



(2025)

PBL AGENCY



/Supporting Student Agency

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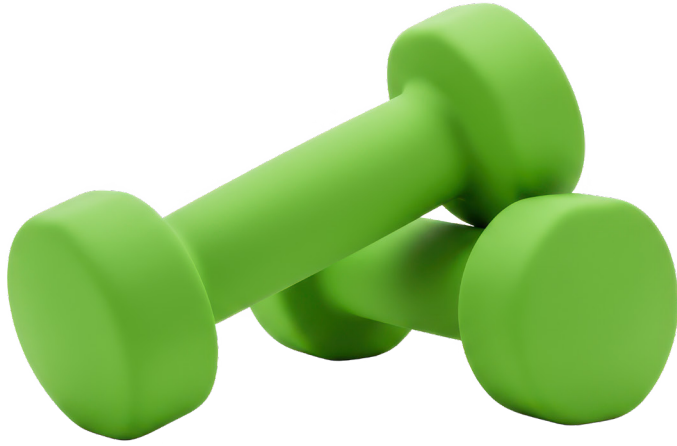
(Spring 2025)

A guide for teachers
of all experience levels.

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Building Student Agency



Why Student Agency Matters in PBL

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire challenges traditional education, describing it as a “banking model” where students are passive recipients of knowledge. He argues that education should instead be a process of liberation, where students become active, critical thinkers who shape their own learning. Similarly, Anindya Kundu’s *The Power of Student Agency* argues that agency is not just about individual grit—it requires opportunity, support, and access to resources that allow students to act on their own behalf.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) embodies these principles by positioning students as agents of their own learning. However, simply implementing PBL does not automatically cultivate agency. Many students—particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds—have spent years in educational settings that have conditioned them to be compliant rather than empowered. They need scaffolding, encouragement, and real-world purpose to develop their ability to take initiative, advocate for themselves, and persist through challenges.

As teachers implementing PBL, we must not only provide opportunities for agency but also support students in developing the confidence and skills to engage it. This section will explore key strategies to help students find purpose, build resilience, and develop the skills necessary to fully realize their potential within PBL.

Agency at the Heart of PBL

If we are serious about empowering students through PBL, we must go beyond assigning projects and actively nurture student agency.



Help students connect their work to a sense of purpose.



Build relationships that foster trust, risk-taking, and resilience.

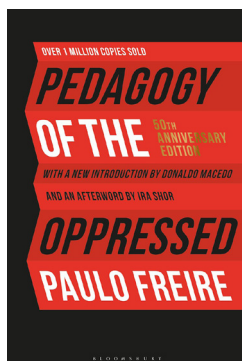


Recognize the social challenges students face and create structures that make participation safe.



Scaffold agency over time rather than expecting immediate self-direction.

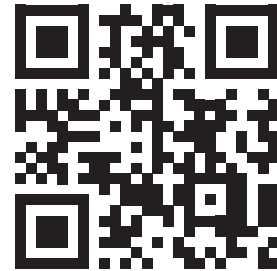
By focusing on these areas, we not only improve the effectiveness of PBL but also help students develop the mindset and skills necessary to shape their own futures.



Scan or Click



Scan or Click





The Power of Purpose: Engaging Student Will to Act

For students to act with agency, they need a reason to care. A sense of purpose fuels motivation, persistence, and engagement. Yet, many students enter high school without a clear sense of why their learning matters beyond earning a grade. They may see school as a series of tasks to complete rather than an opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge to impact the world.

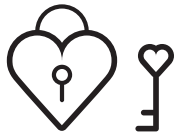
Programs like NXU Education focus on helping students explore their own purpose—developing personal narratives that connect learning to their aspirations, identities, and communities. When students feel their work is meaningful, they are more likely to take risks, persist through setbacks, and invest themselves in the process.

How this applies to PBL:

- Co-design learning goals with students: Help them explore why a project matters to them.
- Connect projects to real-world impact: Let students see how their work solves a problem or benefits a community.
- Allow for personal expression: Give students choice in how they engage with project topics and final products.

Try this:

- [NXU Purpose Curriculum \(NXU Education\)](#) – This program helps students explore their personal purpose and how it connects to their learning.
- [Driving Question Development Tools](#) – If students have agency in defining their own essential questions, they are more invested in their work.
- [Authentic Audience & Community Partnership Resources](#) – When students know their work will be seen by real audiences outside the classroom, they are more likely to engage fully.



The Role of Relationships: Creating a Safe Space for Agency

For students to take risks, they need a foundation of trust. Developing agency requires trial and error, and students must feel safe to fail, revise, and try again. Without strong teacher-student relationships, students may hold back, fearing embarrassment, judgment, or failure.

Kundu emphasizes that supportive relationships are a critical pillar of agency—students who have mentors, teachers, or role models who believe in them are significantly more likely to persist and succeed.

By fostering relationships based on trust, respect, and encouragement, we create an environment where students feel safe enough to take ownership of their learning.

How this applies to PBL:

- Normalize iteration and failure:
Make revision and feedback a celebrated part of learning, not a punishment.
- Model vulnerability:
Share your own experiences of struggle and growth so students see that learning is a process.
- Use feedback as empowerment:
Frame critiques as tools for growth rather than assessments of ability.

Try this:

- **Critique & Feedback Protocols** (e.g., [Peer Feedback Choice Board](#)) – These feedback structures help normalize constructive critique and make revision a positive experience rather than a source of anxiety.
- **Regular, [One-on-One Conferencing](#)** – One-on-one time with students is vital, and conferencing gives students the support and attention they want.
- **[Reflection Journals](#) & SEL Check-Ins** – Many teachers use weekly reflection tools (journals, check-ins, surveys) to track student emotions, struggles, and wins, which strengthens relationships.



