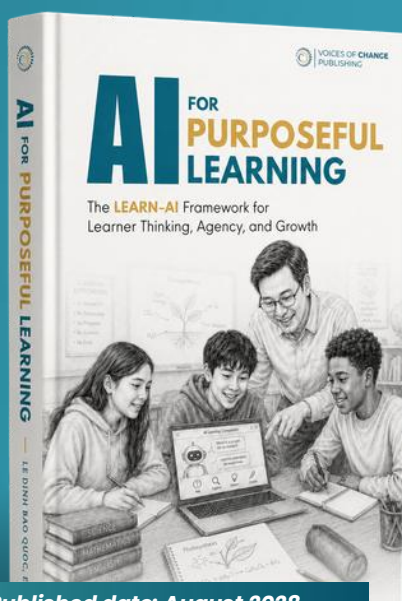
I hope people remember that education is not simply about helping students complete today’s tasks. It is about preparing them to think, make decisions, continue learning, and contribute long after they leave our classrooms.

Technology will continue to change. AI will become more capable, and new tools will emerge that we cannot even imagine today. But the purpose of education remains remarkably consistent. We are helping young people become thoughtful, responsible, and compassionate human beings. Every decision we make as educators should bring us closer to that purpose, not further away from it.

If purposeful learning encourages teachers to pause and ask, “**Why are my students learning this, and how will this experience help them grow?**”, then I think it has already achieved something worthwhile. When we begin with those questions, student-centeredness is no longer just an educational philosophy. It becomes something our learners can experience every day.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Student-centeredness is about learning, not appearance.** A lively, collaborative classroom is not automatically student-centered. The real question is what students are thinking, deciding, and understanding.
- **Purpose should remain at the center.** Purposeful learning begins with clarity about what students are learning, why they are learning it, and how the experience contributes to their growth.
- **The learner should remain visible in the work.** Student work should carry traces of voice, choice, judgment, prior experience, and developing identity, rather than presenting only a polished final product.
- **Evidence of thinking goes beyond task completion.** Teachers should look at students' questions, decisions, explanations, revisions, and reasons for changing direction, not only whether they produced the correct answer.
- **Agency develops through carefully chosen decisions.** Teachers do not need to give up guidance. They can gradually transfer meaningful decisions to learners as their confidence and independence grow.
- **AI should support learning, not substitute for it.** AI can explain, generate examples, and provide feedback, but forming ideas, making judgments, reflecting, and deciding what to do next should remain with the learner.
- **Technology should follow learning purpose.** The most important question is not, "What can this tool do?" but, "What kind of learning are we trying to create with this tool?"



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Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc is an educator, author, and educational consultant with more than two decades of experience in teaching, teacher education, curriculum design, and educational leadership. He is the founder of EduVerse, a global professional learning community connecting educators across more than 100 countries, and the founder of Pro.Ed Education Solutions, an organization supporting schools and teachers through professional development and educational innovation. He is also a co-founder of Voices of Change (VOC), an international network that promotes collaboration, quality, and meaningful growth in education. His work focuses on purposeful learning, student-centered education, teacher development, and the thoughtful integration of AI into teaching. He is the creator of the LEARN-AI framework and the author of the forthcoming book *AI for Purposeful Learning: The LEARN-AI Framework for Learner Thinking, Agency, and Growth*.

MAKING PROGRESS VISIBLE

GSE AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

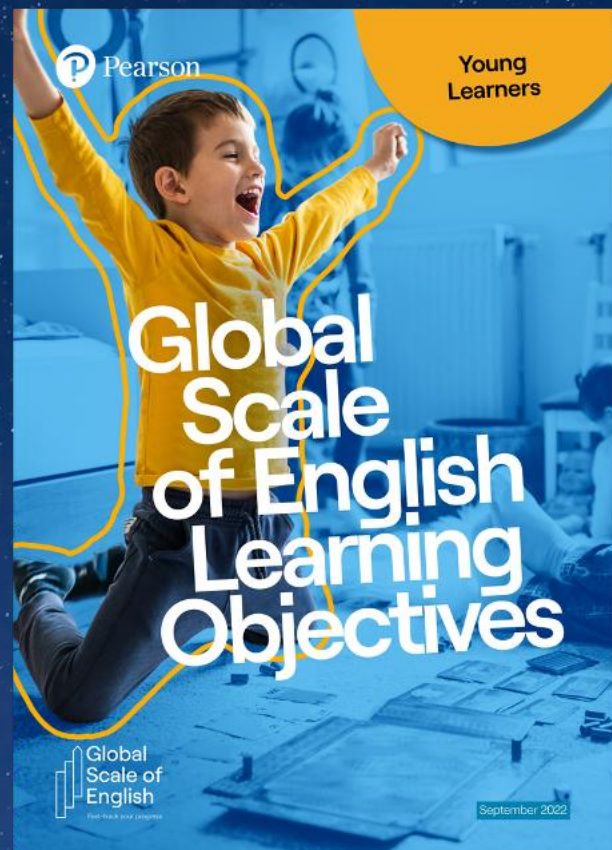
Student-centered learning asks us to look beyond participation and consider whether learners truly understand where they are, what they are working toward, and how they are growing. In language education, this is especially important because progress can be difficult to see. Learners may remain within the same broad proficiency level for months while still making important gains in confidence, communication, and independence.

Having worked with the Global Scale of English (GSE) for years, I have come to value the way it helps bring that progress into view. Its detailed “Can Do” statements can shift the conversation from “What level am I?” to more meaningful questions such as “What can I do now?” and “What am I ready to work toward next?”

That shift connects closely with the theme of this special issue. Agency grows when learners can recognize their progress, understand their goals, and make informed decisions about their next steps. When learning becomes visible, learners are better able to see themselves not as people moving through a system, but as active participants shaping their own development.

The three articles in this specially dedicated section of this **EduVerse Newsletter** explore that idea from different angles. Together, they show how GSE-aligned goals can support learner agency, how visible progress can reduce frustration and strengthen ownership, and how the *GSE Soft Skills Framework* can support meaningful participation, collaboration, and identity.

At its best, the value of GSE is not only that it describes language growth. It helps learners see that growth for themselves – and sometimes, seeing progress is what gives them the confidence to keep moving forward.



Dr. Le Dinh Bao Quoc

Editor-in-Chief
EduVerse-Editorial Board

USING GSE TO MAKE LEARNER AGENCY

Fajarudin Akbar 

Visible

In a GSE-aligned B1 listening and discussion lesson I designed, students explored a question that felt highly relevant to their lives: “Is university still worth it in the age of AI?” The lesson focused on employability, transferable skills, communication, and the changing expectations surrounding education and work. What made the lesson meaningful, however, was not only the topic itself, but the way learners were encouraged to make visible decisions about their own learning throughout the process.

The lesson began with reflection rather than explanation. Before any listening activity or vocabulary instruction, students discussed questions such as:

- Is a university degree still the safest pathway to success?
- What skills might remain valuable even when AI becomes more advanced?
- Would you choose a four-year degree or practical work experience if both were available?



Students immediately connected the discussion to their own experiences, concerns, and ambitions. Some spoke about family expectations surrounding higher education. Others discussed fears about automation and future careers. Several connected the topic to uncertainty about employability and professional identity.

This opening changed the atmosphere of the lesson. Instead of waiting for the teacher to introduce the “correct” ideas, students entered the conversation with perspectives rooted in their own lives. For me, this is where student-centered learning begins: learners connecting language with their identities, decisions, and future aspirations.

Yet student-centeredness requires more than active participation. Students may contribute enthusiastically while still depending on the teacher to define success and direct their progress.

In many language classrooms, learners complete activities successfully but remain unsure about what they are personally trying to improve or how they can recognize progress.

This is where the Global Scale of English (GSE) became particularly useful in my teaching practice.



Making LEARNING GOALS VISIBLE WITH THE GSE

Rather than treating the GSE simply as a proficiency framework or using it only to label the lesson as B1, I used its Learning Objectives to make the communicative direction of the lesson clearer. The GSE provides detailed Learning Objectives that describe what learners can do at different points in their language development, making it possible to move beyond broad level labels toward more specific communicative outcomes.

One relevant GSE 50 Speaking Learning Objective was:

“Can give simple reasons to justify a viewpoint on a familiar topic.”

This objective helped guide the communicative design of the lesson. The central question, “Is university still worth it in the age of AI?”, required learners to do more than express agreement or disagreement. They needed to take positions on education, employability, work experience, and future skills, then give reasons for their views.

This influenced how I connected the lesson stages. Reflection and prediction first activated learners’ existing viewpoints. Vocabulary work provided language for discussing employment and education. Listening and interpretation introduced ideas that learners could compare with their own perspectives. Critical-thinking tasks encouraged them to examine causes and effects. Discussion then gave them opportunities to express viewpoints and justify them with reasons.

In this way, the GSE Learning Objective was not simply a statement added to the lesson plan. It helped me consider how different activities could build toward meaningful communication.

I also wanted students to use the communicative direction of the lesson rather than leaving the objective in the teacher’s plan. Instead of presenting learning goals only as teacher-controlled targets, I translated the broader GSE-informed focus into learner-facing choices. During speaking activities, students selected individual communication goals based on their own needs and confidence levels. Some focused on expressing opinions more clearly. Others wanted to improve their follow-up questions during discussions, while several quieter students chose to build fluency by speaking more continuously.

These individual goals were not separate GSE Learning Objectives. They were learner-facing communication priorities within a lesson whose broader direction had been informed by the GSE. This distinction allowed students to work toward meaningful communication while paying attention to different aspects of their own development.

Although students participated in the same discussion, they were not all monitoring their communication in exactly the same way. Instead of simply completing the activity, they paid attention to their own performance and decided what they wanted to improve.

Throughout the lesson, learners returned repeatedly to these goals. During listening activities, they paid attention to useful language and ideas that could strengthen later communication. During discussions, they monitored how effectively they were participating and whether they were working toward their selected focus. During speaking tasks, they considered which strategies helped them communicate more effectively. During reflection, they returned to what they had noticed and what they wanted to improve next.

The lesson itself followed a gradual progression toward greater learner independence:

- reflection and prediction,
- vocabulary discovery,
- listening and interpretation,
- critical thinking,
- discussion and debate,
- optional AI-supported rehearsal,
- and final reflection.

This experience reminded me that student-centeredness is often shaped by lesson flow rather than isolated activities. The GSE helped provide a clearer communicative direction, while each stage gradually increased learners' awareness, decision-making, and ownership.



Lesson: Is University
Still Worth It?

Connecting LANGUAGE LEARNING TO REAL-WORLD LEARNING

The vocabulary activities focused on words such as transferable, obsolete, steady, and approaching. Rather than memorizing definitions, students explored these words within discussions about employment, AI, and education. This helped them connect language learning with real-world issues that mattered to them.

Later, students completed analytical tasks exploring the causes and effects of changing job markets. They discussed why traditional career pathways are evolving and why communication skills, adaptability, and interpersonal abilities may become increasingly valuable. Instead of searching for single "correct" answers, students were encouraged to interpret ideas, justify their opinions, and consider different perspectives.

This stage also gave learners further opportunities to work toward the communicative direction made visible earlier in the lesson. They were not only sharing opinions about a contemporary issue, but also developing reasons for those opinions, responding to different perspectives, and deciding how they wanted to communicate their ideas.

These discussions created space for identity and personal voice. Students were not simply practicing English structures; they were using English to negotiate opinions, express uncertainty, challenge ideas, and explore possibilities connected to their own lives.

One of the most meaningful stages of the lesson was the final reflection task. Students wrote short reflections on how their perspectives on university education, employability, and future skills had changed. They were encouraged to connect the lesson to their own lives and future goals while naturally using newly learned vocabulary.

Several reflections moved beyond language practice and became reflections on identity and future direction. One student wrote that she had realized communication skills might remain important even as technology continues to evolve. Another reflected that internships and practical experience now seemed more valuable than she had previously believed. Several students acknowledged their anxiety about future careers while recognizing the importance of adaptability and lifelong learning.

These reflections showed that students were doing more than completing language exercises. They were using English to understand themselves, their futures, and their place in a rapidly changing world.

Reflection also gave learners an opportunity to return to the communication goals made visible earlier in the lesson. They could consider what they had noticed about their own participation, which strategies had worked, and what they wanted to improve next. In this sense, the GSE-informed direction of the lesson extended beyond planning and activities into learners' own monitoring of development.

Over time, I also noticed a shift in the questions students began asking. Instead of focusing only on correctness, they increasingly asked:

- "How can I explain my ideas more clearly?"
- "Why do I still hesitate during discussions?"
- "Which strategies helped me communicate more confidently today?"
- "How can I improve my interaction skills?"

These questions reflected growing self-awareness and ownership of learning. They also showed why making communicative goals visible matters. When learners have a clearer sense of what they are working toward, they can begin to ask more specific questions about their own development.

Classroom Note AI AS AN OPTIONAL REHEARSAL TOOL

In this lesson, AI was used as one optional pathway for rehearsal, not as the centre of instruction.

