

# Learning on purpose

Ten lessons in placing student agency  
at the heart of schools

CHARLES LEADBEATER AND THE STUDENT AGENCY LAB

## Acknowledgements by Charles Leadbeater

I would like to thank Mary Hudson and Katherine Adnett for initiating and facilitating this project over more than four years, without allowing it to be interrupted by a pandemic which limited our capacity to work together face-to-face. Thanks also to all the staff at AISSA who made it possible, particularly its Chief Executive Carolyn Grantskalns, and Desiree Gilbert, Senior Educational Consultant. Michael Bunce, who led the parallel MetaPraxis Project has been an invaluable help as a critical friend and facilitator. At the CSE, thanks to Anthony Mackay and his fantastic team for pulling this out of the bag, and also thanks to Louka Parry, at The Learning Future Podcast, for helping shape these ideas into digestible form. Most importantly, the ideas reported here were developed in a highly collaborative, open fashion by a fantastic group of teachers and school leaders from the schools involved in the A Lab. To those schools which saw through the whole three years, despite the pandemic, heartfelt thanks for being such brilliant and willing collaborators. A full list of the teams involved right to the end of the project is included in the appendix.

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# Foreword

In 2018, Mary Hudson (Director of the Leadership Institute) and Katherine Adnett (then Director of the Centre for Innovation), at the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA), initiated two bold innovation programs for cohorts of schools to work together – the Student Agency Lab and the MetaPraxis Project.

## The Student Agency Lab

The Student Agency Lab, led by Charles Leadbeater, was built on the ideas he set out in his 2017 CSE Seminar Series Paper (#269, December), *Student Agency: Learning to make a difference*, which provides a framework for developing student agency as individual, collaborative and collective capacity across different domains (moral, creative, economic, social).

The aim of ‘the A Lab’, as it became known, was to help schools help one another to develop practical approaches to developing greater agency among students; and to follow through the implications of greater student agency for the role of teachers, as well as the organisation and leadership of the whole school. Eighteen schools signed up to be part of the three-year lab, developing and testing hypotheses about how student agency could be deepened and recognised. This paper sets out some of the main lessons the A Lab schools have learned.

## The MetaPraxis Project

The MetaPraxis Project, led by Michael Bunce, worked with schools to facilitate the conceptualisation, design and leadership of interdisciplinary learning projects in primary, secondary and tertiary contexts. A central focus of the MetaPraxis Project has been the development of reflexive meta-cognitive skills. The project’s philosophy views social, collaborative, and reflexive interdisciplinary learning environments as natural contexts within which to establish and nurture complex capabilities, with significant potential to promote agency and transfer of expertise across diverse contexts.

The MetaPraxis Project celebrates the development, integration, and transfer of knowledge, understanding, and cognitive and practical capabilities that emerge from and transcend the bounds of individual disciplines, inspired by synergies between creativity and learning in creative arts practice. The project has sought to enable learners and teachers by modelling and enhancing the opportunity for self-directed and collaborative learning, establishing conditions that promote agency, and exploring integrative ways of thinking about learning design, practice, and impact for individuals and learning communities. A CSE paper on that project, *MetaPraxis: Learning in a floating world of disciplines*, will be published shortly.

## Intersection

Given the close connection between the philosophy and practice of the two projects, Charles and Michael have acted as critical friends: advising, challenging, supporting and inspiring practitioners as they undertake the work. In turn, schools have made connections across the projects to collaborate in practice and research. Agency often emerges in interdisciplinary learning environments; the ‘meta-disciplinary’ learning contexts of MetaPraxis establish reflexive conditions in which students and teachers can learn to develop and acquire agency for themselves and with others.

The aim of these two linked papers is to capture the core ideas developed by the schools in the two projects. In the course of 2022 they will be accompanied by a series of podcasts which delve into the work of the schools and their insights into agency and interdisciplinary learning. Those podcasts are curated by the educational innovator Louka Parry. At time of publication, the first of these has been released.

For more details, go to: The Learning Future Podcast with Louka Parry, at [thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast-about](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast-about).

The ideas generated by the projects will be at the heart of the Global Learning Futures Symposium, to be held in Adelaide and London on 2 May 2022.

For more detail on the projects, visit the websites at: [agencylab.agency](http://agencylab.agency) and [metapraxiproject.org](http://metapraxiproject.org).

For more details from the participating schools, go to their individual websites, which are listed in the appendix.

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# Introduction

The school leaving exam should have just one question, which should read:

*Show how you can work with others to combine and use your knowledge to create change that will generate better outcomes for people and the planet, while doing what you consider to be the right thing.*

That's it.

In a world that is increasingly volatile, unstable, uncertain and unequal, education needs to help students exert some control and purpose over their lives. To do that they need to develop a sense of agency so that they can: understand what matters to them and the communities they are a part of; sense opportunity and act on it; take risks; make commitments; and learn in action how to recover from setbacks, to adjust their plans when things do not work out as they had hoped. They need to do all that by working with others, collaboratively and to develop and apply their learning in the real world, not just in the classroom. They need to learn to thrive by drawing on what makes them fully human: their ability to connect, to make meaning together and to act on fundamental moral purposes.

That is why students who emerge from school should be purposeful, reflective and responsible agents, able to invest themselves actively with others to achieve goals that matter to them, to shape the path to a preferable future.

Agency is not just an individual capacity. Most often it is collaborative, something you can only exercise when working with others, from teams to communities and movements. It is not confined to a single domain or discipline: it is always simultaneously moral and creative, economic and civic. It involves combining knowledge from different disciplines to understand problems and unlock solutions.

That requires a dynamic combination of knowledge with the deeper social and emotional capabilities to turn it into action: resilience, grit, cooperation, empathy. It is not what you know that counts, but what you can do with that knowledge, with others, to tackle complex challenges and to step into unforeseen possibilities.

