THE WAY

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FROM THE DEPUTY PRINCIPAL

Learner Agency

Recent and current events at the College have caused me to reflect on the concept of learner agency. Conscious that this concept is likely considered “teacher-speak”, I have included the following definition from the OECD’s ‘Learning Compass 2030 framework’ (2019).

"Learner agency is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others."

Last weekend, we experienced the unexpected shutdown of Canvas, which briefly removed our collective and individual agency. It is in moments like this that we become aware of the risk of relying too heavily on external systems or applications to support our learning. This can also be true in the classroom if students rely solely on the teacher to manage their engagement and application.

Research about the concept of learner agency is compelling. The OECD frames learner agency as a ‘virtuous cycle’; when students act as "agents" (rather than passive recipients), they develop a sense of purpose. As purpose increases so too does intrinsic motivation. The OECD links this to better mental health and a higher likelihood of students ‘learning how to learn’ – a factor increasingly used by young people to differentiate themselves when seeking meaningful employment beyond school.

Studies into Self-Determination Theory (SDT) have identified that students with agency also meet

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the basic psychological needs of students.

- **Autonomy:** ‘I have a say in my learning.’
- **Competence:** ‘I feel capable of meeting the challenge.’
- **Relatedness:** ‘I feel connected to my teacher and peers.’

SDT suggests that when these three needs are met through agentic practices they move quickly from "doing it because I have to" to "doing it because it matters to me."

As I write this, we are preparing the Year 8 and 10 Subject Selection presentation. The process of students selecting their subject is a key opportunity for students to demonstrate learner agency. Selecting a subject allows them to make an informed decision based on interest, curiosity, enjoyment and skill. It is a choice that can be transformational in determining their engagement and approach to learning.

Equally, exercising learner agency doesn’t need to wait for a subject selection process. Every student in the College can make daily decisions to be active participants in their learning. Examples of these daily agentic decisions include:

- - Making an informed decision about who to sit next to in class, before the teacher intervenes.
- - Taking the initiative to contribute to a class or group discussion.
- - Taking notes in class to support later revision.
- - Journalling to reflect on challenges faced and how they were overcome.
- - Goal setting to identify areas for future growth and development, and a plan to achieve it.
- - Developing a study plan to support home learning.
- - Sharing ‘what went well’ with mum and dad each evening.

Finally, it is important to note that the development of learner agency is gradual. It requires support from teachers and parents. This support should try to avoid removing agency and making decisions for young people, regardless of their age. Instead, we should consider the idea of ‘co-agency’ where adults provide the map and the compass, but the student holds the wheel.

Learning is an exciting journey – particularly when students exhibit control, take responsibility and can celebrate their growth.

Mr Chris Wyatt
Deputy Principal

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