Students who wished to practise before speaking with classmates interacted with an AI-generated HR manager, answering follow-up questions about communication skills, negotiation, and workplace interaction. They used the activity to rehearse the communication goals they had already selected earlier in the lesson.

One quieter learner repeated the interaction several times before joining the classroom discussion. During the pair discussion that followed, her participation became noticeably more confident and sustained.

The experience reinforced an important point: AI did not create learner agency. It simply provided an additional opportunity for preparation within a lesson already guided by clear goals, learner choice, meaningful communication, and reflection.



Pearson Transforming
Language Learning with AI

SMALL SHIFTS

THAT MAKES AGENCY *Visible*

Many of these changes did not require major curriculum redesign. They emerged through relatively small pedagogical adjustments:

- using GSE Learning Objectives to make communicative goals more visible and meaningful to learners,
- translating the broader communicative direction into learner-facing choices,
- integrating reflection routines,
- allowing multiple pathways for practice,
- connecting language learning to authentic contemporary issues,
- and using AI as one optional rehearsal tool rather than an answer generator.

Together, these small shifts gradually changed the classroom culture. Students became more aware of their goals, discussed their progress more specifically, and reflected more independently on their communication development.

Most importantly, progress became more visible to the learners themselves. When students can recognize how they are growing, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning. Student-centeredness becomes meaningful when learners understand not only what they are learning, but also why it matters and how they are progressing.

Designing **LEARNER AGENCY** IN MOTION

As education continues to evolve alongside technological change, student-centeredness must evolve as well. In language classrooms, this means moving beyond participation alone to helping learners understand and direct their own learning.

My experience using GSE-informed lesson design has shown that learner agency becomes stronger when students are able to:

- understand the communicative goals they are working toward,
- make meaningful choices about their own learning priorities,
- monitor their progress,
- rehearse through different pathways,
- reflect meaningfully,
- and connect learning to their own identities and future aspirations.

None of these practices reduce the teacher's role. On the contrary, teachers play a critical part in selecting relevant Learning Objectives, connecting them to meaningful contexts, designing coherent learning sequences, and creating opportunities for learners to make informed choices.

The goal is not to create technology-centered classrooms. It is to create classrooms where learners increasingly see themselves as capable, reflective, and independent participants in their own development.

When learners can understand their goals, make decisions, monitor their progress, and recognize their own growth, student-centeredness is no longer simply a pedagogical concept. It becomes something they actively experience in motion.



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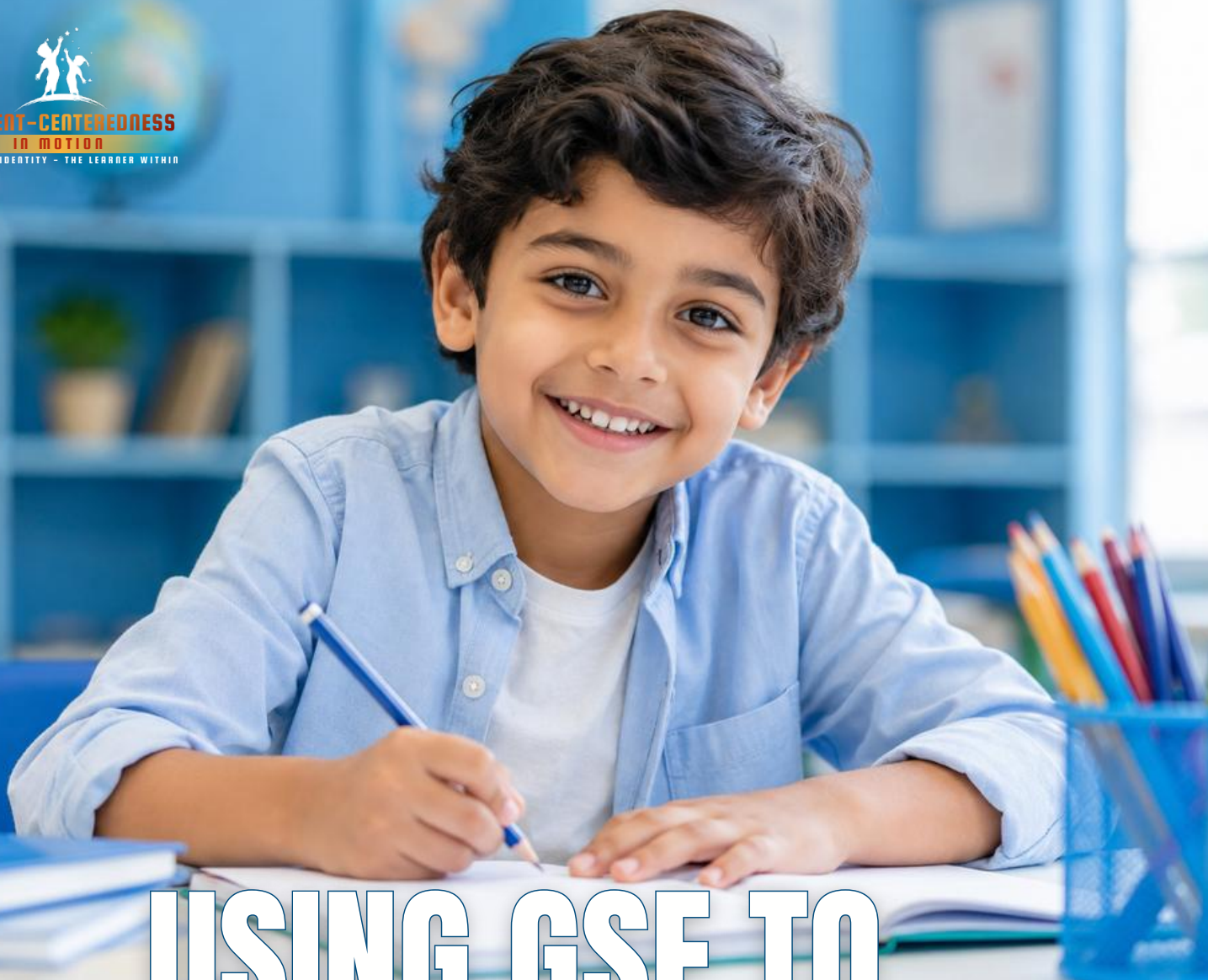
The GSE helped provide a clearer communicative direction, while each stage gradually increased learners' awareness, decision-making, and ownership.

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USING GSE TO SUPPORT LEARNER PROGRESS AND REDUCE FRUSTRATION

Nicolas F. Chaparro G. 

Frustration is a powerful force in education. In many aspects of life, it can lead people to stop trying, abandon goals, or doubt their own abilities. Language learning is no exception. Students invest time, effort, and emotional energy into learning a new language, yet many eventually reach a point where they feel they are no longer progressing. When that feeling appears, motivation often begins to fade.

As teachers, we know that frustration is part of the learning process. Mistakes, challenges, and moments of uncertainty are natural components of language development. However, while frustration may be inevitable, abandonment should not be. One of our most important responsibilities is helping learners recognize that progress is happening, even when it may not be immediately visible.

Throughout my career as an English teacher and academic leader, I have seen that students rarely abandon language learning because it is difficult. More often, they abandon it because they cannot clearly see where their effort is taking them. When learners cannot identify their progress, they begin to question the value of their work, compare themselves with others, and eventually lose confidence in their ability to succeed.

For this reason, making progress visible has become one of the guiding principles of my teaching philosophy. Among the tools that have helped me achieve this goal, the Global Scale of English (GSE) has played a particularly important role.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS OF LEARNER FRUSTRATION

One of the earliest lessons I learned as a teacher came from a student who was very close to leaving her English program altogether.

She was highly motivated and genuinely wanted to learn English. However, she constantly compared herself with her friends, who seemed to be progressing faster. Rather than focusing on her own development, she measured her success against the performance of others. Over time, this comparison became discouraging. Feedback that was intended to help her improve began to feel like evidence that she was falling behind.

The problem was not a lack of ability. It was a lack of visible and personalized progress. Eventually, our teaching team redesigned her learning pathway around her own pace and needs. She continued sharing learning experiences with her friends, but she stopped measuring herself against them. Instead, she began focusing on her own achievements and development.

The transformation was remarkable. As her progress became more manageable and visible, her confidence grew. She remained engaged in the program, continued developing her skills, and eventually reached a C1 level of proficiency. Watching that journey unfold became one of the most rewarding experiences of my teaching career.

That experience taught me an important lesson: students need goals that feel achievable, progress that feels visible, and learning journeys that feel personal.

BEYOND LEVELS MAKING PROGRESS VISIBLE

Traditional language frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) have provided educators with a valuable common language for describing proficiency levels. They help teachers, institutions, and learners understand broad stages of language development.

However, broad proficiency levels can sometimes create challenges for learners.

A student may spend months working within a single CEFR band without fully understanding what progress has been made. While teachers may recognize substantial growth, learners often see only one thing: they are still at the same level.

This is where the Global Scale of English provides additional value.

The GSE was designed to complement the CEFR by providing a more detailed and measurable description of language development. According to Pearson, one of the goals of the GSE is to help learners build confidence by understanding their English abilities more precisely (Pearson, 2020).

Rather than viewing proficiency as a series of large stages, the GSE breaks learning into smaller, more manageable steps. This greater level of detail allows teachers and learners to identify progress that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

In practical terms, the difference is significant. Instead of simply knowing that a learner is working toward a B1 level, teachers and students can identify specific communicative abilities that have already been achieved and those that are still developing. This creates a clearer picture of progress and transforms learning into a more transparent process.

Research and educational practice suggest that this more granular perspective allows teachers to monitor smaller stages of development that broader frameworks may overlook (Bridge Education Group, 2022).

Consider a student who feels discouraged because they are “still B1.” Instead of focusing only on the level label, the teacher and student review the communicative objectives they have been working toward. The student may realize that they can now express opinions more clearly, ask follow-up questions during conversations, and sustain a discussion for longer than they could a few weeks earlier. The overall level may not have changed, but the progress within it has become visible.

For learners, that visibility can make all the difference. When learners recognize what they can do today that they could not do before, progress becomes tangible, personal, and worth celebrating.

FROM PROGRESS TO MOTIVATION

One of the most powerful changes I have observed when using communicative objectives is the way students talk about their learning.

At the beginning of their journey, many learners ask questions such as: “Am I B1 yet?” or “How much longer until I finish this level?”

These questions are understandable, but they focus on labels rather than abilities.

As students become more aware of specific communicative objectives, the conversation begins to change. I remember a student approaching me after returning from a family trip with genuine excitement. The student explained that he had been able to communicate at the airport and help his family by acting as their translator. He also shared that his parents were proud of him and that he felt proud of himself as well.

That moment represented something much bigger than a level descriptor. The student was no longer measuring success by whether he had reached a particular proficiency band. Instead, he was recognizing the practical value of what he could actually do with the language.

The textbook had become reality. The classroom had become communication. The learning objective had become a lived experience.

This shift is important because motivation grows when learners can connect their effort to meaningful outcomes. When students recognize that they can perform tasks today that they could not perform a few months earlier, progress becomes personal and relevant. As Billie Jago (2024) notes, clearly defined learning objectives can motivate learners by making progress visible and providing a clear pathway for improvement.

Visibility builds confidence. Confidence strengthens motivation. Motivation encourages persistence.

FROM MOTIVATION TO OWNERSHIP

Motivation alone is valuable, but visible progress often leads to something even more important: ownership. When students understand where they are in their learning journey, they become more curious about where they are going next.

Instead of studying simply because they are required to do so, they begin looking for opportunities to apply their skills. They ask more questions, seek authentic opportunities to communicate, and become active participants in their own development.

In my experience, these learners also become valuable contributors to the classroom community. Particularly in multi-level learning environments, they support classmates by explaining concepts, sharing strategies, and encouraging others based on their own experiences.

This transformation is significant. Learners are no longer passive recipients of information; they become active participants in the learning process. As progress becomes more visible, ownership grows. And when learners take ownership of their progress, they are more likely to remain engaged and committed to their long-term development.

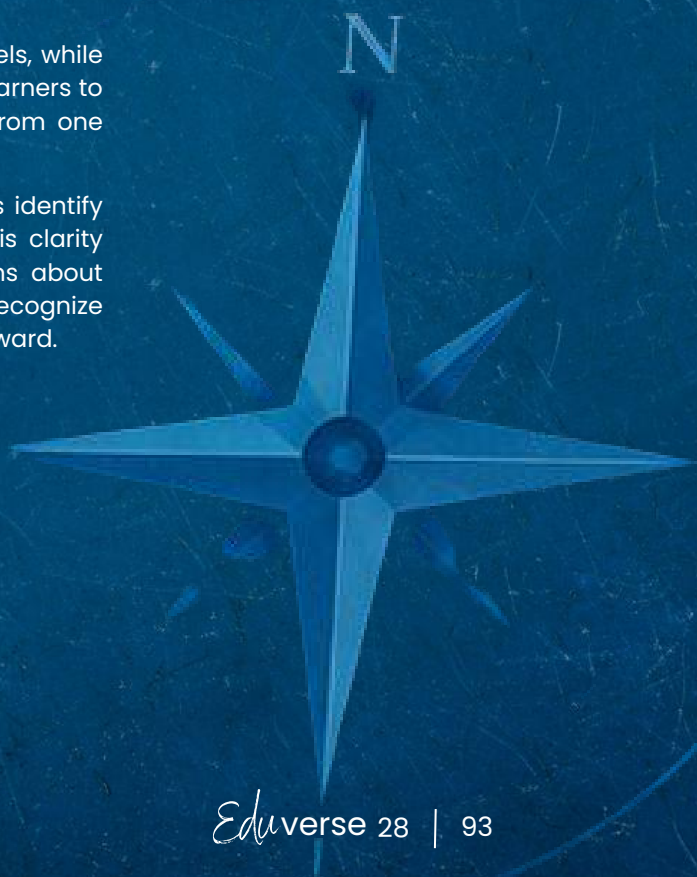
THE GSE AS A LEARNING GPS

When explaining the GSE to colleagues and students, I often use a simple metaphor: the GSE is like a GPS for language learning.