The learning that will allow young people to answer that question confidently will be very different from what we currently regard as a good education: a long apprenticeship in diligently producing exactly the right answer at the right time.

It is easy to agree in principle that learning should develop a powerful sense of agency. It is much harder to do that in practice, in schools which have to work within a system that is ultimately driven by exam results. In this setting it is all too easy to marginalise student agency as an add-on, to turn it into a course in design thinking, an entrepreneurship program, or community service.

The Agency Lab was created to work with a set of schools that wanted to explore how to make agency **central** to their ethos and their work. The cohort met at least three times a year, over three years, starting in 2019. After each session of reflection, learning and imagination the teams went back to their schools to iterate their work in practice. Despite the disruptions of COVID most of the schools developed a much stronger sense of agency, both among students and teachers, which they put at the heart of their philosophy and practice.

This paper reports some of what we have learned together in the course of those three years. However, it is just an outline of the main lessons. Each of the schools can tell this story in much greater depth, with more practical examples and richer colour. To find out more, visit their individual student agency websites, listed in the appendix.

# Lesson One: Learning on purpose

Agency is not action for the sake of it. Nor is it simply offering students more choice from a pre-set menu, nor an occasional voice to give feedback on their teachers.

Student agency is about pursuing learning for a purpose. It is about understanding the connection between the why and how of learning.

Psychologists argue that purpose gives life meaning and direction in answer to questions such as: what do I stand for and care about? Without a sense of purpose there is a danger that life will be aimless and shallow, reactive and drifting.

Purpose is a bridge between identity and intent. What and who you care about is a matter of identity; it is fundamental to who you are. Yet purpose also expresses what you want to achieve and who you are becoming. That intent is made meaningful by being acted upon in the real world; our purpose should propel us into the world.

A real sense of purpose is anchored in identity (who we are, what matters to us), intent (what change we want to bring about) and action (how we can make this change demonstrable).

Student agency is about pursuing learning for a purpose. It is about understanding the connection between the why and how of learning.

Schools need to become places where students can learn to develop their sense of purpose. That means giving them plenty of well-structured opportunities to imagine and experiment with a sense of purpose, to excavate their identity and to reflect on their actions.

For that to be possible, however, a school then needs itself to be rich in purpose: not a single sense of purpose that is instilled in students, but a multiplicity of purposes that students can compare and experiment with. In addition, all the adults in the

school, from the principal to the teaching assistant, need to come to school with a sense of purpose in mind. If they are simply going through a routine, then that is what the students will do.

Too often schools seem deterministic and directive organisations: the goals are clear – the highest possible scores in exams, the richest haul of qualifications, the top places in the league tables – only the means can be adjusted. No wonder that both teachers and students find little to inspire them in this kind of system.

Instead schools should be creative communities joined by a sense of cause. They should be purpose-seeking institutions, where students find and develop their sense of purpose. These schools are open to initiative and change, from within and without, from students and teachers. They are like mountaineers constantly looking for higher peaks to scale, as well as new techniques to do so. Purpose-seeking systems co-evolve with shifting environments, aspirations and new knowledge to seek out new, better purposes.

This kind of thinking can be applied in many different settings. A brilliant subset of schools – Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School Para Vista, Wilderness School and Westminster School – started a sub-project, to explore how agency could be developed through the teaching of mathematics, and developed a wide array of tools to engage more students in their learning of mathematics.

## Lesson Two: Dynamic capability

The big wins are at the intersections.

Exercising agency not only becomes the intersection at which its many ingredients come together. It is a dynamic capability where knowledge gets turned into action, which becomes a means of learning, as students sense and respond to feedback. Agency does not depend on any one body of knowledge. It becomes the way to integrate knowledge from across disciplines, from maths, sciences, history and geography, to see challenges and opportunities from many vantage points. Learning for a purpose shows students why knowledge and higher-order thinking matters.

Also, it is where knowledge and social and personal capabilities come together. Learning should be a personal journey of growth and discovery. On that journey there is no neat boundary between the cognitive, social and emotional aspects of learning. All learning requires personal strengths of persistence, to overcome fears, self-doubt and obstacles. Agency is about developing the personal attributes of character that will count for so much throughout a student's life. Students need powerful, real-world experiences, where what matters is at stake, to develop a sense of responsibility and commitment.

Agency does not depend on any one body of knowledge. It becomes the way to integrate knowledge from across disciplines ... to see challenges and opportunities from many vantage points.

All of this needs to be a deeply collaborative experience. We find out who we are in the context of the relationships we form, and the collaborations of which we are a part. Acquiring new knowledge and taking action on it, for a shared goal, is only possible in a social context. Schools should provide that context, rather than being places of numbing routine.

Learning to become a capable solver of non-routine problems requires a dynamic combination of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, hard and soft, and well-grounded academic knowledge combined with an ambition to make a contribution that counts. The schools that make that possible do not fall prey to false dichotomies between the head and the hand, the academic and the vocational. They are places that encourage the dynamic combination of these ingredients through the cultivation of a sense of agency.

Endeavour College put it in the following way.

*The starting point for Endeavour College was to establish a teaching framework by articulating graduate qualities, where students are enabled to become independent learners, to be interdependent, and also able to take collective action in their world.*

At Southern Vales Christian College, students are provided with the opportunity to engage with real-world problems in familiar and new contexts within Understanding by Design units 'to develop as lifelong, curious, ethical, and resilient collaborators'.

Youth Inc. is a new school, based on a capability-based curriculum. It is finding the balance between explicit teaching of core capabilities and transformative purpose-driven learning by students.

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## Lesson Three: Philosophy, product, practice

Schools that cultivate agency create a strong connection between philosophy, product and practice.

