

# Learner Autonomy

In today's rapidly changing world, incorporating autonomy in the classroom is paramount to preparing students for an unpredictable future.

Traditional education models produce dependent learners who need to be equipped to navigate uncertainty. As AI heralds a new future, schools must prepare learners with human-centred skills like creativity, agility, and empathy to help them meet the challenges of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

The gap between the skills people learn and the skills people need is becoming more obvious, as traditional learning falls short of equipping students with the knowledge they need to thrive, according to the [World Economic Forum](#).

Today's job candidates must be able to collaborate, communicate and solve problems with creativity and empathy in ways that machines cannot. It benefits learners to develop a social and emotional proficiency which, combined with traditional skills, will equip them to succeed in the evolving digital economy.

By fostering student autonomy over traditional subject-based learning, Learnlife gives its learners human-centred skills that will serve them far into the future.

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## What is learner autonomy?

Autonomous learning is a term we hear a lot outside of the context of education.

It often conjures images of robots and self-driving cars. The definition of autonomy in education, however, is usually in the context of language learning, which is highly personalised, with every learner needing to work at their own pace to acquire language understanding and reach mastery.

When we talk about learner autonomy at Learnlife, it is simply a way to refer to learners who take active control of their learning journey, exercise personal agency, and make informed decisions regarding what, how, and when they learn.

It signifies a shift from traditional education models, where learners passively receive information and instructions, to a dynamic and empowering approach where learners are at the forefront of their educational experience.

At its core, autonomy in schools emphasises self-direction and self-regulation. It involves learners setting their learning goals, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and selecting appropriate strategies to achieve their objectives.

Rather than being solely dependent on teachers or structured curricula, autonomous learners take the initiative, seeking out resources, opportunities, and experiences that align with their interests and aspirations. Importantly, learner autonomy extends beyond mere independence.

While the autonomous learner model involves learners functioning independently, it also emphasises interdependence and collaboration.

Autonomous learners engage with peers, mentors, and resources, leveraging social networks and support systems to enhance their learning experiences. Collaboration becomes a means of enriching learners' understanding, gaining diverse perspectives, and co-creating knowledge.

Developing autonomy promotes critical thinking and metacognition.

Autonomous learners reflect on their learning processes, evaluate their progress, and adjust their strategies accordingly. They develop a deep understanding of their learning preferences, strengths, and areas for growth, fostering a lifelong commitment to learning and personal development.

Student autonomy is closely linked to intrinsic motivation. When individuals have a sense of ownership and control over their learning, they are more likely to be engaged, curious, and persistent in their pursuit of knowledge.

Unlike extrinsic motivators such as grades or rewards, which may offer short-term incentives, intrinsic motivation sustains long-term interest and commitment to learning.

In essence, learner autonomy empowers individuals to become active participants in their educational journey, equipped with the skills, mindset, and agency to navigate a transformational world. By fostering autonomy, educators can nurture self-directed learners who are resilient, adaptable, and prepared to thrive in the complexities of the modern world.

## **Why is learner autonomy important?**

By fostering a culture of autonomy and empowerment, Learnlife prepares students to thrive in an uncertain world, equipping them with the resilience and adaptability needed to succeed in any endeavour.

Through scalable innovations like the Stages of Autonomy framework, Learnlife is revolutionising education and inspiring learners worldwide to take control of their futures.

The transition to autonomy is a journey marked by self-discovery and growth. Learnlife's nurturing environment and personalised support allow learners to gradually embrace autonomy, building essential lifelong learning skills.

Learner autonomy cultivates intrinsic motivation. When individuals have a sense of agency and control over their learning, they are more likely to be engaged, enthusiastic, and driven by their innate curiosity.

Unlike extrinsic motivators such as grades or rewards, which can wane over time, intrinsic motivation sustains long-term interest and commitment to learning.

By fostering a genuine passion for learning, learner autonomy lays the foundation for a lifelong journey of exploration and discovery.