A GPS helps travelers understand three things: where they are, where they are going, and how they can get there. Learners need the same kind of clarity. They need to understand their current abilities, the goals they are working toward, and the steps that can help them move forward.

The CEFR provides a valuable map of broad proficiency levels, while the GSE adds greater detail within those levels. This allows learners to see progress that may not yet be reflected in a change from one CEFR band to another.

By making progress more visible, the GSE can help learners identify their strengths, areas for improvement, and next steps. This clarity reduces uncertainty and supports more informed decisions about learning. Instead of feeling stuck at a level, students can recognize the smaller achievements that show they are still moving forward.



Frustration may be a natural part of learning, but it does not have to define the learner experience. When students can clearly see their progress, understand their goals, and recognize their achievements, they are more likely to remain engaged, motivated, and confident in their ability to succeed.

The value of the GSE is not simply that it measures learning. Its value lies in helping learners understand learning. It provides a clearer picture of progress, supports meaningful communication, and encourages students to take ownership of their development.

Ultimately, language learning becomes most powerful when it moves beyond textbooks, exams, and level descriptors. When students are supported by meaningful resources, guided by committed teachers, and accompanied by a learning pathway they can understand, language stops being something they study and becomes something they live.

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DESIGNING FOR MORE THAN LANGUAGE

GSE SOFT SKILLS

FOR EVERYDAY LESSONS

Hebatallah Morsy 



A FAMILIAR CLASSROOM PUZZLE

Think about the last discussion activity you taught. Chances are, a few learners spoke readily, some joined in when invited, and others remained mostly on the sidelines.

Most teachers can probably think of learners who have the vocabulary needed to contribute yet rarely volunteer ideas. Others may speak less accurately but participate confidently, build on classmates' comments, and help move discussions forward. What influences these different patterns of participation?

I've often returned to that question because language objectives alone do not seem to provide the full answer. Classrooms are shaped not only by language proficiency, but also by confidence, interaction, relationships, habits, and learners' perceptions of their own role within a group.

That question eventually led me to look at the GSE Soft Skills Framework from a different perspective – not simply as a set of descriptors, but as a way of thinking more intentionally about participation in the language classroom.

LOOKING AT GSE THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

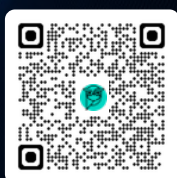
The Global Scale of English (GSE) is often associated with language progression. Teachers use descriptors to identify what learners can do at different stages and to make progress more visible.

What particularly caught my attention, however, was the **GSE Soft Skills Framework**. Alongside language development, it describes areas such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, leadership, and self-management with the same level of clarity.

Reading through the descriptors, I found myself wondering whether they might be useful for more than planning behaviours. Perhaps they could also provide a useful lens for thinking about classroom participation and the kinds of learning experiences we want students to have.

Research on learner identity provides an interesting lens here. Norton (2013) argues that language learning is closely connected to identity and investment. Learners engage differently depending on how they see themselves and the opportunities available to them through language. Lave and Wenger (1991) similarly describe learning as participation within communities of practice, where people gradually become more involved through meaningful contribution.

Viewed through this lens, the GSE Soft Skills descriptors can become more than planning objectives. They can also prompt us to think about what repeated participation might feel like from the learner's perspective. If learners regularly collaborate, contribute ideas, or take responsibility for their learning, what messages might they begin to internalize about themselves?



GSE Soft Skill	Possible Learner Experience
Collaboration	My ideas contribute to a group.
Communication	My voice matters in discussion.
Critical Thinking	I can question and respond to ideas.
Leadership	I can help move a task forward.
Self-Management	I can take ownership of my learning.

The table is not intended as a new interpretation of the GSE Soft Skills Framework. Rather, it offers one way of thinking about how repeated opportunities to demonstrate these skills might shape learners' confidence, participation, and sense of agency over time.

GSE Soft Skills Framework describes areas such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, leadership, and self-management with the same level of clarity.

WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE

Consider a high-intermediate class working within the GSE 50–59 range. The language focus is discussion skills. Learners are expected to express agreement, disagreement, and build on one another's ideas.

Relevant GSE objectives include:

- Can repeat back what is said to confirm understanding and keep a discussion on course. (GSE 52)
- Can express disagreement in a manner that shows they were actively listening to the other person. (GSE 58)

Alongside these language objectives, the teacher may choose to focus on a soft skills descriptor related to collaboration and active listening. One question guides the lesson planning: **What kinds of participation would we like learners to experience during this task?**

For this lesson, the answer might be: "I am someone who listens, responds, and contributes meaningfully in English." Notice that the language objectives remain the same. The activity itself also remains familiar. Learners discuss a real-world issue in groups, but with one simple condition: **No idea can stand alone.**

Every contribution must connect to something someone else has already said – by building on it, asking a follow-up question, offering a different perspective, or explaining why they agree or disagree.

This small adjustment changes the nature of the interaction. Learners are encouraged to engage not only with the topic, but also with one another's thinking. As the discussion develops, the teacher is able to observe not only how well students use the target language, but also how they listen, respond, collaborate, and support the conversation.

Language support, discussion roles, and reflection questions can all reinforce this experience. A closing question such as "What kind of English speaker were you in this task?" invites learners to notice their own participation, not just their accuracy.

What becomes visible is not only whether learners can use English, but also how they participate while using it.

QUESTIONS WORTH BRINGING INTO PLANNING

When planning a lesson, I found it useful to think about a few additional questions alongside language objectives. Consider the following:

- Which GSE language objective is being targeted?
- Which GSE soft skill is naturally connected to the task?
- What kinds of participation might learners experience?
- What task condition encourages that participation?
- What support will learners need?
- How will they reflect on the experience afterwards?
- What evidence might help inform feedback?

These questions do not necessarily add complexity to planning. They simply draw attention to dimensions of learning that are sometimes present but invisible. They prompt us to consider how learners participated, what they experienced during the activity, and how those experiences might shape their confidence, agency, and future participation.

A FINAL THOUGHT

At the beginning of this article, I asked why some learners participate readily while others remain on the sidelines, even when they have similar language ability.

There is rarely a single answer. Participation is shaped by many factors, including confidence, relationships, previous experiences, and how learners see themselves within the classroom community.

One of the things I appreciate about the GSE Soft Skills Framework is that it gives language to aspects of classroom life that many teachers already care about. Participation, collaboration, contribution, and reflection are hardly new ideas. Yet having descriptors for them can make them easier to notice, discuss, and intentionally include in lesson design.

For me, the value of the framework goes beyond planning activities. It encourages us to think not only about what learners can do in English, but also about the experiences we create while they are learning it. Those experiences can gradually shape how learners see themselves – as contributors, collaborators, critical thinkers, and confident language users.

The question, then, may not be limited to what learners can do in English.

It may also include how they experience themselves while using it.

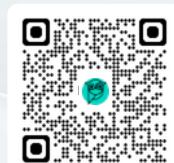
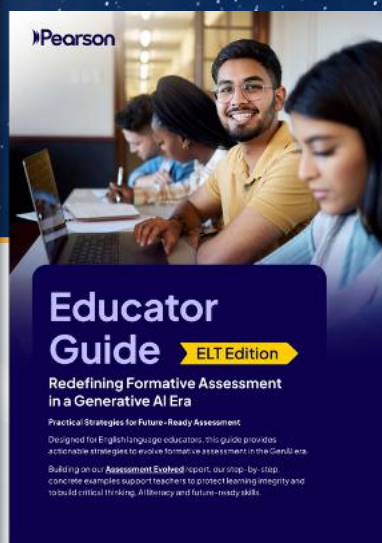
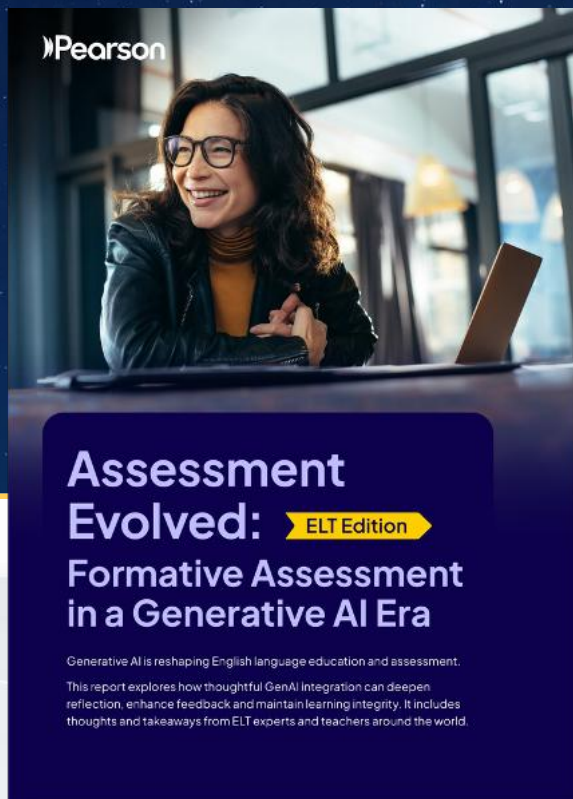
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With over 20 years of experience in English language education, **Heba** is a teacher educator, ELT consultant, and GSE Ambassador committed to rethinking how teachers learn. Through professional development, AI integration, and collaborative learning communities, she encourages teachers to question, reflect, and transform ideas into meaningful classroom practice. She believes teaching changes when teachers do.





FREE DOWNLOAD

As AI continues to reshape education, educators around the world are asking important questions: How can assessment remain meaningful? How do we protect learning while embracing new possibilities? And what skills will learners need in an AI-driven future?

To support these conversations, Pearson has recently published two complementary resources for English language educators. **Assessment Evolved: Formative Assessment in a Generative AI Era** explores how formative assessment can evolve to promote learning integrity, critical thinking, and responsible AI use. Accompanying it, the **Educator Guide** translates these ideas into practical classroom strategies that teachers can apply immediately. Together, they offer timely insights and practical guidance for educators navigating one of the most significant changes in education today.

These two Pearson reports offer timely insights into how formative assessment can evolve in the age of AI while keeping learner thinking, feedback, and educational purpose at the center. They inspire educators to see assessment not simply as a measure of learning, but as a powerful part of the learning journey itself.

Dr. Lê Dinh Bao Quoc
Head of EduVerse
Pro.Ed Education Solutions



When I was a child, many people tried to help me learn.

My teachers cared. My school tried. I was sent for psychological assessments, spelling evaluations, vision and hearing tests, balance assessments, and a range of learning evaluations. My Danish teacher even welcomed me into her home and patiently sat with me as I learned to read.

Yet despite all the support and effort, no one could fully understand why learning felt so difficult. The truth was not that I was unwilling to learn. The truth was that my nervous system was overwhelmed.

At home, life looked very different from what people saw at school. My mother was deeply ill, both physically and mentally, and I lived between two very different worlds: one at school and one at home. I carried responsibilities, stress, fear, secrets, emotional pressure, and uncertainty that my young mind could neither process nor explain.

Between the ages of seven and nine, I was homeschooled because I struggled socially and did not fit in. My mother removed me from school out of love and a genuine desire to protect me. She truly wanted to help me, but she was not a trained teacher, and she herself was struggling deeply.

Learning at home often took place under pressure, fear, emotional unpredictability, shouting, or threats when I did not understand something quickly enough. Although lessons were completed, my nervous system slowly learned to associate learning with stress and emotional danger.

When I returned to school in third grade, something confusing happened. I could already read, spell, and do mathematics. But suddenly, learning became difficult again. It was as if my brain shut down the moment I had to absorb new information.

Today, I understand what I could not understand back then: the brain and nervous system adapt to survive.



THE 4A METHOD

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS THROUGH AWARENESS, ALIGNMENT, ACTION AND APPRECIATION

Michelle H S Quick 

✦ WHAT THIS EXPERIENCE TAUGHT ME

Research in trauma psychology, neuroscience, and stress physiology shows that children living under prolonged stress or emotional overwhelm often shift into survival-based nervous system states. When the brain is focused on protection and threat detection, learning, memory, concentration, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility can all be affected. The nervous system prioritizes survival before learning.