A philosophy of learning runs through the schools: a framework of beliefs and values about why learning matters and how it happens, which is centred on the kind of experiences they want young people to have, the capabilities and character traits they want to develop. It is not an account of how well the school does in league tables or exams; nor is it about where students go next in their careers.

A philosophy on its own, however, can be lofty, vague and abstract. To make it tangible and practically useful, the schools develop tangible products that students and teachers can use to make it real: a method for learner self-assessment; a lesson format as a creative workshop; an entrepreneurship program.

Finally, these two, the philosophy and the product have to be knitted together by daily practices, routines and habits, which embed both in the life of the school. Both teachers and students need to get used to these different kinds of practices: ways of setting up learning projects and ways in which students work together in teams. Walford Anglican School for Girls, for example, started with an effort grade, which was reported on each term, but changed focus to establish a much more holistic, reflective and dynamic account of agency by students, which was linked to their sense of wellbeing.

The philosophy and the products that promote agency can be thought of as the ‘explicit’ knowledge needed to promote it. Without a change in practice, especially among teachers, the products and philosophy never get embedded in the tacit knowledge of the school. They do not become the new normal.

Schools can start at any point in this triangle of philosophy, product and practice; but wherever they start they have to engage with the other two elements. If a school starts with a philosophy it needs to turn it into tangible products and daily practices. If a school starts with a standalone product – a design thinking course – in order to give it meaning and significance across the school it needs to be translated into practice and articulated as a philosophy. The development of agency might start with the practice of a particular teacher who develops a different approach. In order for the tacit knowledge of that teacher to spread to others in the school it will need to be made more tangible, explicit and ‘generalisable’.

Schools that promote agency have a strong underlying philosophy of students as protagonists in their own learning; they develop usable products for teachers and students to use, and embed those in the daily practices, habits and routines of the school.

A good example of a school bridging philosophy, product and practice is Walford Anglican School for Girls, which has created a set of cards of Applied Learning Principles, which students can apply to different learning contexts – principles that could be applied in different learning scenarios. Calvary Lutheran Primary School helped students to engage with their learner maps to set goals around the development of their personal social capabilities. The map is a product; students setting and monitoring their goals is a practice.

## Lesson Four: Students bring it to life

It might sound obvious but student agency only really takes off when students themselves bring it to life. Making that step – to trust the students to make their own decisions, based on their own ideas and interpretations of what is possible – is quite a big undertaking, especially for schools where teachers are used to being in charge, the source of all knowledge and the makers of all key decisions.

Time and again participants told stories of how students had shown them the way forward by showing what was possible when they were given more scope to design the way they learn and what about. Once the students get a chance to reframe learning in their own terms, then the learning takes on a new life as a project they feel personally committed to and motivated by. Underneath that is a profound shift in the way power works in schools, which is why it is so unsettling for many teachers.

Time and again participants told stories of how students had shown them the way forward by showing what was possible when they were given more scope to design the way they learn and what about.

Most students' experience of school is one of relative powerlessness. They do not feel trusted with power over resources, their own time or their learning. Instead they experience the power of the school as a power over them, to enforce rules, to compel them to do things. Much of that comes in the form of the hard power of explicit rules, timetables and the curriculum, rather than the

soft power of values. Students have very limited power to initiate much at school, and so instead students withdraw into a form of passivity: physically present but psychologically absent and uncommitted. Many studies have shown that a sense of autonomy, respect and control are vital to organisational cultures that promote good

work and in which people feel fulfilled. Many schools fail this test: they do not provide their students with the conditions to do good work.

Student agency is a recipe for students to become more powerful across several dimensions of power. They develop the capability and power to initiate, lead and direct learning (where once they might only have been able to exercise the power to withdraw). Students experience the power of **with**, which comes from working with others collaboratively (where once they might only have been experienced the power of the education system over them). They also learn that the soft power of purpose, passion and values can be so much more powerful in animating than the hard power of rules and timetables.

Student agency comes to life when students start to work with newfound power to initiate learning, with one another, organised around their purpose, passions and motivations. That generates more power and more learning across the school. The school becomes more powerful as a community. However, that is not necessarily how it feels to teachers.

A teacher at University Senior College reflected, 'what really struck me is the need for trust, and the letting go'.

At Calvary Lutheran Primary School, supporting students to engage with the learner map became the focus for conversations about agency, so students could map their own journey and raise their concerns about the lack of respect for their individual needs as learners

*... so our definition of student agency was around [them] independently thinking and shaping themselves through goal setting, so the focus was very much around the goal setting.*



A teacher from Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School Para Vista reported as follows on how students took responsibility for their own progression rather than waiting for the teacher to decide for them.

*We've got kids standing up in the middle of a lesson and taking their name off the wall without asking, and moving it on to the next stage of the work. It was a big moment for me, to go from – 'Oh, why are you standing up without asking' – to, 'Oh, actually, that's agency'; that a kid will say 'I'm just moving to the other group now because I think I've got this. I don't need your help anymore'.*

## Lesson Five: Teachers as agents

It is impossible for students to develop agency unless teachers themselves are agents, trusted by the school and the wider system to craft and design learning with students. Students only become agents when capable teachers do as well.

If student agency increases the power of students to initiate learning, does that mean there is a shift in power away from teachers? Many teachers fear that is the case and the insecurity they feel becomes a reason for them to resist, if only tacitly, attempts to enhance student agency. Yet the lesson here is that power is not a zero sum game. An increase in power for students does not have to mean a loss of power for teachers. In fact when it is done in the right way

student agency can generate power on both sides. Teachers might lose some of their traditional hard power over students but they create much stronger shared power with students, through a more creative relationship – and they do this by creating new patterns of soft power in the school.

