Autonomy: A Detour Off the Linear Path

As teachers, when we enter our classrooms and face our students, we have autonomy. We are guided by curriculum and supported by management, but how we teach is largely up to us. This is one of the most important factors in job satisfaction, not just in the classroom, but also in the business world. Major companies around the world have noted that giving employees autonomy over their roles means they solve more problems and create more interesting products than they would under the paycheque- and monitoring-management systems of the past. Google, 3M, and Atlassian have given employees 20% of their time to create, and each company has cited that their most innovative products and ideas come from this creative time. Yet how much autonomy are we giving our students? When we trust our students and provide them the space to think, we are giving them autonomy.

Imagine if someone told Pablo Picasso, Dr. Seuss, or any one of us that we needed to follow the lines and complete the task just like everyone else. Autonomy is essential for the sense of freedom we require. It is essential for creating new ideas and for developing creativity. With student-driven learning, we provide our students with the opportunity to respond to problems in their own way and to think. We are telling our students that we value their ideas and are giving them space to experiment, play, and try out their theories.

POSTCARD FROM THE CLASSROOM

In art, students from Kindergarten to Grade 5 read Peter Reynold's *The Dot*. Afterward, they were given all kinds of materials and asked to make their own mark. The only criterion was that the work had to be different from anyone else's. These were hung for all to see near the art room.

According to a cluster of recent studies in behavioral science, students who have more autonomy also have

- higher self-esteem
- better interpersonal relationships
- greater conceptual understanding
- getter grades
- enhanced persistence at school and in activities
- higher productivity
- less burnout
- greater levels of psychological well-being

Small Hop: Brainstorming Starting Routines

DESTINATION

To empower students to create routines that help the school year flow.

SHIFT

Rather than outlining a rotational schedule for feeding the class pet, washroom breaks, or use of highly coveted device, allow students the opportunity to create the system. They are thinking critically about a washroom pass or feeding a class pet because we empowered them to do so.

SPARK

Present the problem: *Who gets to go to the washroom, when, where? Who gets to feed the pet? There are four computers; how do we make sure everyone gets a chance during free time? How do we make it fair for everyone?* Give students time to think about solutions.

UNFOLDING THE ROADMAP

- Brainstorm ways to solve the problem as a whole. Record and listen to the discussion. Students will probably create a rotational system, based on names on a list.
- As students share their ideas, they will start to evaluate what they think will work (many may like one idea) or critique ideas they have experienced before or doubt. During this dialogue, begin to sort the recorded ideas.
- Narrow down ideas to find the first idea to try. Decide which ones can be determined by a blind vote (heads in lap) or that flow from the discussion.

CLOSURE

By empowering our students to create their own system, we are also opening them up to critical thought. As the year progresses, the system might work well, need to be adapted, or need a complete overhaul. This presents more opportunities for learning. Since students created the system, they are more aware of it, assessing what elements are working and what might need fine-tuning. They can reflect on the system, modify it, and learn from their own decisions.