Looking back, this helps explain what happened to me. At home, learning had become associated with fear and emotional pressure. When I returned to a safe school environment where no one shouted or threatened me, my nervous system still reacted as if danger were present. It had learned to protect me by shutting down during learning situations.

For years, I believed this meant I was unintelligent. Not because I lacked curiosity, ideas, or the desire to learn, but because every time I encountered something new, it felt as though an invisible iron door closed inside my mind.

Everything changed when, at around thirty-five, a doctor explained that what I had experienced was not stupidity, laziness, or a lack of potential. My brain had simply spent years adapting to stress and survival. Understanding that changed not only how I saw myself, but also how I understood learning.

Audiobooks, reflection, meditation, nervous system awareness, emotional understanding, healthy routines, and inner balance all became important parts of my journey. Even today, I can still become overwhelmed when learning large amounts of new information. The difference is that I now understand what is happening inside me. Understanding creates compassion instead of shame.

Over time, I realised that my experience was not unique. Through my studies, my work as a social worker, coach, facilitator, and educator, I met many people who were not lacking intelligence or potential. They were carrying stress, emotional overload, or experiences that had taught their nervous systems to stay in survival mode. They did not need someone to question their ability to learn. They needed someone to understand what was happening beneath the surface.

That realisation fundamentally changed how I understood student-centeredness. I began to see that before learners can fully engage with new knowledge, many first need to feel safe enough to learn. This understanding gradually became one of the foundations of **MYCORA™ – The 4A Method**.

✦ FROM EXPERIENCE TO MYCORA

These observations first developed into what I called the Triple A Model before evolving into The 4A Method. Later, I realised something important: appreciation is not where transformation begins. It is where it becomes integrated, the golden ribbon that ties growth together.

MYCORA is built on the understanding that human beings are deeply interconnected, with themselves, with other people, with nature, and with their own neurological systems.

The branching networks of tree roots remind me of the neural pathways of the human brain. Both are living systems that adapt, connect, and continually change. Modern neuroscience describes this as neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to create new neural pathways through learning, repetition, emotional experience, reflection, and behaviour. This reminds us that growth is possible throughout life.

For me, however, the most important lesson is not simply that people can change. It is how change begins.

Not through pressure. But through awareness.

That understanding became the foundation of the four interconnected stages of MYCORA:

- Awareness
- Alignment
- Action
- Appreciation

★ THE 4A METHOD

Although MYCORA grew from my own experiences, I never intended it to remain a personal story. Over the years, I came to see the same patterns in children, young people, and adults from many different backgrounds. This is why MYCORA is not simply a framework for personal growth. It is also a way of thinking about student-centered education, one that begins with understanding the learner before trying to improve learning.

1 AWARENESS SEEING WHAT IS HAPPENING INSIDE US

Awareness is the first step, not because it solves everything immediately, but because transformation cannot begin until we become conscious of what is happening within us. Many students move through learning without fully understanding how stress, fear, pressure, or emotional overwhelm influence the way they think, feel, and respond.

Awareness invites learners to pause and notice their thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, patterns, and needs. In the classroom, this might begin with simple practices such as emotional check-ins, reflective writing, breathing pauses, body awareness, or open conversations about well-being.

A student who appears distracted, resistant, angry, or unmotivated may not simply be "difficult." The student may be overwhelmed internally. Awareness changes the question from "What is wrong with this student?" to "What is happening inside this human being?" That shift changes everything.

2 ALIGNMENT RETURNING TO YOURSELF

Once awareness is created, the next step is alignment.

Alignment is not about perfection. It is about connection, the ability to remain connected to yourself while moving through life. Many young people learn how to perform before they learn how to listen to themselves. Alignment helps learners reconnect with their values, needs, identity, emotional truth, boundaries, and inner direction.

Like trees adapting to changing seasons, human beings also need flexibility, rest, grounding, and emotional safety. In the classroom, alignment can be nurtured by encouraging students to pause and reflect on questions such as: What feels true to me? What do I need right now? What helps me feel safe enough to learn and grow?

When learners feel connected to themselves, learning often becomes deeper, more sustainable, and more meaningful.

3 ACTION TAKING THE NEXT HONEST STEP

Awareness without movement can easily become overthinking. That is why action is the third stage.

In MYCORA, action is not about pressure or perfection. It is about taking the next honest step. Sometimes that means asking for help, participating in a discussion, trying again, setting boundaries, speaking honestly, or simply showing up.

In the classroom, this means helping students see progress as a series of small, achievable steps rather than expecting immediate success. Just as neural pathways strengthen through repetition, confidence and resilience grow through consistent action over time.

MYCORA reminds us that growth rarely happens through giant leaps. Like nature itself, it develops gradually, one honest step at a time.

4 APPRECIATION INTEGRATING GROWTH AND MEANING

Appreciation is the final stage, and that distinction matters deeply.

MYCORA does not begin with forced positivity or telling people to "just be grateful." Genuine appreciation grows only after learners have become aware of themselves, reconnected with what they need, and taken meaningful action.

In the classroom, appreciation means creating opportunities for students to recognise their progress, acknowledge their effort, reflect on what they have learned, and find meaning in their experiences. Rather than focusing only on what is still missing, students are encouraged to notice how far they have come.

Human beings are naturally drawn to notice problems and potential threats. While this instinct once helped us survive, it can also make us overlook growth and possibility. Appreciation gently rebalances our attention, not by denying difficulties, but by helping us recognise progress alongside them.

BRINGING MYCORA INTO THE CLASSROOM

MYCORA is not designed to be another programme that teachers need to "fit in." It is a simple way of bringing greater awareness of the whole learner into everyday teaching. Even five to ten minutes can help students pause, reconnect, take a small step, and recognise their own progress.

A simple classroom routine might follow this sequence:

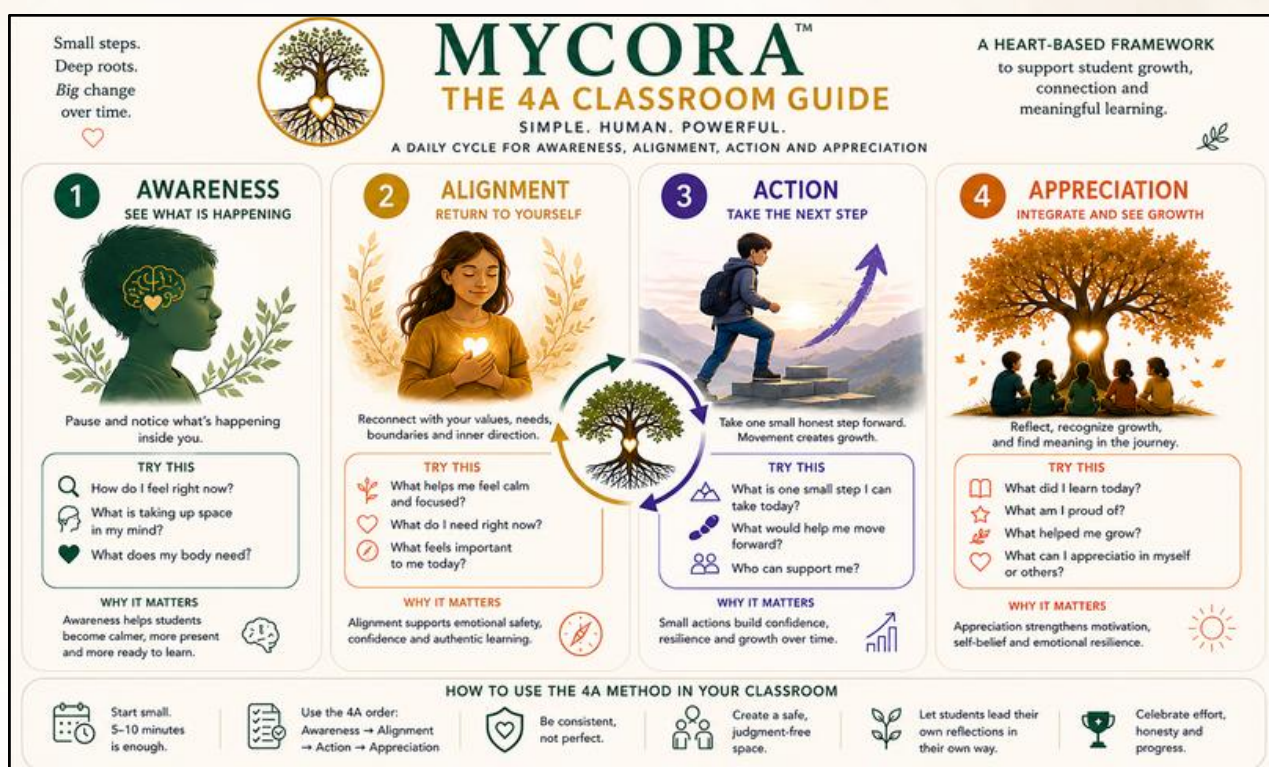
Awareness (Pause and notice) → Alignment (Reconnect and reflect) → Action (Take one small step) → Appreciation (Reflect and recognise growth)



Stage	Purpose	Invite students to...	Example questions
Awareness	Helps students become calmer, more present, and more ready to learn.	Notice what is happening inside themselves, including thoughts, emotions, stress, body signals, and needs.	How do I feel right now? What is taking up space in my mind? What does my body need today?
Alignment	Supports emotional safety, confidence, and more authentic learning.	Reconnect with their values, needs, boundaries, emotional safety, and inner direction.	What helps me feel calm and focused? What do I need right now? What feels important to me today?
Action	Builds confidence, resilience, and progress through small, realistic steps.	Identify one honest action they can take through participation, courage, consistency, or asking for support.	What is one small step I can take today? What would help me move forward? Who can support me?
Appreciation	Strengthens motivation, self-belief, and emotional resilience.	Notice effort, progress, learning, connection, and meaning.	What did I learn today? What am I proud of? What helped me grow? What can I appreciate in myself or others?

There is no perfect way to use MYCORA. Some teachers may incorporate the four stages into daily classroom routines, while others may use them during reflection activities, pastoral care, mentoring conversations, or after challenging learning experiences. What matters most is consistency rather than perfection, and creating a classroom where students feel safe to reflect in their own way.

As a teacher, you do not need to have all the answers. Sometimes the most powerful gift you can offer a learner is the feeling of being seen, heard, safe, and understood. That is often where meaningful learning begins.



Student-centered learning is about far more than academic achievement. It is also about emotional safety, self-understanding, reflection, connection, and creating the conditions in which learners feel able to grow.

Children do not leave their stress, fears, life experiences, or emotional burdens outside the classroom door. They bring themselves with them. Before they can fully engage with learning, many first need to feel seen, safe, and understood.

That is why MYCORA is not simply a framework. It is an invitation to look beneath behaviour, beyond performance, and toward the whole person. It reminds us that meaningful learning begins not only with what students know, but with how they experience themselves as learners.

Perhaps one of the most important questions education can ask is not, "How do we help students achieve more?" but "How do we help students learn without losing connection with themselves?"

I often think back to the child I once was, a child who believed she was not intelligent simply because no one could see what was happening beneath the surface. Looking back, I realise I did not need someone to push me harder. I needed someone to understand me first.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest responsibilities we have as educators.

Not simply to teach students how to succeed in the world.
But to help them stay connected to themselves while moving through it.



Michelle H S Quick is the CEO of HBBA Denmark – Heart-Based Business Alliance – and a speaker, coach, and social professional working at the intersection of mental health, leadership, and global collaboration. She is passionate about building bridges across borders, cultures, and people, with a strong focus on supporting young individuals in developing skills within business, networking, and investment. Michelle creates inclusive spaces where everyone—regardless of background or learning differences such as dyslexia—can grow, connect, and thrive. Her work brings together human connection and business to foster meaningful, sustainable impact across Europe and beyond.

AI & VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

**REDEFINING STUDENT VOICE, IDENTITY,
AND AGENCY IN GLOBAL CLASSROOMS**

Prof. Marina Falasca 



In a recent virtual exchange project connecting university students in Argentina and the United States, something unexpected happened. At the beginning of the collaboration, many of the Argentine students remained quiet during the first discussions. Although they were eager to participate, several later admitted that they assumed their international peers would naturally lead the conversation. They felt their English was not strong enough and believed the students from the Global North would have greater expertise.

However, the dynamic changed dramatically when the task shifted. Instead of discussing global environmental issues in abstract terms, students were asked to investigate environmental challenges in their own communities. Suddenly, the Argentine students became the experts. They described flooding in their neighborhoods, shared images of polluted rivers, and explained how climate change was affecting local livelihoods.

In that moment, the classroom dynamic transformed. Students were no longer simply practicing English or completing an assignment. They were contributing knowledge rooted in lived experience.

This shift illustrates an important lesson about contemporary education: student-centeredness is not a fixed instructional method but a dynamic process in motion. As classrooms become increasingly global and technology reshapes how knowledge is produced and shared, educators need to move beyond simply engaging students. They also need to cultivate learner agency, identity, and authentic voice. This vision aligns with recent calls to rethink education as a collaborative and human-centered process that prepares learners for an interconnected world (UNESCO, 2021).

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS IN MOTION

For decades, student-centered learning has been promoted as a cornerstone of effective teaching. Traditional lecture-based instruction has gradually given way to collaborative projects, problem-based learning, and participatory classroom practices.