Developing student agency does mean teachers rethinking their role and remaking their identity. They will not always be instructing from the front of the class, the font of all knowledge, the centre of the action, the decisive figure in whom authority is vested. They have to give

up that identity, which is unsettling. To step into the possibilities opened up by student agency they also have to step into uncertainty, that what happens next is not entirely under their control. That provokes scepticism and doubt among many, especially perhaps those already feeling exhausted by change. Yet teachers have an absolutely critical role in developing student agency.

Here is the iron law of co-agency: it is impossible for students to develop agency unless teachers themselves are agents, trusted by the school and the wider system to craft and design learning with students. Students only become agents when capable teachers do as well.

If teachers are coming to school feeling like they are working on a qualifications production line, following a script, teaching by rote, how likely is it that children will learn to become self-determining agents? If the adult role models in the school are not themselves capable, trusted agents, how can students develop that identity?

Schools develop student agency because they develop agency across the school, through its culture, for all those who work there. At the heart of this is the dynamic

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teacher, sometimes an instructor, often a designer, guide, coach, mentor, facilitator, convenor, always an activator devising ways to make learning more engaging, demanding, stretching and rewarding, prepared to go with the possibilities that students open up, rather than closing them down in advance.

Student agency requires students and teachers to do great work, together. It is **power with**, the power that comes from relationships, rather than **power over** that comes from hierarchy, in action.

Schools that develop student agency develop teacher agency as its essential counterpart.

A good example is Bethany Christian School, where one of the teachers developed the following approach.

*As we were trying to establish the role of a teacher in all of this, a thought came to me that a teacher's role could be likened to that of the role of a belayer in rock climbing. The parallel between the role of a teacher and a belayer can be seen as a belayer's role is examined.*

*Firstly, a belayer makes sure the climber is properly tied in and secure before they begin their ascent. It's important to note that it isn't the belayer's ascent, it's the climber's ascent. During the climb the belayer calls out small hints at key moments, or step-by-step instructions – all dependent on the ability of the climber. These instructions are usually given when the climber gets stuck, to help them get unstuck. The belayer has a different view to the climber, so is able to give this kind of advice.*

*In addition to this, through being attentive, they are able to help the climber from hitting the ground or coming to harm after slipping. They are there to help them. When the climber reaches their goal, the belayer is usually the first one to congratulate them – to celebrate with them.*

*The relationship is a partnership. In this partnership the roles can switch – meaning that the climber can become the belayer.*

At Mount Barker Waldorf School they discovered that teachers need to rethink their role and the kind of satisfaction they get from supporting students. It requires teachers to be less obviously central to the drama of learning. One senior leader reported as follows.

*We had a teacher who was pretty sceptical to begin with, because for him teaching was all about an a-ha moment, when the student gets the idea, the knowledge that the teacher is communicating. That's what he did the job for: that moment of knowledge exchange. He was worried that the agency work, by giving students more of a role being in the driving seat, would rob him of that moment. After a while he rang me late at night one day. This is not a teacher that ever rings me. I was worried about what had gone wrong. And he had the grace to say: 'I get it, it's about waiting and supporting them to find their own way to the answer, that's not just the right answer but the right answer for them. I didn't think they could do it. I thought they'd just waste their time but, now I've seen it, it does work. It's a different kind of feeling.'*

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## Lesson Six: Creating new patterns

An organisation (or a larger system) is a set of patterns, of repeated interactions and exchanges between the people involved. Innovators break old patterns and create new ones. That is what these schools are doing with the idea of student agency.

The patterns of school as we know it are all too familiar: the classroom that contains the teachers and the students for lessons in which the teacher instructs the students; the day organised into periods, the weeks into terms, the students into year groups. It is familiar and durable but also increasingly dysfunctional.

Too many students leave school feeling they are failures, demotivated and lacking confidence. The anxiety brought on by high-stakes testing damages student wellbeing, especially among those students least likely to do well in exams. That encourages student withdrawal, which exacerbates underlying inequalities. Meanwhile, even those who do well through the current system often find once they are free from its routines and structures that it has done far too little to develop the wider skills and dispositions that matter so much in the real world. Yet despite this mounting toll of dysfunction it is difficult to break these patterns.

Indeed many of our biggest social challenges are the result of complex, interlocking patterns of dysfunction, which are continuously recreated and reinforced through the rational choices of parents and teachers, students and employers. These systemic patterns are seemingly impossible to break.

The A Lab schools, with only limited resources, are trying to remake the patterns of learning, to improve outcomes for all students, across a wide range of measures. They are doing more than arresting or ameliorating the negative dynamics of

the current system. They are trying to imagine and enact a different pattern of relationships in learning.

Mount Barker Waldorf School reflected on their ‘train metaphor’ as a way for teachers, students, and parents to reflect on and question the predictability of the school day, and replaced it with a scuba diving metaphor that signalled possibilities for greater freedom and creativity.

*We have just introduced a workshop lesson which gives students the freedom and headspace to continue with their learning uninterrupted. Teachers are there but on the perimeter of the lesson and will provide guidance if needed.*

Tatachilla Lutheran College started by considering existing structures such as Student Representative Council (SRC) and Chapel, and

*... adopted a more flexible approach, where the audacious hope is that you will end up with a school that's co-created rather than imposed.*

They are redrawing the boundaries around and within the school, to allow teachers and students to find different ways of learning. There is more real-world learning, breaking the boundaries of the school. There is more project-based learning, in which students learn to work together to explore opportunities. Boundaries between disciplines are broken down. The day, the week and the term are reorganised to allow more time for learning when it is required. The hierarchical architecture of the traditional school is becoming more like a community, a network or a platform. Negative dynamics of disinvestment by students are being turned into virtuous positive ones; so opening up new and unforeseen possibilities for creating additional value.

Systems are patterns created around their signature relationships: landlord to tenant, doctor to patient, teacher to student. These schools are trying to create new signature relationships, in which students work together to initiate learning which makes

a difference to their world, supported by teachers. That signature relationship is a potential pattern for an entirely different education system, one based on the exploration of possibility and potential, rather than instruction and control.

