



## Move From Engagement To Empowerment

**C**reating an environment where students want to learn can't help but make your teaching more effective. But is it enough? Just because students follow our directions to complete a task doesn't mean they're fully invested in the task. If the goal is to nurture curious and creative learners, then students have to own their learning too. Remember, we know when students are *engaged in the learning process*, we see increased attention, motivation, and focus.

### Empowerment is the locomotive that drives deeper student learning.

Make no mistake: Students must be helped to feel a degree of excitement about what they are asked to learn. *Engagement* is also a prerequisite to shoring up knowledge and understanding. However, we can't stop there or we will never give students the chance to fully grasp and own what they're learning. Students need to find value in what's being asked of them. *Empowerment* goes to the next level and invites students to drive their own learning. Rather than ride along as mere passengers on the train, empowerment gives students license to become train engineers. It's the locomotive that drives deeper student learning. Without a doubt, empowerment is infinitely more efficacy-building than engagement. One of the biggest benefits when we shift our focus from engagement to empowerment is watching students flourish as leaders of their own learning. Five actions serve as catalysts for this shift.

First, we must **stimulate possibilities rather than supply choices**. While it's great to give students options, this strategy still leaves them selecting from our menu. Students need examples and resources to generate risk-taking—without prepackaged alternatives. To stimulate possibilities, a middle school teacher swapped out *writing prompts* for *writing ideas*. Instead of giving students ten topics they could write about, the teacher noted: "It's your blog. Write what you want. But if you're looking for inspiration, here are tons of visual prompts you can use."

A second move is to **tap students' interests instead of trying to make content more interesting**. While we labor to write engaging lesson plans, these efforts don't always reap the benefits we hope for. Therefore, find out what students are curious about. What are their passions? For example, we might ask students to identify a problem in the school and structure our instruction around this dilemma. Standards always play a role, but we shouldn't feel confined by a single path to meet them. We'll have a lot of latitude to address the standards while pursuing authentic experiences.

### In-the-moment checkpoints are far more compelling than an end-of-unit exam or a final score on a rubric.

A third move is to **turn assessments from something students take to something students do**. When students have the opportunity to set their own goals, check their progress along the way, and adjust actions to act on evidence, they learn how to boost performance. This can be as simple as using emojis to depict different levels of understanding around "I can" statements with younger learners. For older students, it

might involve a description of what they learned in a 140-character tweet. Questions like these offer a good framework for self-reflection: *What did you learn from this exercise? What did you find tricky? What mistakes did you make along the way?* In-the-moment checkpoints can be far more informative than an end-of-unit exam or a final score on a rubric.

A fourth move is to **step back rather than step in**. When students struggle or become confused, our natural inclination is to swoop in for the rescue. We want so badly for learners to understand the objectives and achieve "success." But our kindheartedness may actually keep students from developing the habits of mind they need to persist through challenges. There's a fine line between supporting students in reaching academic goals and doing too much of the work for them. Sometimes we must step back and give students room and time to fly on their own. Finding the right balance builds learner agency and a growth mindset.

A fifth move is to **replace over-teaching with under-teaching**. A popular trend in education is to scaffold instruction. The idea is to use a variety of techniques to lift students toward proficiency and independence. Unfortunately, in some cases, scaffolding becomes a crutch. For example, in a guided reading lesson, a teacher asks students to look at the book cover to infer what the story is about. Next, students are directed to read a paragraph and make predictions about what's coming next. New vocabulary words are pointed out and students are taught how to pronounce each word. While all three skills—inference, prediction, and vocabulary development—are important for building fluency, it's the teacher who determines where, when, and how students learn. In our haste to produce measurable results, it's easy to over-teach, over-explain, and over-show. Remember, telling students which strategy to use and when to use it reinforces codependent behavior.

### The Master Teacher knows doing less telling, talking, and fixing positions us as catalysts of empowerment.

Author George Couros notes *engagement* is more about what teachers can do for students—*empowerment* is about helping students figure out what they can do for themselves. The Master Teacher knows whether it's a project, paper, investigation, or experiment, students need wiggle room to finish assignments. We know students crave flexible systems to set their pace, choose formats, and decide resources to use. We also need to be intentional about what we choose to do less. By doing less telling, talking, and fixing, we can be catalysts of empowerment.

*Robert L. DeBruin*  
—Founder and Author

#### THE RESEARCH

- Couros, G. (2015). *The innovator's mindset: Empower learning, unleash talent, and lead a culture of creativity*. San Diego, CA: Dave Burgess Consulting.
- Spencer, J. (2019, March 18). Making the shift from student engagement to student empowerment. Retrieved from [spencerauthor.com/empowerment-shifts](http://spencerauthor.com/empowerment-shifts)
- Spencer, J., & Juliani, A. J. (2017). *Empower: What happens when students own their learning*. San Diego, CA: IMPress Publishing.

#### LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

##### Tips For: Learning Environment

One way to make your teaching visible to students is to *Walk the Red Carpet*. As you design your next unit of study, capture the production through a Red Carpet photo gallery. Gallery sections should include: **Behind the Scenes**—How did you prepare for the unit? Who did you turn to for assistance? **Casting Call**—What process did you use to select resources and materials? **Snag**—What unexpected obstacles did you encounter? **Smile**—What made you excited or proud? **Critics' Choice**—What have you learned along the way? What feedback do students have for making this unit better? This technique can enhance the learning experience of your students.



One way to foster a student-led environment is through *Hot Teams*. Introduced by the world's leading design firm, IDEO, *Hot Teams* are assembled around a specific project or task and are disbanded once the project is over. Students pick their studio (i.e., the project they're interested in) and select their team leader. *Hot Teams* can be assembled for projects that are small in scope, are intense in effort, and have short deadlines. They provide a great venue for student-centered learning aligned with our packed schedules.



If you want to do less directing and fixing, put students in the driver's seat. One idea is to introduce *Teach Me* exercises in which each student takes something he or she is working on and becomes the teacher—and we ask questions without corrections or suggestions until the student finishes the lesson. *Teach Me* moments build confidence, enhance communication skills, and put students behind the wheel of their own learning. Such authentic interactions provide powerful clues about what students are thinking and what support they need from us.

#### THE MASTER TEACHER Weekly Pd™ PROGRAM

##### Points to Ponder...privately or with colleagues

- In Context:**  
How do you empower students to find their own way? How do students come to understand themselves as learners?
- With Content:**  
Make a list of questions you might ask students to position yourself as a catalyst for empowerment. How do these questions correspond to the five instructional shifts described in this lesson?
- With Colleagues:**  
Discuss with a colleague how you might do less telling, less talking, and less deciding so students can figure things out on their own.

##### Inspirational Quote

“Empowerment is less about doing school and more about doing learning.”

—John Spencer