Learner autonomy nurtures critical thinking and decision-making skills. When learners are empowered to make choices about what, how, and when they learn, they develop the ability to evaluate information critically, analyse options, and make informed decisions.

This process of self-directed learning fosters independence and resourcefulness, equipping individuals with the skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

Moreover, learner autonomy promotes deeper learning and understanding.

By engaging in self-directed inquiry and exploration, learners are encouraged to delve into topics of personal interest, ask meaningful questions, and seek out diverse perspectives. This active involvement in the learning process leads to a more profound understanding of concepts and principles and the development of higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis, evaluation, and application.

Additionally, learner autonomy fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for one's learning. When individuals are actively involved in setting goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on their learning experiences, they develop a greater sense of accountability and ownership over their educational journey.

This sense of ownership not only enhances motivation and engagement but also instils a lifelong commitment to continuous learning and personal growth.

Learner autonomy prepares individuals for success in an ever-changing world. In today's rapidly evolving society, where knowledge and skills become obsolete at an unprecedented pace, the ability to adapt, innovate, and learn autonomously is essential.

By cultivating learner autonomy, educators empower individuals to navigate uncertainty, embrace complexity, and thrive in the face of change.

## **How to foster learner autonomy**

Fostering autonomy in education requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises student agency, self-direction and empowerment within the learning process.

There are lots of ways educators can cultivate learner autonomy effectively, but each learning community must create a plan that works best for their learners.

Establishing a supportive learning environment is one of the first and most important steps for building learner autonomy.

Create a classroom atmosphere that encourages exploration, risk-taking and independent inquiry. Fostering open communication, respecting diverse perspectives, and celebrating individual strengths and interests all help to make learners feel valued in the classroom.

With openness and trust, learners will take ownership of their learning and feel empowered to take risks, express themselves authentically, and engage actively in the learning process.

When students feel valued and respected, they are more likely to invest themselves fully in the learning experience, eagerly pursuing their interests and seeking out new growth opportunities.

As you begin to create an atmosphere that encourages autonomy, It is important to offer choice and flexibility within whatever curriculum you need to cover.

Provide students with many opportunities to make choices about what, how, and when they learn. Offer a variety of learning activities, materials and resources to accommodate diverse learning preferences and styles.

This can be an overwhelming step for teachers who are accustomed to a high level of control in the classroom, but it is a crucial step for building trust with students. Letting learners work to their strengths will further encourage them to take more risks and ownership of their learning and build confidence along the way.

Encouraging students to develop self-regulation skills, such as setting goals, monitoring progress through self-reflection and time management, is an essential aspect of developing learner autonomy.

When learners reflect on their learning experiences, identify strengths and areas for growth, and set meaningful learning goals, they develop valuable metacognitive skills to better self-direct their learning experience.

Providing regular opportunities for self-assessment and reflection helps create a space where teachers are guides on the side rather than sages on the stage.

One key part of moving from a teacher-centred classroom to a learner-centred one is by finding ways to step aside and foster collaboration and peer learning.

Encourage collaboration and peer interaction by creating opportunities for students to learn from and with each other. Collaborative learning experiences promote communication, teamwork and the sharing of ideas and perspectives.

By implementing these strategies consistently and intentionally, educators can create an environment that empowers students to take ownership of their learning, develop essential skills and competencies, and become self-directed learners prepared for success in school and beyond.

# How does learner autonomy happen at Learnlife?

At Learnlife, autonomy is embedded in every part of the learning experience, from choice-based options in building blocks to learner-led conferences, personal learning plans, and learning vitae replacing traditional grading systems. Learners track their progress through self-assessments and engage in reflective conversations with mentors.

To facilitate the development of learner autonomy, Learnlife has devised the Stages of Autonomy framework, guiding students from dependence to independence. This framework serves as a roadmap for learners to understand and bridge the gap between their current autonomy level and their aspirations.