## Lesson Seven: Recognising agency

To develop agency, students and teachers need reliable ways of recognising and developing it, showing it in action to employers and collaborators. That is why many of these schools are exploring new approaches to assessment.

Innovative agency schools ... are providing students with a richer array of ways to show who they are and what they can do.

The social and emotional skills, such as motivation, responsibility, resilience, curiosity and meta-cognition, are predictive not only of academic outcomes, but life outcomes.

Yet schools are still compelled to test individual, cognitive ability, in written exams that reward the rapid recall of memorised material.

Innovative agency schools are not dispensing with traditional tests but finding ways around them, to make them less decisive in determining outcomes for students. They are providing students with a richer array of ways to show who they are and what they can do. Recognising the kind of mixed learning, of head, hand and heart, that goes into agency, does not mean simply issuing students with a grade at the end of a course.

Once again that means breaking the boundaries which ensnare students in the current system: quantitative versus qualitative; formative versus summative; norm-referenced versus criterion/standards-referenced; tests versus assessments; internal versus external;

continuous versus judgement; assessment of learning versus assessment for learning; and so on. These schools are busy mixing up these ingredients, to find new combined methods of assessment, for learning rather than merely of learning.

That means more open-ended items in assessments, which allow students scope to show what they can do, including elements of performance and creativity. These approaches use rubrics common in music, drama, art and dance, to judge the performance of skills like collaboration, persistence, creativity and problem solving. Presentations, to peers and the school's community, of work, based on collaborative investigations of topics, play a larger role. Students are increasingly asked to be self-critical of their learning and to reflect with others, to learn by both giving and receiving feedback.

Assessment systems designed to promote student agency will involve both formal testing and lots of informal peer-to-peer and self-assessment; they will have ceilings that rise and expand as student performance improves; they will go far beyond testing routine recall of facts to test higher-order thinking, problem solving and creativity; they will deliver test results and grades but also qualitative descriptions and expert judgements of how well a student performs. Students should be able to develop a CV of real-world achievements to add to their school leaving certificates.

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A senior leader at Mount Barker Waldorf School put it as follows.

*We had a go at making a rubric for agency. It had several things in it that started on, for example, an individual coming up with an idea, then making a plan, then perhaps initiating to work with others, because our focus was on collaborative agency, holding that vision across a certain amount of time and carrying out the actual plan, with other people. There were dispositional things that went along with it, so the willingness to share an idea, to speak confidently about it. Initially we thought it would be quite intangible and hard to observe, but it turned out to be not*

*as difficult as we thought, so you can kind of see evident pride in a student that's bringing an idea to a group; you can see when they're slightly nervous in delivering a presentation, because they really want it to go well. Yeah, you can see them helping out teammates when it's the teammates' turn to speak, because they want the whole of the presentation to work. If you introduce a bit more peer feedback, peer review among students, they can often – and you've given them the language to use – talk about agency. They can often reflect on their learning in a way that surprises you.*

## Lesson Eight: Strategies for change

The A Lab schools provide lessons not just in what they did and why to promote student agency, but also how to go about such a fundamental, disruptive and transformative innovation: the strategies, narratives and leadership styles required.

Any successful strategy for change of this kind needs multiple points of entry, to build energy and momentum across the school. It cannot be top-down alone; and the strategy needs to be less about rolling out a blueprint to fix a problem, and more about unlocking potential and exploring what is possible. Successful strategies have to embody the principles of agency, to learn for a purpose, through action and then reflection, to probe, sense and respond to what is possible.

The schools pursued three strategic trajectories for change, in line with philosophy, product and practice.

The **philosophy strategy** is to create a compelling narrative of what the school

stands for, the principles that govern it.

The goal is to promulgate and spread that philosophy, so that it comes to be embedded in the way that teachers and students behave and think. The philosophy strategy necessarily has to come from the top, from those with the authority to articulate it: principals and governors. However, our experience is that this is never enough on its own and often schools do not start with this but come to it later, as change starts to unfold.

The **product strategy** to bring about change is to create new formats, methods and tools for students and teachers to organise learning: longer, cross-disciplinary lessons to allow for more collaborative inquiry; courses in design thinking and entrepreneurship; programs that take students into the real world to learn by tackling real-world challenges. The product strategy depends on teacher and student innovators coming up with new formats and settings for learning; new

pieces of kit, like self-assessment tools. Some schools have put their emphasis on developing design thinking as a critical creative skill that can be widely applied. The risk, of course, is that this becomes a standalone product, an end in itself, detached from a wider, larger purpose that can provide it with depth and coherence.

Schools need to be led by the possibility and potential of their students and teachers rather than a rigid plan. The most effective strategies for change quickly build on sources of energy and momentum within the school.

The **practice strategy** is to start with the innovative practices of a group of teachers and students, who together develop new ways of learning and then spread these laterally through the organisation. That might happen first in subjects and disciplines (an outstanding example is the way that maths teachers at Westminster School created a way to teach maths through developing real-world problem solving) or it might happen across age groups.

Schools cannot be made into curious, purpose-seeking organisations through a blueprint designed by its leaders. For sure they need a compelling vision and leaders need a sense of how the whole comes together, but that needs to be matched by a sense of openness and curiosity. Schools need to be led by the possibility and potential of their students and teachers rather than a rigid plan. The most effective strategies for change quickly build on sources of energy and momentum within the school.

New school organisations develop when many different, often seemingly unconnected, actions beat to the same drum as teachers, students, leaders, parents and community partners start to make complementary changes which build up momentum. Change propagates when interconnected behaviours change in concert and collective change acquires a rhythm of its own. The most effective strategies combine the micro and the macro, philosophy, product and practice to lay down the new rhythms of collective change.