Yet the educational landscape is evolving rapidly. Digital technologies, global communication platforms, and AI tools are transforming how students access information and interact with one another. In this context, student-centeredness must be understood not as a static pedagogical model but as an evolving practice shaped by new technological and social realities.

Virtual Exchange (VE) offers a clear example of how student-centered learning is evolving in a digitally connected world. By connecting students from different countries through structured online collaboration, VE creates opportunities for intercultural dialogue, shared problem-solving, and meaningful engagement with global issues (O'Dowd, 2023). In these environments, students are not simply learning about other cultures from textbooks; they are interacting directly with peers whose experiences and perspectives may differ from their own.

At the same time, participation in digital learning environments introduces new complexities. The presence of online platforms does not automatically guarantee meaningful interaction. Students may log into virtual meetings, contribute brief comments in discussion forums, or submit written responses without fully engaging with the ideas being exchanged. In other words, being present online does not necessarily mean being meaningfully engaged.



THE PARTICIPATION PARADOX IN DIGITAL LEARNING

This tension points to what many educators are beginning to recognize as a participation paradox in digital learning – a growing gap between visible online activity and authentic intellectual engagement. In many online courses, participation is often measured through observable actions such as posting messages, responding to prompts, or submitting assignments. While these indicators suggest involvement, they do not necessarily reflect genuine reflection, critical thinking, or personal investment in the learning process.

A student may contribute several forum posts yet remain emotionally distant from the discussion. At the same time, the growing availability of generative AI tools introduces a new dimension to this paradox. Students may use AI to produce sophisticated responses that appear polished but do not fully represent their own thinking.

As scholars have noted, AI technologies are increasingly capable of generating convincing educational content, raising important questions about the role of teachers and learners in knowledge production (Selwyn, 2019). In such situations, participation risks becoming performative rather than authentic. The student is present, but their voice may be partially replaced by algorithmic output.

This challenge raises an important question for educators: how can student-centered learning be preserved in an era where technology increasingly mediates communication and knowledge production?

IDENTITY, VOICE, AND AI IN THE STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM

The relationship between student voice and technology has become one of the defining questions of contemporary education. With the rapid expansion of generative AI tools, the ways students express their ideas, construct arguments, and participate in academic conversations are being fundamentally reshaped. As a result, educators are increasingly examining how these technologies influence not only the quality of student writing but also the extent to which learners feel confident expressing their own perspectives.

This question becomes particularly significant for students learning English as a foreign language. Many of these learners experience what researchers describe as rhetorical anxiety – the fear that their language may not sound sufficiently academic or fluent. As generative AI tools become more accessible, students often turn to them to produce more sophisticated written responses, hoping to overcome linguistic limitations and participate more confidently in academic discussions.

AI can certainly support language development. However, it also raises an important pedagogical dilemma: does AI amplify student voice, or does it replace it?

In some cases, AI becomes a *megaphone* that produces polished language but distances learners from their own ideas. When students rely entirely on AI-generated text, their contributions may appear fluent yet lack the authenticity of personal perspective.

If student-centered education seeks to nurture agency and identity, then allowing AI to fully substitute student voice risks undermining this goal. For this reason, educators increasingly need frameworks that help learners engage critically and reflectively with AI tools rather than using them passively.

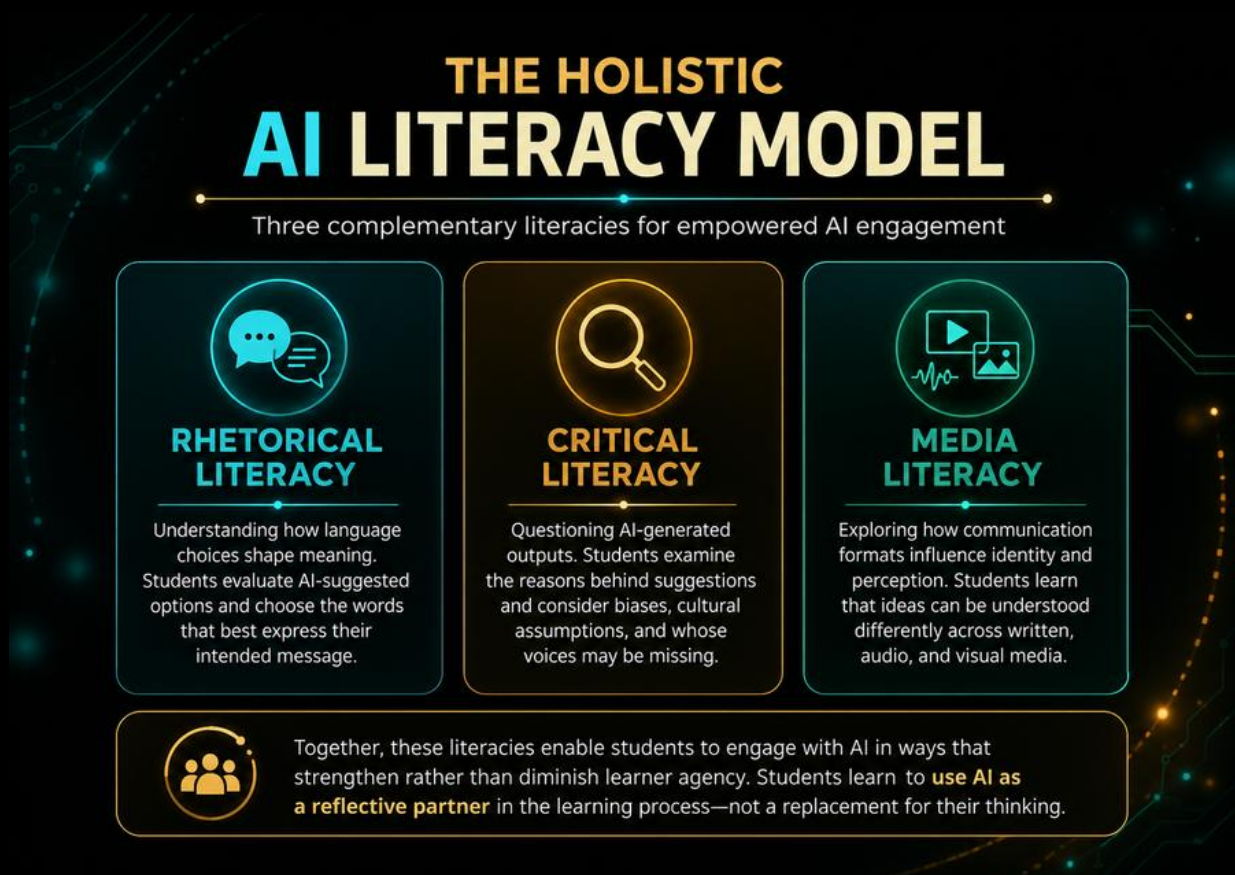
One such framework is the Holistic AI Literacy Model, which reframes AI not as a shortcut for producing answers but as a tool that supports the development of learner agency (Falasca, 2025).

THE HOLISTIC AI LITERACY MODEL: USING AI AS A MIRROR RATHER THAN A MEGAPHONE

The **Holistic AI Literacy Model** proposes that students should learn to interact with AI through three complementary forms of literacy: rhetorical literacy, critical literacy, and media literacy (Falasca, 2025).

- **Rhetorical literacy** focuses on understanding how language choices shape meaning. When AI suggests alternative ways of expressing an idea, students evaluate these options and select the formulation that best represents their intended message. In this way, AI becomes a mirror that helps learners refine their expression rather than a tool that substitutes their thinking.
- **Critical literacy** encourages students to question AI-generated outputs. Learners examine why certain phrases or perspectives are suggested and consider whether these reflect cultural assumptions, linguistic biases, or standardized forms of English that may marginalize diverse voices.
- **Media literacy** expands the framework by exploring how communication formats influence identity and perception. Students learn that an idea expressed through a written message may be interpreted differently than when shared through audio or video communication.

Together, these literacies enable students to engage with AI in ways that strengthen rather than diminish learner agency. Instead of relying on technology to produce answers, students learn to use AI as a reflective partner in the learning process.



A CLASSROOM TRANSFORMATION

The impact of this approach became visible during the later stages of the Argentina–United States virtual exchange project described earlier. As students began to apply the principles of the Holistic AI Literacy Model in their collaborative work, they were encouraged to reflect more intentionally on how digital tools shaped the way they communicated, constructed knowledge, and interacted with their international peers.

To translate these ideas into practice, students were asked to design short presentations proposing solutions to environmental challenges in their own communities. Although the use of AI tools was permitted, learners were also required to document and reflect on how they used them – examining whether the technology helped clarify their ideas, refine their language, or unintentionally overshadow their own voices. This reflective process encouraged students to move beyond simply using AI for convenience and instead engage with it as a tool for learning, critical thinking, and self-expression.

Some learners used AI to explore different ways of explaining environmental concepts in English. They compared their original writing with AI-generated suggestions and discussed which version best represented their intended meaning. This activity fostered rhetorical literacy, encouraging students to reflect on language choices.

Students were also asked to verify environmental information suggested by AI tools before including it in their presentations. This step promoted critical literacy, reminding learners that AI outputs must be examined rather than accepted automatically.

Finally, groups experimented with different communication formats – including written reports, short videos, and voice recordings – to present their findings. This process developed media literacy, helping students understand how communication formats shape how ideas and identities are perceived.

Through this process, AI did not replace student voices. Instead, it functioned as a support tool that helped learners clarify their ideas and express perspectives rooted in their own experiences. As students became more confident in sharing their local realities, their contributions to the international dialogue grew more authentic and meaningful.

One Argentine student later reflected on this shift:

“At first, I felt my English wasn’t good enough to lead the discussion. But when we talked about flooding in my neighborhood, I realized I had something important to contribute.”

Moments like this illustrate the potential of virtual exchange to transform how students perceive their role in global learning. When learners recognize that their lived experiences matter, they move from passive participants to active contributors. Research on virtual exchange has similarly shown that these collaborative international projects can strengthen students’ ability to connect local knowledge with global issues – an essential dimension of global citizenship education (Falasca et al., 2026).



PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT AGENCY

1 ASSESS THE PROCESS, NOT ONLY THE PRODUCT

Traditional assessment often emphasizes final outputs such as essays or presentations. In collaborative international projects, however, the learning process itself is equally important. Teachers can ask students to maintain short reflection logs describing moments of negotiation, misunderstanding, or cultural learning during collaboration.

2 ENCOURAGE REFLECTIVE AI USE

Rather than banning AI tools, educators can integrate them into reflective activities. For example, students can compare their original writing with AI-generated alternatives and analyze which version better represents their voice.

3 CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL EXPERTISE

Tasks that require students to draw on local knowledge can significantly enhance participation. When learners contribute insights from their own communities, they become knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of information.

4 PRIORITIZE CONTRIBUTION AND INQUIRY

Student-centered classrooms should recognize learners who ask thoughtful questions, offer support to peers, or introduce new perspectives. These behaviors are essential to collaborative learning yet often overlooked in traditional assessment systems.

RETHINKING THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE

As digital platforms provide access to vast amounts of information and AI systems generate increasingly sophisticated responses, the role of educators must also evolve. In classrooms where knowledge can be instantly retrieved or algorithmically generated, teaching can no longer be defined primarily as the transmission of information. Instead, educators are increasingly called to act as facilitators of presence – professionals who design learning environments where authentic interaction, reflection, and dialogue can take place. Their role shifts toward guiding students in making sense of information, engaging with diverse perspectives, and developing their own voices within complex digital environments.

In an era of automated responses and algorithmic content, one of the most valuable contributions educators can make is fostering spaces where students feel safe expressing imperfect ideas, experimenting with language, and engaging in genuine dialogue. Within these environments, technology becomes a resource that supports learning rather than a substitute for thinking. Frameworks such as the Holistic AI Literacy Model illustrate how emerging technologies can be integrated into student-centered education in ways that strengthen learner voice, identity, and agency rather than diminish them (Falasca, 2025).

THE FUTURE-READY LEARNER

Education today faces unprecedented challenges as well as new possibilities. Artificial intelligence is transforming how knowledge is produced, accessed, and shared, while global collaboration is becoming an increasingly important component of academic and professional life. In this evolving landscape, traditional models of teaching that emphasize the transmission of information are no longer sufficient. Instead, educators must design learning environments that help students navigate complex digital ecosystems while developing the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and engage constructively with diverse perspectives.

Within this context, student-centeredness in motion highlights the importance of viewing learners as active participants in shaping their educational experiences rather than passive recipients of information. Initiatives such as virtual exchange, combined with reflective and responsible uses of AI, illustrate how technology can support learning environments grounded in dialogue, collaboration, and shared knowledge construction. By integrating these approaches, educators can help students develop not only disciplinary knowledge but also the agency, empathy, and intercultural awareness required to participate meaningfully in an interconnected world (O'Dowd, 2023; UNESCO, 2021).