The Stages of Autonomy framework comprises four stages: Foundations, Guided, Independent, and Autonomous. At each stage, learners gradually assume more responsibility for their learning, with support tailored to their needs.

| Pillar of Autonomy  | Description  | 60                       | Initiation  | 45                       | Guided  | 30                       | Inter-dependent   | 15                       | Lifelong Learner   |
|---------------------|--|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|--|
| Self Responsibility | Showing responsibility for my<br>• Learning Devices<br>• Materials<br>• Habits | <input type="checkbox"/> | I do not always have my device and learning materials accessible to me at the start of learning activities.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a device ready to be used to learn when prompted accordingly.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a device ready to be used at all times.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I proactively get ready to learn and set up my device and help others do so as well.   |
|                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I benefit from reminders on how to take care of the materials in the space.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am aware of the importance of taking care of the learning materials but might need occasional reminders.                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | I take initiative to take care of the materials in my learning community and spaces.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I regularly take care of the materials and spaces in my learning community and help/encourage others do so as well.  |
|                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am not aware of the behaviours and/or strategies that best benefit my well-being and my learning.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have discovered some of the habits that promote my well being but I am still learning how to put them into practice.                | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have established long term healthy habits that consistently benefit my well-being and my learning.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | My habits allow me to successfully follow learning programs. I regularly evaluate how I can adjust my habits to be healthier, happier and more engaged.  |
| Self Management     | Developing the capacity to manage<br>• Space<br>• Time<br>• Tasks              | <input type="checkbox"/> | I get easily distracted by what is happening around me. I require quiet and calm learning environments in order to learn or get work done.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I focus best in calm and quiet learning environments. If I see that my learning environment is not ideal, I actively ask for support. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I usually complete my tasks even in challenging environments.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am confident in my ability to work and complete my tasks in challenging environments. I achieve my goals regardless of what is happening around me, by adapting or making adjustments as needed.   |
|                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am normally not aware of my time. I require the Learning Guides' support with planning and organizing.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I try my best to finish my learning goals within the expected timeframe but don't always manage to do so.                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a strong sense of awareness of time. I normally complete tasks within the expected timeframe.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am confident about my time management. I manage to plan in advance, collect quality feedback and iterate my projects.  |
|                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> | When I face projects or activities, I require that the tasks are broken down into small chunks in order to learn best.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I get my tasks done independently when there is a very clear expectation established by a Learning Guide and a supporting document.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I start, manage, and complete tasks independently. If the expectation is not clear, I proactively look for the support of others (peers, LG's) or find ways to co-create my expected outcome. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I co-create the expectations of my projects to fit my learning goals. I use strategies that empower me to complete tasks, ask for feedback and iterate in the expected time line or even ahead of the deadline. I help other learners to understand expectations and complete tasks. |
| Self Regulation     | Identifying & managing<br>• Emotions<br>• Needs<br>• Behaviours                | <input type="checkbox"/> | I often find myself not knowing what I am feeling or how to express myself to others.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am aware of my emotions but I struggle to communicate them to others. I am happy to receive help from others when it is offered.    | <input type="checkbox"/> | I identify, regulate, and communicate my emotions. I communicate my needs effectively to others around me.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am emotionally resilient and have established strategies to deal with emotional downs. I proactively take care of my emotional well-being in my everyday life.   |
|                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I normally struggle to identify my physical and learning needs.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I identify my physical & learning needs under guidance of an LG, family member or peer.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I identify and advocate for my own physical and learning needs.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I identify and advocate for my own physical and learning needs without a Learning Guide. I am aware of the needs of those around me and try my best to support them.   |
|                     |  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am not aware of how my actions impact others. Sometimes it is difficult for me to control my actions, particularly when I am feeling tired or overwhelmed by my emotions. | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am aware of how my actions affect me and the people around me. I am learning strategies on how to best manage my behaviors.         | <input type="checkbox"/> | I am fully aware of how my actions impact those around me and have developed effective strategies that allow me to regulate and control my behaviour.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | I role model positive behaviors and take responsibility for my actions. I celebrate those around me for positive behaviors and also help them recognize unlucky behaviors in a constructive way.   |

Primary learners are also introduced to this framework but with a rubric that is age-appropriate. Their framework, called Stages of Readiness, charts their autonomy along a simple three-stage path from growing to sprouting to blooming.