Walford Anglican School for Girls is a good example of where the principal enabled a team of teachers to be really innovative. She did not insist the ideas came from her. She created an environment in which teachers could act as leaders in redesigning learning. One of the teachers involved made the following remark.

*So the first thing that we felt was really important was to build our team and to trust our team. You only need a few like-minded people to be able to make change. The second is to keep it tangible. For us, being able to visualise the work made it come to life, and our cards, which set out our Applied Learning Principles, weren't the be-all and end-all, but a symbol of what we wanted to see happening in classrooms, thus making it tangible. In that way we've seen change in the classroom and our greatest ally in that, as we found out, was the students, with that pull factor. As teachers, we were able to go with it, letting students take the agency and be in control.*

At Tatachilla Lutheran College, leadership shifted from a top-down paradigm to empower *real traction in the classroom with teachers and students who have permission to try things and to have a go.*

Scotch College advocates

*... shaking things up, becoming comfortable with intentionally being innovative and creating change. Staying in your default setting is obviously the easiest thing to do, but it's not going to be nearly as invigorating as being innovative alongside your students and creating positive change.*

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## Lesson Nine: The power of narrative

Developing a compelling narrative for collective change is probably the most important strategy and the A Lab schools put a lot of effort into crafting the right narrative. It is not just a question of coming up with a story that sounds good.

A compelling narrative has to convey both purpose and possibility, it speaks to identity (who you are, where you've come from and what you stand for) and intent (where you are going, what you want to achieve). One reason that a shared narrative is so important to schools promoting student agency is that one aspect of agency is being able to tell a coherent story about yourself, with an arc into the future. For the school it also has to connect the macro and the micro, the big picture of what the school stands for, made real in the daily, micro decisions that students and teachers have to take.

So, a good narrative has a kind of resonance, between past and future, identity and intent, the big picture and the detail of daily decisions that determine which direction we go in.

Schools went through a structured process to think about what kind of narrative they wanted to create and what they wanted to achieve with it. That process had five steps.

First, identify the dominant narrative, the conventional orthodoxy, which you want to challenge and dislodge. Understand how it ensnares you, how it disables you from making change and what its weaknesses are, how it does not add up.

Second, find a compelling, resonant metaphor around which to organise your narrative. Conventional educational narratives are about competing, racing, coming top of the league tables, delivering students to the next stage of education. Alternative narratives of agency are about

growth, building, dreaming, travelling, stepping into the possible, preferable future.

Third, create a structure to the narrative which encompasses the setting (where and when the action takes place); the protagonists; the choices they have to make and what that reveals about their character and values. The resolution to the dilemmas they face provides the narrative with its moral point.

Fourth, use that structure to illuminate the way ahead, what lies in store and how the narrative can help people to navigate in an uncertain terrain.

Fifth, and finally, a good narrative is an invitation to join in, to tell your story, in your voice. Narratives that bind people together are still unfolding. People can find meaning in a narrative because it resonates with them, they can find themselves in it. A good narrative resonates. Most of the schools moved away from mechanistic narratives towards narratives that encouraged mutual growth of head, hand and heart.

As mentioned earlier, at Mount Barker Waldorf School, for example, they moved from a metaphor based on getting on a train to a metaphor of learning as scuba diving.

*We had metaphors for our school, and we talked about being on a train, and that predictability of the school day for teachers and for students, and for parents as well. It was like being on schedule, on the train tracks, getting on the right carriage. Everyone was invested in this kind of model. And then we've kind of looked at this new model of scuba diving, where you are exploring all around you. You need some good equipment and proper training but then you just need to feel the wonder of where you are.*

## Lesson Ten: Whole-school leadership

School leaders play a critical role in helping this narrative to emerge and in convening people around it. The leaders in the A Lab schools have different personal styles. Some lead from the front very visibly; others hold back, creating the conditions for others to take leadership. Despite these differences in style, the leadership they show and cultivate has several characteristics that are different from the conventional model.

The role of school leaders is to promote leadership as learning across the school.

In the conventional model, leadership comes from leaders who occupy a position in an organisational hierarchy. Leaders make critical decisions, deploy resources and set the direction; followers

follow. In A Lab schools, leadership is a form of shared learning, in situations of uncertainty, where outcomes cannot be fully specified in advance and have to be created through mutual action. Here, to lead is to learn and to encourage others to learn what is possible.

The consequence of this is that leadership has to be distributed, as students and teachers learn to lead in situations that are not standardised. Leaders cultivate other leaders and spread the capacity for leadership. That might be sometimes on the basis of knowledge and expertise; at other times it might be due to lived experience or tacit know-how.

At Scotch College a middle leader reflected as follows on advice the principal gave her.

*One of the things he said was that to be an innovative educator you need to try new things; we don't mind if you fail but we want you to fail fast, learn, and then get on with the journey.*

The role of school leaders is to promote leadership as learning across the school. One way to think of this is that school leaders need to become convenors of deep-seated cultural and systems change across the organisation, to bring together the people who need to be engaged to make change happen.

The power to convene system change takes a rare combination of conviction and pragmatism: a commitment to a cause, combined with a recognition that solutions only emerge collaboratively through shared learning. Good convenors are able to grow creative communities, joined in a shared cause to explore what is possible and to make change together.

Convenors go under several guises. Some call this role system stewardship; others refer to them as system orchestrators. A system convenor is anyone who takes responsibility for remaking the patterns, the relationships and interactions that comprise the system and which enable shared learning.

System convenors are not project managers, facilitators, visionary charismatic leaders, brokers, counsellors or mentors, although they may well deploy these skills. System convenors:

- create an invitational narrative, which attracts people to come together to explore possibilities for system change;
- help people to see the opportunity from different perspectives, which requires empathy and imagination;
- encourage people to move across and flex boundaries of organisations, disciplines and professions, to promote learning through unusual exchanges;



- 
- develop a shared narrative of the new alternative system, which also gives each of those involved a new narrative about their own role;
  - work on power, both hard and soft, informal and formal, to shift the mindsets of those in power and to build up the influence of those with little power.

