



Supporting Students as Self-directed Learners

Self-Direction

This sudden shift to remote classrooms in 2020 required students take more responsibility for their own learning. There are actions you can continue to take as faculty to support students and foster their intrinsic motivation to learn.

1. Give students choice whenever possible—but limit the options to provide guidance and avoid overwhelming them.

While unlimited choice can be overwhelming, giving students some autonomy in their learning can foster their motivation to learn. Can they choose their project or paper topics? Can they choose some of their readings or learning activities? Can they choose from a list of options about what format an assignment will take (paper, presentation, video, podcast, etc.), as long as they are demonstrating achievement of course learning outcomes?

2. Make course material relevant to students' lives.

Demonstrating the relevance of your course content to their lives will go a long way in encouraging them to engage with your course. Can you relate your course concepts to something happening in the world? Can you let students know why they may find this information or these skills useful in the future?

3. Provide opportunities for students to practice using skills and knowledge in a safe, low-stakes way.

Are there opportunities for you to assess students formatively, in a low-stakes way designed to offer helpful feedback before a graded task? Can students write practice quizzes, complete drafts of an assignment or lab report, or get feedback in some other way? If you have clear assignment criteria, you might even be able to allow students to self-assess, or to peer assess, using your criteria to reduce marking work/time for you.

4. Ask students to articulate their learning when possible, including their processes for undertaking tasks and applying skills and knowledge.

Providing students with a few prompts to get them thinking about their learning and how they learn can help them learn better and more deeply. For example, asking a student to articulate their writing process, problem-solving process, or approach to undertaking a task encourages them to consider what works and what doesn't. Asking a student to identify their three main takeaways from a video or reading or lab report will help them to see the value of the exercise, and it will also highlight—for them and for you—where their learning has and hasn't happened.

5. Encourage student input into the course whenever appropriate.

Students learn best when they feel invested in a course, so find ways to allow them input and feedback. For example, could the students offer feedback about your grading rubric (or other marking tool)? Could you negotiate categories or criteria weighting with them? Can you ask them to self-assess with the same tool? Even if you can't change the rubric, having an open discussion with your class about how marks are determined can go a long way to fostering students' investment in your course—and in their own learning.

Resources

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