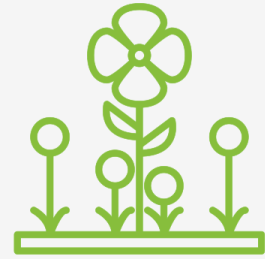




**I'm ready  
to grow!**



**I'm ready  
to sprout!**



**I'm ready  
to bloom!**

Through our wellbeing curriculum and mentoring, learning guides can address obstacles like low self-esteem and underdeveloped executive functioning skills with learners, which can hinder progress towards autonomy.

Learnlife addresses these challenges by building learners' confidence, enhancing executive skills, and providing ample opportunities for practice and reflection.

At the heart of this work is cultivating a growth mindset. We foster a growth mindset by emphasising the importance of effort, perseverance, and resilience in the learning process. Learning guides encourage learners to embrace challenges, learn from mistakes, and view setbacks as opportunities for growth.

At Learnlife, we consistently emphasise real-world relevance by connecting learning experiences to real-world contexts and applications.

This helps learners see the relevance and significance of their learning. Whether in building blocks, passion projects or Open Path, we encourage learners to explore topics of personal interest and pursue projects that have meaning and purpose.

## In Summary...

Learner autonomy is vital in education because it fosters intrinsic motivation, critical thinking, deeper learning, ownership and adaptability.

By placing learners at the centre of the educational process and empowering them to take control of their learning, educators can nurture self-directed learners equipped with the skills, mindset and agency to succeed in the complexities of the world.

By fostering an environment of openness and trust, educators lay the groundwork for learners to develop the confidence, resilience and self-efficacy needed to navigate their educational journey with autonomy and purpose.

Ultimately, when learners feel empowered to take ownership of their learning, they become active participants in their education, driving their own growth and success both inside and outside the classroom.

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## Valuable resources on learner autonomy

We've created a list of resources on learner autonomy that may be helpful for leaders and educators looking to unleash learner autonomy in their community.

- [The Future Will Not Be Taught by Devin Carberry](#) - Written by Learnlife's Innovation and Learning Director, this book features a chapter on learner autonomy, showing how it can be done using real examples from Learnlife's lighthouse hubs.
- [Unleashing the Power of Learner Agency by Stewart Hase and Lisa Marie Blaschke](#) - A free online book compiling stories and examples of learner agency in action written by educators from around the world.

- [Nurturing Learning Autonomy in the Classroom](#)
  - [Stages of Learner Autonomy](#)
  - [The Learning Lab Newsletter: Autonomy in Action](#)
  - [Stages of Autonomy: Growing the Skills of Becoming a Lifelong Learner](#)
  - [Stages of Autonomy Framework and Rubrics](#)
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## Growing learner autonomy in your school

More and more schools are looking for guidance on how to implement autonomy in the classroom.

We have the pleasure of sharing our experience to help schools unleash learner autonomy in a way that's tailored to their unique goals and has school-wide impact.

We've trained 330 teachers in 37 schools worldwide, guiding them in creating a learner-centred culture where learners and educators balance freedom and accountability.

If you're interested in growing learner autonomy, [we'd love to hear from you](#).

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## The Elements of Learning Innovation

Check out some further resources from our Elements of Learning Innovation - an agile roadmap for supporting transformation in education.

- [Growing Positive Relationships](#)
- [Learn Programmes](#)
- [Personal Learning and Lifelong Learning](#)

- [Shaping a Strong Learning Culture](#)
- [Learning Vitae As a New Credentialing](#)