



Fostering Learner Agency: The Goal of UDL 3.0¹

What is it?

Learner agency is the destination toward which all UDL 3.0 considerations point. It is a student's capacity to act purposefully — to set goals, make meaningful choices, monitor progress, and adapt strategies in response to feedback. Agency is not developed by simply following directions; it involves learners actively shaping their educational experience rather than passively receiving it. Your course design choices can nurture this capacity.

Research on self-determination theory identifies three psychological needs that support agency: **competence** (feeling capable and effective), **autonomy** (experiencing meaningful choice), and **relatedness** (feeling connected and supported). When your course design supports learners to fulfil these needs, they are more likely to engage deeply and persist through challenges.

Course design encompasses your choices about organization (how you structure the path to learning objectives), instructional strategies (how you build community and engage learners with content), and assessment (how you determine learners' progress toward mastery and provide actionable feedback on their progress). Thoughtful decisions in each of these areas can nurture all three psychological needs.

Why do it?

Research consistently links agency to positive outcomes: enhanced academic achievement, greater creativity and problem-solving ability, reduced anxiety, and increased persistence in the face of challenges.

The skills demonstrated by students with agency — self-regulation, goal-setting, reflection, and adaptation — are precisely what graduates need in a world where continuous learning is essential. By fostering agency now, you prepare students not just for your course, but for lifelong learning and professional success.

¹ Content developed with AI, based on [the CAST UDL Guidelines™](#), scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of [Flaticon.com](#) contributors.

How to do it

Learner agency can thrive when you are intentional with your course design decisions. The following strategies provide a starting point for designing your course to foster competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

1. Build competence through transparency

Students develop confidence when they understand what success looks like and why it matters. When expectations are clear — not just what to do, but why it matters — students can direct their efforts purposefully rather than guessing what you want.

Try this: Share rubrics before assignments begin and explain the reasoning behind each criterion. Discuss how assignment components connect to course goals and are professionally relevant. When students understand the reasoning, they can make informed decisions about where to focus their attention and why that focus is important.

2. Build competence through supportive structure

Course organization shapes how students experience challenge. When learning is sequenced thoughtfully — with appropriate scaffolding that adjusts as students develop — they build a sense of control over their progress. This sense of control is what leads to feelings of competence.

Try this: Create a visual course map that shows how assignments build toward mastery. Use low-stakes checkpoints — such as practice quizzes, draft submissions, or self-assessment checklists — that let students gauge their progress before high-stakes assessments. Design scaffolding that you can reduce as students demonstrate readiness, for example, moving from detailed templates early in the term to more open-ended prompts later.

3. Nurture autonomy through meaningful choice

Autonomy does not mean leaving students to figure things out on their own — it means providing meaningful choices within a supportive framework. The key distinction is how students experience those choices: feeling invited into learning rather than pressured toward compliance. When students sense that their preferences and perspectives matter, they engage more creativity, process more deeply, and enjoy more. Choice may be new for students, though, and purposeful course design can help them to learn how to make informed and meaningful choices.

Try this: Offer choice in assignment topics, formats, or deadlines. Support students in making those choices by discussing criteria for deciding which option aligns with their strengths, interests, or goals? Recognize that choice can feel unfamiliar — some students may need encouragement to trust their own judgment.

4. Foster relatedness through community and connection

Students who feel connected to their instructor and peers show increased engagement across behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. These relationships do more than make learning enjoyable — they provide the social foundation that helps students persist through difficulty and take the risks that learning requires.

Try this: Use a beginning-of-term survey to learn about students' goals, concerns, and backgrounds. Form intentional groups based on shared interests or complementary strengths. Create structures for peer feedback that build relationships alongside skills.

5. Teach self-regulation as a skill

Self-regulation — the ability to set goals, manage time, monitor progress, and adjust strategies — is learned, not innate. These metacognitive skills develop through practice and guidance, yet many students arrive without them. When we assume students already know how to plan their learning or reflect on their progress, we inadvertently disadvantage those who need the most support.

Try this: Build goal-setting activities into your course structure. Have students articulate what they want to learn and revisit those goals at midterm. Include reflection prompts that ask students to evaluate their strategies, not just their products. Model your own learning process, letting students see how you work through unfamiliar problems and juggle competing priorities.

6. Design assessments that develop agency

Assessment design sends powerful signals about what you value. Assessments that invite personal connection, offer multiple pathways to demonstrate mastery, and emphasize growth over perfection support agency development.

Try this: Create assignments that ask students to connect course concepts to their own experiences, goals, or professional interests. Consider tiered assessments that let students choose their level of challenge. Provide actionable, formative feedback early enough that students can act on it.

7. Gradually release responsibility

Agency develops over time through guided practice, not through sudden independence. Early in the term, provide more structure; as students build skills and confidence, reduce scaffolding and increase opportunities for self-direction.

Try this: Start with more prescribed assignments and gradually offer more choice. Early assignments might include detailed process steps; later ones might ask students to determine their own approach. Use capstone projects that give students significant control over topic, method, and format.

Key Takeaway

Fostering learner agency is not about stepping back — it is about thoughtfully stepping in. When you design courses that build competence, honor autonomy, and nurture connection, you create conditions in which students can become the self-determined learners they are capable of becoming. The investment you make in agency development pays dividends far beyond your course.

Resources

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