For Scotch College, Bethany Christian School and Endeavour College, there is a real sense that they are convening; creating a space into which people can step, and creating conditions so that people can find better ways to achieve what's important for them.

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## Student agency and school systems

The A Lab schools were all different. Some were small primary schools; others large schools serving students from nursery through to the end of secondary. Some were religious in inspiration, others secular. Some had deep roots in a proud history; others had been set up quite recently. The point of their journeys towards student agency is that they were all different. They created their own stories, which resonated with their history, context and ambitions. There is no 'one size fits all'.

However, there are common ingredients to what these schools have achieved, why and how.

They put a sense of purpose, linking the school and the students' identity and intent, at the heart of learning. They believe in stepping into the possibility and potential of their students to open up new questions, to find new vantage points and solutions. They create a triangle of philosophy, product and practice to generate change, shifting constantly between all three. They promote agency both as an individual capability but mainly as a dynamic interaction between students

and teachers, where both parties have agency, possibility and responsibility. Through this they create new patterns to the interactions that make up the daily life of the school, new ways for students to interact with one another, with teachers and the outside world. To achieve that they deploy strategies, which spread the philosophy, develop new products and share new practices across the school. Critical to this are compelling shared narratives that invite people to come together to enact change – narratives which resonate with students and teachers, the past and the future – and, to achieve all that, the leaders in these schools are brilliant convenors, leading through shared learning, to give people the confidence and the courage to step into the possible, to make it real.

Yet these schools, of course, cannot make wholesale change on their own. They operate within systems, which constrain not just their behaviour but their ambitions and imaginations. How can this kind of school-level change translate itself into a vision of wholesale system change.

Here are four suggestions.

First, all systems change requires what Carlota Perez, the historian of technological revolutions, calls ‘visible attractors’ (*Technological Revolutions and Financial Capital*, 2002, Elgar, Cheltenham, UK). Richard Arkwright’s Cromford Mill, which opened in 1771, was a visible attractor for the cost-reducing mechanisation of the cotton, textile and other industries. In 1829 Stephenson’s Rocket steam locomotive won the race to connect Liverpool and

Manchester by rail and became the visible attractor for the age of steam power and transport. In 1875 Carnegie’s highly efficient Bessemer steel plant went on stream, becoming the visible attractor for what would become the age of steel. In 1893 the World Fair, held in Chicago, acted as the visible attractor for electrification. Now, these A Lab schools and others are emerging as visible attractors, the first working models, of a very different kind of system for learning.

**Table 1. System conditions for allowing and encouraging schools to help their students develop agency**

SCHOOL	SYSTEM
Learning to develop purpose; learning on purpose. Schools as purpose seeking.	Purpose seeking systems, find new purposes as conditions change.
Agency requires investment in knowledge and underlying capabilities.	Validate investments in non-cognitive capabilities vital for learning, knowledge acquisition and student flourishing.
Schools moving between philosophy, product and practice animated by underlying sense of purpose.	System based on philosophy of learning not position in international league tables, which allows for product and service innovation and new practices to spread across the system.
Students bring agency to life. A power shift to students generates more power across the school to initiate change.	Students as protagonists, designers, advocates, investors within the wider system through voice, choice and creativity.
Teachers as agents, with scope for judgement and initiative to design better learning environments.	Invest in teacher capacity and role as designers and facilitators of learning to develop student agency along with teacher agency.
Patterns of interactions, where, when, how long and what for, change in the school. Old constraining patterns broken; new patterns emerge.	Enable new patterns of interactions to emerge across the system by devolving and deregulating, allowing boundaries to be broken and crossed. Allowing more time for learning in more settings.
New methods of recognition of learning for student agency.	Enable new frameworks of assessment and recognition to emerge, to allow more formative, holistic accounts of student achievement and capability.
Strategies for change come together based on philosophy, product and practice.	Encourage strategies for change through philosophical inquiry into the nature of learning, rapid new product development across the system and forums for shared practice.
Create compelling narratives that invite students and teachers to step into the possibilities of change.	System develops invitational narratives of change, which help illuminate the way forward for the entire system.
Distributed leadership for learning. Leaders as convenors of systems change.	Distributed leadership for learning. Leaders as convenors of systems change.

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Second, to change an entire system requires a rearrangement of all the patterns of relationships within it. It is not enough to have school-level innovation when we need system-level innovation. When electrification was shown to work at the

We need more experiments at the level of cities, regions, provinces and nations of minimum viable systems, which include shifting regimes of regulation, accountability, training, funding and, critically, assessment.

World Fair, held in Chicago in 1893, what was on show was the crude but working system linking light bulbs, generators, distribution networks. That system had taken contributions, both technical and economic, from many players, including Westinghouse, Edison, Tesla and their teams, as well as the financier JP Morgan. In Chicago this collaboration produced not just a product nor an infrastructure of machinery, but a ‘minimum viable system.’

We need more experiments at the level of cities, regions, provinces and nations of minimum viable systems, which include shifting regimes of regulation, accountability, training, funding and, critically, assessment.

Third, to make that possible we need A Lab-style programs at the level of an entire system, to convene all the players, teachers, students, employers, policy-makers, inspectors, politicians, to bring about collective change.

Finally, fourth, the ten lessons in promoting student agency that we have drawn from the experience of these schools have correlations in what the wider system needs to do to make that possible. We need to address the system conditions for allowing and encouraging schools to help their students develop agency. Those conditions are set out in Table 1.