Social Capital: What Students Have on the Line

It's easy to assume that reluctance to participate in PBL is simply a matter of motivation, but we must remember what's at stake for students—their social capital.

For teenagers, social belonging is paramount. Raising a hand in class, sharing an idea, or presenting a project carries real risks:

- Fear of looking foolish in front of peers.
- Worry about judgment from classmates.
- Risk of failing publicly rather than safely in private.

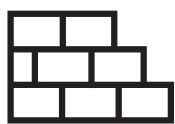
These fears are legitimate and natural for all humans, especially at this stage of their development. If we don't acknowledge these concerns, students may withdraw rather than engage. Recognizing the social stakes of PBL allows us to be more strategic in how we introduce risk-taking and support students in stepping outside their comfort zones.

How this applies to PBL:

- Start with low-stakes opportunities to build confidence: Before presenting to a whole class, let students practice in pairs or small groups.
- Use structures that balance accountability with psychological safety: Team-based projects can help students feel supported rather than exposed.
- Frame risk as part of the process: Normalize that learning is public and that even the most skilled professionals go through rounds of critique and revision.

Try this:

- **Scaffolded Presentation & [Public Speaking Resources](#)**
– If students feel they will be put on the spot without preparation, they'll hesitate to engage. Your guide likely includes strategies for scaffolding public speaking, peer presentation practice, and confidence-building exercises.
- **[Community Agreements](#)** – When build norms and agreements together, it lowers the stakes of the unknown.
- **[Low-Stakes Brainstorming & Idea-Sharing Protocols](#)**
– Structured protocols (like silent gallery walks, think-pair-share, or anonymous idea boards) allow students to share ideas in lower-risk ways before moving to more public participation.



Scaffolding Student Agency: A Deliberate and Necessary Process

Agency is not an on-off switch—it's a skill that needs to be developed over time. If we expect students to immediately take ownership of their learning, we may set them up for frustration. Instead, intentional scaffolding helps students build the confidence and skills to engage in deeper, self-directed learning.

Freire reminds us that true agency is not something that is given—it must be practiced. Kundu reinforces that students need both opportunity and structured support to act on their own behalf. In PBL, we must actively create conditions where students can develop these skills.

Your fellow teachers in the CAST School Network have been working on this challenge the last few years. They've developed helpful ideas, tools, and strategies to scaffold student agency that are available in this guide.

Scaffolding agency is not just about making PBL work—it is a central goal of education itself. The ability to think critically, act with purpose, and advocate for oneself is what prepares students for life beyond school.

How this applies to PBL:

- Teach self-direction explicitly: Provide tools like project management checklists, student-led goal setting, and time management strategies.
- Use gradual release: Move from structured guidance to open-ended learning as students build confidence.
- Integrate reflection as a core practice: Encourage students to analyze their own growth, challenges, and successes.

Try this:

- [Student Agency Rubric](#) -- This rubric was created by CAST teachers to help students identify what agency looks like, where their practice of agency is at, and where it needs to be.
- [Student Agency Mini-Posters](#) -- Based on the rubric, these mini-posters go a step further, helping students spot when they are struggling with key elements of agency, and what they can do to spark growth.

Agency Quick Start Ideas

How have CAST teachers implementing PBL found success building their students' agency? Here are some quick ideas and strategies they've embraced successfully along with resources to help facilitate them.



Addressing Soft Skills in 1-on-1 Conferencing

Make tracking and discussing soft-skill growth a part of your 1-on-1 conferencing/check-ins with students.

Tools: [10 Must-Have Soft Skills for Success, 1-on-1 Conferencing](#)



Investigate the Root Causes of Procrastination

Procrastination is not about "being lazy" or a personality flaw. It is rooted in a number of potential psychological factors like a fear of failure, task aversion, or even anxiety and depression. Invite students to investigate or discuss this.

Tools: [Solving Student Procrastination](#)



Phone/Digital Distraction Self-Assessment

Help students see, understand, reflect, and own decisions around their phone/technology interactions.

Tools: [Challenge: Do You Have a Screen Problem?](#)



Intentional Reflection on Soft Skills (Rubric & Mini-Posters)

Use stations, playlists, exit tickets, and other student-facing tools to invite students to reflect on their agency and soft skills.

Tools: [Agency Rubric](#), [Agency Mini-Posters](#), [Agency Anchor Lesson](#), [Station Rotations](#), [Playlists](#), [10 Must-Have Soft Skills for Success](#)



Help Empower Students with Brain Science

Help students realize that they aren't stuck being victims of their still-developing frontal lobes. Invite them to learn and reflect on their hardwired survival brain that isn't serving them well as students in this age.

Tools: [How Our Brain Responds to Stress Posters](#), [You Have Power Over Your Brain Posters](#)



Introduce and Play with Time Management Strategies

Time management is a vital skill set that are not innate or natural. They are learned and developed. If you and your students recognize a problem with time management, introduce resources and skills that give them an opportunity to find which ones work for them!

Tools: [Time Management Tips](#)

What if...

...you tried one of these innovative ideas to integrate direct agency support and reflection into PBL?



Create a PBL around these very issues (procrastination, soft skills, phone use, etc).



Create stations or playlist items that invite students to learn and reflect on these challenges alongside your content-focused stations.



Invite students to group up around these challenges and develop a prototype to address the challenge in one class period.