Ultimately, the goal of student-centered education extends beyond producing competent learners. It seeks to empower individuals who are able to express their voices, engage thoughtfully with different perspectives, and contribute to addressing the complex challenges facing their communities and the wider world. When students learn to connect their local experiences with global conversations, education becomes not only a pathway to knowledge but also a foundation for responsible global citizenship.

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SUPPORTING STUDENT IDENTITY IN A COMPLEX CLASSROOM

Lic. Liliana Paucara Flores 

Every classroom reflects the society beyond its walls. Students bring not only their knowledge and abilities, but also their identities, beliefs, experiences, and relationships. While student-centred learning encourages us to recognise every learner as an individual, supporting one student's identity can sometimes create unexpected challenges within the wider classroom community. This experience from an English language classroom in Bolivia illustrates how issues of identity, peer acceptance, and cultural context can shape teaching in ways that extend far beyond lesson planning. More importantly, it highlights how small, thoughtful decisions can help maintain both respect for individuals and a productive learning environment.

As a teacher, I have always believed that creating a respectful and inclusive classroom is essential for effective learning. However, one particular experience challenged my understanding of what it truly means to be student-centered. It made me reflect deeply on my role, not only as an instructor, but as someone responsible for managing complex human interactions in a learning environment.

Respect.
Listen.
Learn.
Together.

Every
voice
matters

Diversity
Strengthens
Us

Different
stories
One
classroom

In today's educational discourse, student-centeredness goes beyond engagement. It includes recognizing students as individuals with identities, emotions, and personal realities that influence how they learn and interact. While this idea is widely accepted in theory, applying it in real classrooms – especially in specific cultural contexts – can be challenging.

The experience described in this article took place in my classroom in Bolivia. It prompted difficult questions about identity, inclusion, respect, and classroom management, while reminding me that student-centred teaching is rarely about finding perfect answers. More often, it is about making thoughtful decisions that support both individual learners and the classroom community as a whole.

A SITUATION THAT CHANGED MY PERSPECTIVE

In one of my classes, one student began expressing their gender identity in ways that differed from the expectations of many classmates, including wearing make-up and presenting themselves in a more feminine way.

At first, this did not seem to affect classroom learning. The focus remained on teaching, and as long as everyone participated, the class appeared to function normally. Over time, however, changes in the group dynamics became increasingly noticeable.

Some female students accepted the situation without difficulty and worked with the student respectfully. Several male students, however, became visibly uncomfortable. They avoided interaction and, on some occasions, openly refused to work in the same group.

What initially appeared to be a personal matter gradually became a classroom challenge. Collaborative activities became more difficult to manage, and it became clear that the issue was not the student's identity itself, but how differing attitudes within the class were beginning to affect participation and learning.

“What initially appeared to be a personal matter gradually became a classroom challenge.”

THE REALITY OF THE CLASSROOM

Teaching in Bolivia means working within a cultural context where topics related to gender identity are not always openly discussed or widely accepted. Students bring their beliefs, values, family influences, and social experiences into the classroom, and these shape how they respond to one another.

In this situation, different realities coexisted. One student was expressing their identity in a personal way. Some classmates responded with acceptance, while others showed discomfort or resistance. As a result, the challenge extended beyond one individual. It became a question of how to maintain a respectful learning environment where every student could participate.

This experience changed my understanding of student-centred teaching. It reminded me that being student-centred is not simply about supporting one learner or adapting instruction to individual needs. It also involves caring for the classroom as a learning community, where different identities, perspectives, and emotions must coexist respectfully.

The dilemma was not whose perspective was right or wrong. It was how to support one student's identity without allowing the classroom to become divided, while also helping every student remain engaged in learning. That required careful judgement rather than simple answers.

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING STUDENT-CENTERED

At that moment, I started asking myself important questions:

- How can I support one student without creating more resistance among others?
- Should I force students to work together, or respect their preferences?
- What does inclusion really look like in practice?

These questions did not have simple answers. Student-centred teaching is not about making everyone comfortable all the time. It is about creating conditions where every learner is treated with dignity, differences are managed respectfully, and learning can continue.

Rather than judging or persuading students to adopt particular views, my responsibility was to create a classroom where respect, participation, and learning remained central. Finding that balance became one of the most important lessons from this experience.

This experience also clarified that the teacher's role extends beyond delivering content. It also involves managing group dynamics, promoting respect, preventing exclusion, and maintaining a structure in which every student can participate. I recognized that my personal feelings – such as discomfort or uncertainty – should not interfere with my professional responsibilities. Instead, I needed to focus on solutions that supported learning for everyone.

Being a teacher in this context means acting as a mediator. It involves guiding students, setting boundaries, and ensuring that differences do not become barriers to education.

“How can I support one student without creating more resistance among others?”

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES THAT I APPLIED

ASSIGNING GROUPS INSTEAD OF LETTING STUDENTS CHOOSE

One of the first adjustments I made was to assign groups myself. When students choose their own groups, exclusion can occur naturally. By organizing groups strategically, I ensured that every student remained included in classroom activities.

The purpose was not to force friendship or personal agreement. It was to make participation in learning a shared responsibility. Although some resistance remained at first, visible exclusion gradually decreased.

ESTABLISHING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS OF RESPECT

Classroom expectations were reinforced around three principles: everyone deserves respectful treatment, discrimination is not acceptable, and the classroom must remain a space for learning.

These expectations were presented not as punishments or personal beliefs, but as the conditions needed for a safe and productive class. Clear boundaries helped shift attention away from individual differences and back towards how students were expected to treat one another.



OBSERVING WITHOUT OVERREACTING

Instead of reacting immediately to every situation, I started observing more carefully. Not every moment of discomfort requires intervention. In some cases, students gradually adapt on their own.

This approach reduced the risk of overreacting, helping me respond more effectively when action was truly necessary.

SUPPORTING THE STUDENT INDIVIDUALLY

The student at the centre of the situation also needed quiet, consistent support. Without making their identity a public topic, I ensured that they had opportunities to participate, were not isolated, and knew that the classroom expectations applied to everyone.

This support was subtle, but important. Inclusion does not always require a visible intervention. Sometimes it begins with making sure a learner is not left alone within the group.

KEEPING ACADEMIC TASKS CLEAR AND PURPOSEFUL

Clear, structured, and engaging activities helped reduce opportunities for tension to dominate the lesson. When students understood the task, their roles, and the expected outcome, they were more likely to focus on the learning rather than on personal differences.

This did not remove the underlying discomfort, but it prevented that discomfort from controlling every interaction.

What I learned is that small changes can make a meaningful difference. The classroom did not change overnight, but the conditions for improvement gradually became stronger. Group work became more structured, open rejection decreased, and students began adapting to the new dynamics.

These changes reminded me that student-centredness is not about finding perfect solutions. It is about observing carefully, responding thoughtfully, and making continuous adjustments that help every learner participate with greater dignity and respect.

REFLECTING ON A CHANGING EDUCATIONAL WORLD

Today's classrooms are more complex than ever. Students come with diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives. As teachers, we must be prepared to face situations that may not have clear guidelines.

This experience helped me understand that student-centred teaching now includes recognising diversity, managing social dynamics, and creating inclusive learning environments. At the same time, it is important to respect the cultural context in which we teach. What works in one country may not work in another. Therefore, strategies must be adapted carefully.

This experience was not easy, but it was meaningful. It challenged my beliefs, tested my skills, and helped me grow as a teacher. Supporting student identity in a complex context requires patience, reflection, and practical action. It is not about choosing sides, but about creating balance.

In the end, I understood that being student-centred means working with classroom realities rather than ignoring them. It means guiding students through differences, maintaining clear expectations, and continuing to adjust when there is no perfect solution.

My classroom became a space of challenge, but also of learning, not only for my students, but for me as well.

"My classroom became a space of challenge, but also of learning, not only for my students, but for me as well."

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RAISING THE **BAR**

REFRAMING NOTIONS OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Dr. Liza Trejo 

Dr. Brandee Mau 



We want students continually moving forward in their ability to think, communicate, interpret, create, and participate meaningfully in the world around them. Today, that means making meaning across multiple modes, media, languages, and texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015).

Imagine if classrooms functioned more like athletic training environments than assembly lines.

Think about a hurdler on a track team. A great coach does not set the same hurdle height for every athlete and hope for the best. Instead, the bar is set at just the right level – challenging enough to promote growth, but achievable enough to build confidence and momentum. As athletes grow stronger and more skilled, the bar rises with them.

Success is not measured only by winning the race. Athletes celebrate personal records – the moments when they surpass where they were before. Growth matters.

Isn't that what we want our students to do in multiple languages?

We want students continually moving forward in their ability to think, communicate, interpret, create, and participate meaningfully in the world around them. Today, that means making meaning across multiple modes, media, languages, and texts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). But that kind of growth does not happen by accident.

Strong coaches carefully design the conditions for success. They know when to model, when to guide, when to intervene, when to step back, and when to release responsibility. They understand that every athlete brings different experiences, strengths, training backgrounds, languages, cultures, and opportunities. Great educators do the same (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012). They recognize that every learner grows at a different pace and needs different kinds of support and challenge along the way.

That belief has guided much of our own work as language educators and led us to ask a simple but important question: *How do we design language and literacy learning so every learner can grow toward their next level of proficiency – not just a standardized finish line?*

The reflections in this article are informed by our work with the **Proficiency First Multiliteracy Framework**, but they are intended as practical ideas that any language teacher can adapt to create more student-centered learning experiences.

Too often, schools still operate as though students were products moving along an assembly line rather than members of a team, each developing at their own pace. It is not because educators do not care. Many of the most dedicated teachers and school leaders are working within systems shaped by large class sizes, packed curricula, and competing demands. Under those conditions, it is easy to focus on covering content rather than cultivating curious, confident learners who use language authentically to communicate, think, and create.



REFRAMING STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS

So how do we move away from the assembly line and create classrooms that look more like an athletic training facility – or even a scientific laboratory – where curiosity, experimentation, and growth are expected?

It begins with the way we design learning. If we want students to be more curious, we need to let them ask good questions. If we want them to get stronger, we let them lift the weights. So when you look around your school or your classroom, think about who is doing the work?

Another term for this is **agency**.

Agency develops when learners take responsibility for their own process. Think again about the weight room. Athletes do not become stronger because someone else lifts the weights for them. They learn to adjust their training, understand what their bodies need, and take increasing ownership of their own development.

I once had a student who scored almost perfect grades on every exam. Assuming she loved Spanish, I commented on how much she seemed to enjoy the class. She said, “No, I just study all the time.” I was surprised and impressed. She had taken ownership of her own learning by identifying where she needed to improve and putting in the effort outside the classroom.

In today’s schools, it’s more important than ever that teachers show students how to do this, whether it’s through AI tools, study groups, personalized practice routines, or carefully curated text sets that allow an entry point for all proficiency levels of readers. We must give students agency to own their own language learning experience.



WHAT GREAT “COACHES” DO PRACTICAL SHIFTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Great coaches do not simply shout instructions from the sidelines. They model for their athletes, they show them videos of professional athletes, they have them analyze tapes of their own athletic performance in order to see what they are doing well and what could be improved.

Similarly, great language teachers follow backwards design by thinking about the end performance (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012). If we want students to be able to read, write, think and speak in another language and culture, we must present them with conditions in the classroom that will prepare them for those challenges, and then let them stumble, stutter, mess up, try again, and eventually succeed. All in a safe environment where they are willing to take the necessary risks involved in order to achieve their personal record.

One way we think about designing these conditions is through three simple questions that help us *raise the BAR for every learner*.

- » The **B** in **BAR** stands for Be explicit with language goals. Teachers need to know students' current level of proficiency, as well as the intended level of proficiency. When the goals are clear, students can better understand what they are working toward. Then you can provide the necessary hurdles and training that will challenge them enough but not too much.
- » The **A** in **BAR** stands for Add appropriate linguistic support. Do your students need word walls or sentence frames? If they've passed that level, maybe they need conversational practice with an AI tutor, or some individualized syntactical feedback through ChatGPT. Support can also come from how students are partnered or grouped during classroom activities. Linguistic support is a broad area, but if you know your students, you will be able to create the perfect training routine for each one.
- » The **R** in **BAR** stands for Reduce linguistic and cognitive barriers. Language learners bring many strengths, but they also face challenges. Some may struggle with vocabulary or syntax. Others may decode words accurately but find comprehension difficult. Some students may not yet have found a meaningful reason to engage with the language. Like a good coach, the teacher needs to notice what may be holding each learner back and adjust the learning conditions so students can show what they know and continue growing.

BUILDING TEACHERS' CAPACITY TO RAISE THE BAR

Applying BAR effectively requires more than knowing the three principles. Teachers also need a strong understanding of language proficiency, a growing repertoire of scaffolding strategies, and the professional judgment to reduce barriers without lowering expectations.

1 Be explicit with language goals. Teachers need a solid foundation in language proficiency. If we cannot clearly explain the difference between a novice, intermediate, and advanced language user, it becomes difficult to guide students toward stronger speaking, reading, writing, listening, and thinking.

2 Add the necessary linguistic support. This means continually expanding our repertoire of scaffolding tools. Professional development, online communities, podcasts, blogs, and conversations with other language educators can all help us discover and share what works for our students.

3 Reduce unnecessary linguistic or cognitive load. If students are expected to read an entire book or article, we can provide pre-, during-, and post-reading activities to build background knowledge, guide learning, and support comprehension. We can also present ideas through multiple modes and media (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). The definition of "text" today is much broader than it was 25 years ago. Students can learn from maps, infographics, TikTok videos, memes, artwork, and many other authentic resources for communication and meaning-making.



Not every student is going to become a diplomat or a teacher, but every student can achieve their own personal record. That is why it is important to raise the bar for all learners.



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CLOSING REFLECTION

The impact of student-centered learning is not always visible in the moment. When we raise the BAR, we are not simply helping students complete today's lesson – we are helping them develop the knowledge, confidence, and skills they will carry with them long after they leave our classrooms.

I'll leave you with two stories that have stayed with me throughout my teaching career.

When I was a graduate student teaching introductory Spanish, I introduced the music of Maná, a prolific Mexican rock band known for blending rock, pop, and socially conscious themes. One of my students, a college freshman at the time, fell in love with their music. I remember him telling me he had downloaded the rest of their songs and was listening to them outside of class. Many years later he found me on social media. He had become a diplomat and was using his Spanish professionally.

At the time, I could never have predicted where his learning journey would lead. What began as a classroom activity connected with something personally meaningful, and he chose to continue learning long after the course had ended.

Later in my career when I was teaching Spanish at a small, private women's college, I had a student who wanted to teach Spanish. I took a special interest in mentoring her. She did a teaching internship alongside me. Many years later, when I was teaching in a Dual Language Immersion program, she was hired and we became colleagues. It was a full-circle moment in my life as a language teacher.

These two students followed different paths, but they shared something important. They were given opportunities to grow from where they were, pursue language in ways that were meaningful to them, and build confidence in their own abilities.

Not every student is going to become a diplomat or a teacher, but every student can achieve their own personal record. That is why it is important to raise the bar for all learners. By centering learners, giving them agency, and viewing language education through a proficiency-first lens, all students can become stronger speakers, readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators – in many languages.

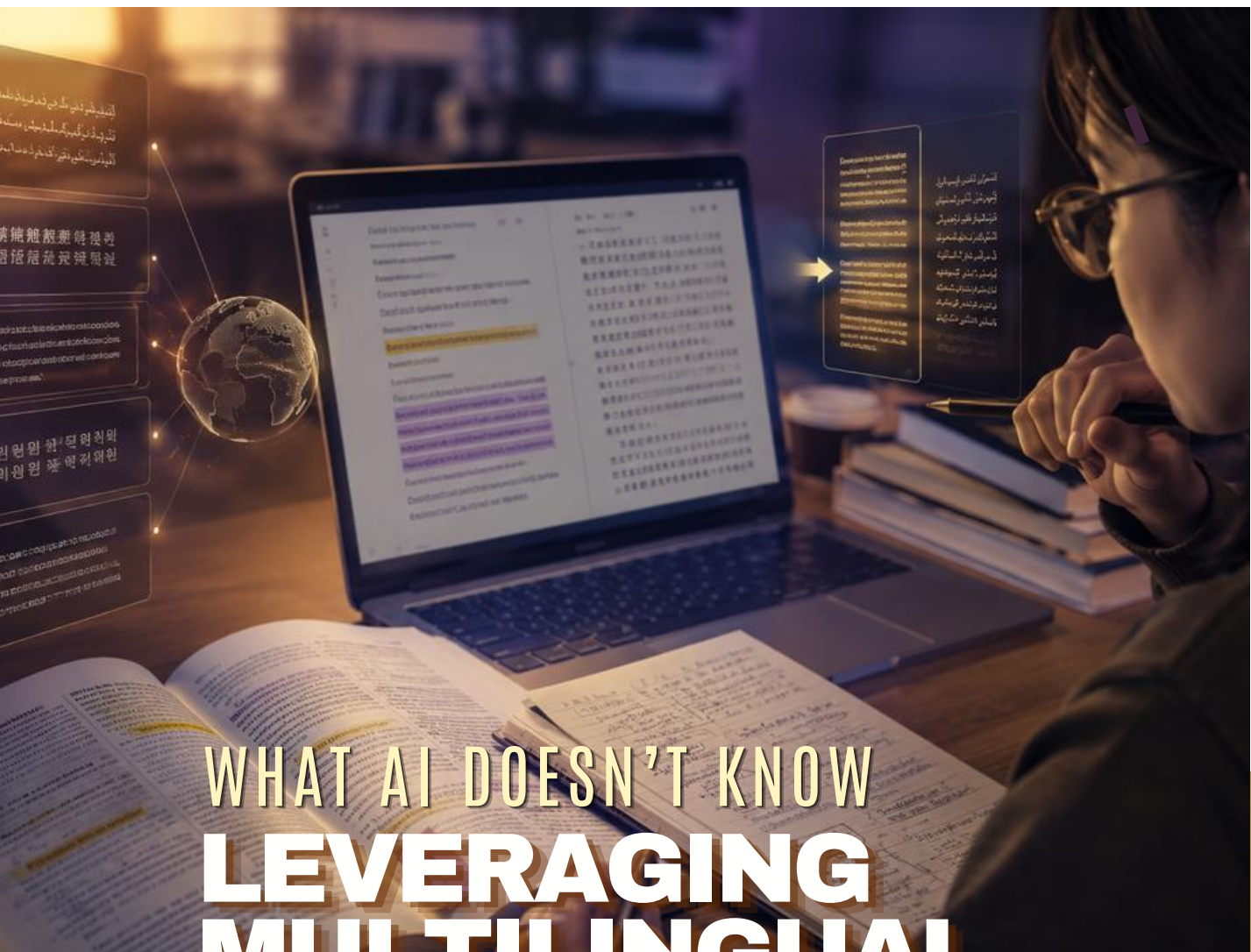
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WHAT AI DOESN'T KNOW LEVERAGING MULTILINGUAL KNOWLEDGE WITH MACHINE LEARNING

Dr. Rachel Toncelli 
Dr. Natalya Watson 

When we first noticed that our international graduate students were consistently reading AI-translated versions of assigned English-language articles rather than engaging with the original texts, our first instinct could have been to ban the practice. Instead, we asked a different question: What if the very tool students were using to bypass critical reading could become the instrument through which they developed it?



What if the very tool students were using to bypass critical reading could become the instrument through which they developed it?

Our students are multilingual international students enrolled in a university pathway program preparing them for graduate programs in business, analytics, digital media, and engineering. They arrive with strong disciplinary knowledge, but when faced with complex readings in English, many default to AI translation tools as their first and only strategy. The result is comprehension without interpretation: students grasp the general content of a text but do not draw on its linguistic and cultural richness to construct meaning at a deeper level.

This limitation is particularly important when students read media texts, which faculty in our graduate programs identify as a valuable, but underused, resource for connecting disciplinary knowledge with current events and public discourse. Media articles present a unique challenge for English language learners because they often combine historical references, popular culture, political allusions, and social norms that require shared cultural knowledge to interpret (Bhatia, 2017). Figurative language and cultural references rarely transfer neatly across languages. Tone adds another layer of complexity. For example, the wide range of styles found in American journalism may contrast with the more institutional style often associated with the Chinese press (Cai & Deignan, 2019). Understanding these differences requires not only linguistic proficiency but also familiarity with the media traditions and communicative norms of each culture, something current AI systems still struggle to capture.

To help students develop critical reading skills, we designed the International Media Comparative Reading (IMCR) activity, a structured four-stage activity that repositions AI translation not as a shortcut but as an object of critical inquiry. Evaluating AI-translated texts in their native language against English originals shifted students from passive consumers of machine output to authoritative bilingual analysts with linguistic and cultural expertise that the AI-translation technology still lacks. In other words, using AI with students bolsters their awareness of the expertise they possess that AI does not.

► LEVERAGING STUDENTS' CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

One thing that all multilingual students bring to class with them is an enormous wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge. When it comes to news and media, multilingual students know how stories are framed in their home countries, how metaphors work in their native language, and how tone shifts depending on who holds political power. They often have an intuitive sense of what may be lost as meaning moves across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Too often, however, these linguistic resources remain invisible in English-language classrooms. Even unintentionally, this can suggest to students that their languages and cultural knowledge have little place in academic learning. We know that this invisibility can affect learners' motivation, engagement, and confidence as developing scholars.

The opposite is also true. When students are invited to use their full linguistic repertoire as an analytical tool, they are positioned as experts, not just learners in the classroom. In our experience, learning that builds upon affirming the identities, skills, and resources of students supports their development as capable multilingual scholars in academic spaces.

The IMCR activity was designed around this principle. Rather than asking students to set aside their native languages, we make them an integral part of learning in English.

► THE ACTIVITY

The IMCR activity was implemented in an English for Academic Purposes reading course across two sections, involving a total of 25 students. Students were encouraged to use institutional AI tools such as Copilot and Claude, and class time was set aside during the preceding week for planning and preparation. Working in small groups, they completed a structured four-stage process.

In the first stage, students selected a current topic relevant to their graduate degree program and identified two media articles covering that topic: one from a reputable English-language news outlet and one from a credible Chinese-language source. This dual-language selection was intentional, positioning students as critical readers of two distinct media traditions.

In the second stage, students used AI to translate the English-language article into Chinese and evaluated the output using their own bilingual judgment as native speakers. They then repeated the process in the opposite direction, translating the Chinese-language article into English. Their analyses focused on four areas: the author's tone, figurative language, technical and discipline-specific vocabulary, and sociocultural references and cultural values.

For each category, students documented an example from the original text, the AI translation, their evaluation of how well the translation preserved the intended meaning, and the cultural or linguistic factors that made accurate translation difficult. Throughout the activity, they were guided by one central question:

Why do these nuances matter for interpreting a text, and what do they reveal about critical reading?

In the third stage, students worked collaboratively to compare their analyses across both translation directions. They discussed whether readers relying solely on AI translation would fully understand each article, what important meanings were lost when cultural and tonal nuances disappeared, and what these examples revealed about the challenges of cross-cultural communication in academic and professional contexts.

In the fourth and final stage, students delivered a seven-to-eight-minute group presentation synthesizing their analyses. Presentations summarized each article's rhetorical situation, highlighted key differences in the focus of argumentation and cultural framing between the two sources, evaluated the strengths and limitations of the AI translation in both directions, offered recommendations for its responsible use, and identified contexts where human judgment is needed.





► STUDENT RESPONSE

When we looked at what students took away from the activity, three things stood out.

First, their native languages were analytical tools, not obstacles. For many students, this was the first time an assignment explicitly asked them to use their bilingual and bicultural knowledge as expertise. Moving between translated texts and original texts allowed them to catch what AI missed. This is the kind of critical engagement that Wang and Wang's (2025) APSE model describes as developing awareness, positionality, strategies, and evaluation skills.

In practice, this means not just knowing that AI has limits, but being able to identify specifically where and why it falls short. For example, one group found that the English idiom "sour grapes," used to describe someone belittling another's achievements, had been translated to "bitter fruit" and completely lost its intended meaning. Another group examined a reference to the Sputnik moment, referring to the Soviet Union's 1957 satellite launch and the intense U.S.–Soviet rivalry that followed. In the Chinese translation, the term had been rendered phonetically. Readers could hear the sound of the expression, but the metaphorical meaning, the sudden realization of falling behind, had disappeared. Inviting students to leverage their expertise as they moved back and forth between texts shifted the passive reading of AI translations into an exercise in critical inquiry.

Second, students realized they should not simply defer to AI. At the outset of our courses, we noticed students treating machine translation as authoritative. In one case, students noticed that the Chinese metaphor "dragon soaring and tigers leaping" was completely flattened by the simpler AI translation into "remarkable." Having first-hand experience with the ways that AI translations fell short shifted the students' positioning. "I need to look at what AI produces more critically," one student reflected, "because sometimes it is not correct." Another described AI as "a good starting dictionary," showing a more deliberate approach in which AI supported initial comprehension, but human analysis remained necessary for accurate interpretation.

Third, when students caught errors in the AI translations, they seemed to gain confidence in their own linguistic and cultural knowledge. Some of the clearest moments came when they identified errors that required a level of nuance the AI tools did not have. One group analyzing California wildfire coverage noticed that the original English used a progressive tense ("fire hydrants were running out of water") to convey an ongoing crisis, while the AI translation into Chinese used the simple past, making a live emergency sound like a closed chapter. Another student found four different AI translations for the same politically sensitive phrase and concluded that AI could not fully handle complex political or cultural meanings. She was not only evaluating a tool. She was also recognizing knowledge and judgment that the tool did not possess. We believe this confidence grows when students are invited to bring their full linguistic and cultural identities into the learning process.

▶ THREE THINGS TEACHERS CAN TRY

AI translational tools can make it easy to bypass critical reading across languages and the curriculum, but they cannot replace the cultural and linguistic knowledge that multilingual students bring to class with them or the benefits of close analytical reading. Here are three strategies that teachers can try in their classrooms.

1 ASK STUDENTS WHERE AN AI TRANSLATION GETS IT WRONG

Pick any short media article and translate it into students' native languages. Invite students to compare it across languages. You can also let them pick short articles in their native languages and compare those to English language translations. You don't need to read the translations yourself. Letting students be the experts in the classroom is an important signal that you value their full linguistic repertoires.

2 INVITE STUDENTS TO TEACH A PHRASE THAT RESISTS TRANSLATION

Ask each student to bring in an expression from their native language that loses something when translated into English. What gets lost? Why? These simple prompts can spark rich conversation about culture, metaphor, and the limitations of AI tools.

3 DESIGN FOR COMPARISON ACROSS LANGUAGES, NOT JUST CORRECTION TOWARD ENGLISH

When students compare texts side by side across languages, they are doing sophisticated analytical work. Comparative analysis repositions English language as one perspective among many, which could help empower students.

Our multilingual students came to us already using AI translation. Rather than seeing this as a problem, we made it our starting point. The IMCR activity leveraged our students' cultural and linguistic expertise to develop their judgment and evaluation of AI translation. When students caught what AI was missing, they were not just evaluating the tool, they were recognizing the expertise they already had. This shift centers the resources that multilingual students bring to class with them.

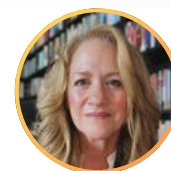
Activities like this move beyond creating rules about AI use. Instead, they help students develop the confidence and judgment to know when to trust AI, and when to trust themselves.

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Education systems across the world are undergoing profound shifts. The accelerating pace of environmental, technological, and social change compels us to reconsider not only what students learn, but how they learn, why they learn, and ultimately, who they become through learning. At the heart of this transformation lies a familiar idea that continues to evolve: student-centeredness.

For decades, student-centered learning has been associated with engagement, differentiation, and active participation. Yet today, these interpretations feel insufficient. To place learners truly at the center is not merely to design activities around them, but to recognize them as active agents in their own development, individuals whose identities, values, and aspirations shape and are shaped by the learning process. The Nordic folk high school approach offers one such perspective. Rooted in dialogue, lifelong learning, and global citizenship, these schools remind us that education is not simply about helping students succeed in school, but about preparing them to participate meaningfully in society.

Student-centeredness in motion is therefore not a static method but a dynamic, evolving practice. It connects agency, identity, and meaningful participation, while encouraging learners to become active contributors to their communities and an increasingly interconnected world.

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS IN MOTION

Lessons from Nordic Folk High Schools

Rilli Lappalainen 





FROM ENGAGEMENT TO AGENCY

A common starting point in discussions of student-centered learning is engagement: ensuring that students are interested, motivated, and involved. While engagement remains essential, it is fundamentally different from agency. Engagement often answers the question, *How can teachers make learning appealing?* Agency, in contrast, asks, *How can learners shape their own learning?*

Agency emerges when students are given genuine opportunities to make decisions, ask questions, and influence the direction of their learning. This might involve co-constructing learning goals, designing projects, choosing assessment formats, or participating in classroom decision-making. Importantly, agency is not about abandoning structure. Rather, it requires intentional design that balances guidance with autonomy.

Even small shifts can make a meaningful difference. Changing classroom questioning from teacher-directed to student-generated invites learners to take intellectual risks and explore curiosity. Similarly, offering choice in assignments allows students to connect learning with their own interests and experiences, moving from compliance toward ownership.

Nordic folk high schools provide a compelling example of agency in action. Grounded in dialogue, participation, and lived experience, they view learning not as something done to students, but as something created with them. Through collaborative inquiry and community-based learning, learners are encouraged to take initiative and engage critically with real-world issues.

IDENTITY AND THE LEARNER WITHIN

If agency addresses what learners do, identity addresses who they are becoming. Student-centered education must therefore extend beyond academic outcomes to support identity formation, self-awareness, and well-being.

Learning does not occur in isolation from identity. Students bring their backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and experiences into the classroom, shaping how they interpret knowledge and interact with others. At the same time, education plays a critical role in shaping how students see themselves – as capable, valued, and empowered individuals.

Supporting identity begins with creating spaces where students feel seen and heard. This includes recognizing diverse perspectives, encouraging personal expression, and building a culture of trust and belonging. Reflective practices such as journals, discussions, and portfolios help students connect learning with their own lives.

The Nordic folk high school approach offers valuable insights into this aspect of student-centeredness. Its holistic approach emphasizes personal development alongside civic engagement, recognizing that education is as much about forming individuals as it is about transferring knowledge. By embedding human rights, equality, and global citizenship into everyday learning, it nurtures both identity and responsibility.

Identity-building is therefore not a by-product of learning but central to it. When students see themselves as active participants in learning and as individuals capable of contributing to society, their engagement becomes more meaningful.

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS IN A CHANGING WORLD

The urgency of rethinking student-centeredness is heightened by global challenges such as climate change, technological disruption, and growing social inequalities. Preparing students for this future requires more than content knowledge. It also demands critical thinking, adaptability, and a strong sense of agency.

Education for sustainable development, as reflected in SDG 4.7, highlights the importance of equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to shape a sustainable future. Nordic folk high schools demonstrate how this can be approached holistically, with sustainability embedded in everyday learning and institutional practices rather than treated as a separate subject.



The UNESCO's 17 Sustainable Development Goals
(Image source: Internet)

In practice, this may involve experiential and nature-based learning, futures thinking, project work, and cooperation with local communities and organizations. Sustainability is also reflected in the daily life of the schools through practices such as reducing food waste, conserving energy, and involving learners in environmental and community initiatives. These approaches allow students to explore global concerns through participation, shared action, and lived experience rather than through content alone.

This approach aligns closely with student-centered principles. When students engage with real-world challenges such as environmental sustainability or social justice, learning becomes more relevant to their lives. These experiences can also strengthen their sense of responsibility and encourage them to contribute to change.

The rise of AI further reinforces the need for student-centered education. In a world where information is readily accessible, education must extend beyond knowledge transmission to meaning-making. Students need to ask questions, evaluate information, and apply knowledge in creative and ethical ways as they navigate increasingly complex environments.

Report summary: Student-centered learning in
Finnish and Norwegian folk high schools.



BRINGING STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS INTO EVERYDAY PRACTICE

While the vision of student-centered education can seem ambitious, its implementation does not always require radical transformation. Meaningful change often begins with small, intentional shifts in everyday practice, including feedback, lesson and curriculum design, assessment, and classroom routines.

One such shift is in feedback. Instead of focusing solely on correcting errors, feedback can become a dialogue that supports reflection and growth. Inviting students to assess their own work or respond to peer feedback encourages them to take greater ownership of their progress and become more aware of how they learn, developing their metacognitive skills.

Lesson and curriculum design also offer opportunities for change. Moving from rigid, teacher-led instruction towards more flexible structures, such as inquiry-based or project-based learning, allows students to explore topics in depth and connect learning with real-world contexts. Curriculum can similarly be approached not simply as a fixed set of content, but as a flexible framework that allows for adaptation, interdisciplinary themes, and space for student interests. Even brief moments of choice within a traditional lesson can strengthen engagement and agency.

Assessment is another area that deserves attention. Standardized tests and rigid grading systems can limit opportunities for agency and creativity. Portfolio assessment, project-based evaluation, and self-assessment offer alternative ways for students to demonstrate learning while participating more actively in the assessment process.

Classroom routines and management can also become more collaborative. Opening lessons with student questions, incorporating regular reflection, involving students in setting shared norms, or inviting them to contribute to classroom decisions and expectations can create a more participatory environment. These changes may appear small, but together they signal a shift in power and responsibility, placing learners more firmly at the center of the educational experience.

Such changes are not without challenges. Resources, teacher preparation, and institutional priorities can influence how readily student-centered practices can be introduced. Nordic Folk High Schools show how dialogue, participation, and shared responsibility can be embedded into everyday learning when the wider educational environment supports them. Their example highlights the value of systemic support and collaboration, while also reminding us that progress can begin through carefully chosen changes in daily teaching.



TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION

As we look toward the future of education, student-centeredness must move beyond its traditional interpretations. It must recognize learners as active participants in shaping their own lives and the world around them.

The Nordic folk high school approach reminds us that such a vision is already being practised. Their emphasis on dialogue, participation, community, and lived experience demonstrates how education can influence not only what learners know, but also how they think, act, and relate to others. They remind us that student-centeredness is not simply a set of classroom techniques, but an educational culture built through trust, shared responsibility, and meaningful participation.

Ultimately, placing learners at the center therefore means trusting their capacity to think, question, create, and contribute. It also asks educators to move beyond providing knowledge alone and to work alongside learners as guides and partners in the learning process.

Student-centeredness in motion is not a destination, but a continuing process of reflection, adaptation, and collaboration. It calls on educators and institutions to remain responsive to learners while creating the conditions in which their voices, decisions, and contributions can shape learning.

Through this approach, education can prepare learners not only for the future, but to participate in shaping it with confidence, responsibility, and purpose.



Rilli Lappalainen is founder and CEO of Bridge 47, a global network advancing SDG 4.7 through global citizenship education, lifelong learning, and non-formal education. He advocates transforming education to drive sustainable, systemic change and has played a key role in shaping SDG 4.7 and its post-2030 future. Alongside his leadership, he works as a sustainability consultant supporting institutions and civil society. With over 30 years of international experience, he has held major roles in global NGO networks. His interdisciplinary background and lifelong curiosity guide his work connecting policy, learning, and practice to create innovative solutions for a more just, sustainable world.



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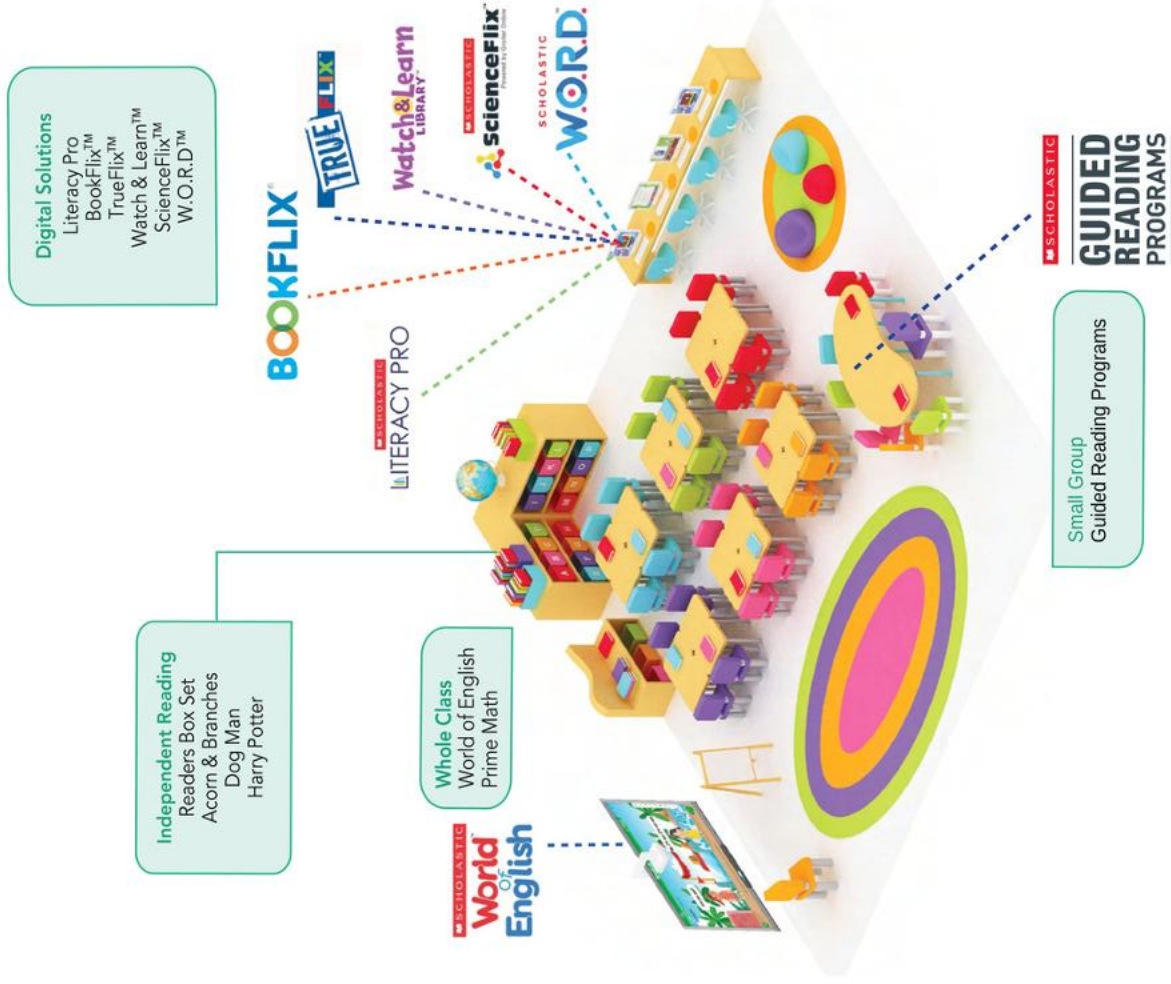


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