# Appendices

## A Lab schools and team members

### **Bethany Christian School**

Wendy Matear – Principal  
Amelia Chandra  
Jeremy Graetz  
Nathan Grierson  
Aaron Mabikafola  
Melissa Taylor

### **Endeavour College**

Glyn Roberts – Principal 2021  
Heather Vogt – Principal 2019-2021  
Sandra Barry  
Rod Dissel  
Kirsty Hansen  
Marni Harding  
Louisa Mulligan  
Troy Thomson  
Sharon Ward

### **Scotch College**

Dr John Newton – Principal  
Carole Frew  
Anne Fromholtz  
Sarah Lane  
Sebastien Lefevre  
Nina Richards  
Tracey Wallace

### **Tatachilla Lutheran College**

Noel Mifsud – Principal 2020  
John Dow  
Lindee Hopkins  
Caroline Pritchard

### **Walford Anglican School for Girls**

Rebecca Clarke – Principal  
Emily Button  
Sheridan Cox  
Kellie Mackereth  
Alice Speirs  
Hannah Trengove

### **Wilderness School**

Jane Danvers – Principal  
Tansy Chen  
Maria Criaris  
Rhiannon Giles  
Julie Grant  
Danielle Kemp

### **Calvary Lutheran Primary School**

Angela Branford – Principal  
Samantha Bailey  
Michelle Holmes  
Paul Kaesler  
Renee Wehner

### **Mount Barker Waldorf School**

Liam Waterford – Acting  
Principal  
Eleanor Waterford  
Fiona Vogel  
Nic Massacci

### **Southern Vales Christian College**

Jenny Nelson – Principal  
Amanda Bone  
Shaneel Wall  
Jacqui Lovett  
Heidi Scriven  
Hugh Serfontein  
Robyn Jellings

### **University Senior College**

Anita Zocchi – Principal  
Tim Agnew  
Nadia Lovett  
Ann Rayson

### **Westminster School**

Simon Shepherd – Principal  
Sharyn Darrell  
Jude Depold  
Chris Graham  
Darren McLachlan  
Claire Muirhead  
Angela Phillips  
Andrea Sherwood  
Natalie Ziedas

### **Youth Inc**

Fred Heidt – Executive Principal  
Lauren Lovett  
Carrie Phillis  
Michelle Richards

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### **Agency in Mathematics Research group**

Bec Ingham – Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School Para Vista  
Angela Phillips – Westminster School  
Rhiannon Giles – Wilderness School

## The Learning Future Podcasts

Special thanks to the teachers who took part in The Learning Future Podcasts:

Learning on purpose	Capabilities and Agency
Westminster School (Angela Phillips)	Endeavour College (Sandra Barry)
Wilderness School (Rhiannon Giles)	Southern Vales Christian School (Jacqui Lovett and Heidi Scriven)
Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School Para Vista (Bec Ingham)	Youth Inc. (Carrie Phillis)

Agency as philosophy, product and practice	Students bring Agency to life
Calvary Lutheran Primary School (Renee Wehner)	Calvary Lutheran Primary School (Renee Wehner)
Walford Anglican School for Girls (Alice Speirs)	Bethany Christian School (Aaron Mabikafola)
University Senior College (Tim Agnew)	University Senior College (Nadia Lovett)

Teacher buy-in	Create new patterns
Bethany Christian School (Nathan Grierson)	Tatachilla Lutheran College (John Dow)
Mount Barker Waldorf School (Eleanor Waterford)	Mount Barker Waldorf School (Nic Massacci)
Westminster School (Andrea Sherwood)	

How to recognise Agency	Strategies for innovation and change
Mount Barker Waldorf School (Fiona Vogel)	Scotch College (Tracey Wallace)
Tatachilla Lutheran College (Lindee Hopkins)	Tatachilla Lutheran College (John Dow and Lindee Hopkins)
	Endeavour College (Louisa Milligan)
	Walford Anglican School for Girls (Sheridan Cox)

Leadership	The Agency School
Bethany Christian School (Wendy Matear)	Scotch College (Ann Fromholz)
Endeavour College (Sandra Barry)	Youth Inc. (Carrie Phillis and Lauren Lovett)
Scotch College (Sarah Lane)	

With thanks to these schools who contributed at various times across the duration of the project:

Encounter Lutheran School	St Andrew's School
Golden Grove Lutheran Primary School	Trinity College South
Pembroke School	Willunga Waldorf School

## School websites

**For more details on the work of each of the schools involved in the A Lab, go to their individual student agency sites, as listed below.**

Bethany Christian School	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/bethany">agencylab.agency/bethany</a>
Calvary Lutheran Primary School	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/calvary">agencylab.agency/calvary</a>
Endeavour College	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/endeavour">agencylab.agency/endeavour</a>
Mount Barker Waldorf School	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/mountbarker">agencylab.agency/mountbarker</a>
Scotch College	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/scotch">agencylab.agency/scotch</a>
Southern Vales Christian College	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/southernvales">agencylab.agency/southernvales</a>
Tatachilla Lutheran College	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/tatachilla">agencylab.agency/tatachilla</a>
University Senior College	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/usc">agencylab.agency/usc</a>
Walford Anglican School for Girls	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/walford">agencylab.agency/walford</a>
Westminster School	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/westminster">agencylab.agency/westminster</a>
Wilderness School	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/wilderness">agencylab.agency/wilderness</a>
Youth Inc.	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/youthinc">agencylab.agency/youthinc</a>
Agency in Mathematics	<a href="http://agencylab.agency/maths">agencylab.agency/maths</a>

## Full podcast addresses

### A Lab

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-1](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-1)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-2](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-2)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-3](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-3)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-4](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-4)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-5](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-5)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-6](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-6)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-7](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-7)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-8](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-8)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-9](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-9)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-10](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/a-lab-10)

### MetaPraxis Project

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/meta-1](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/meta-1)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/meta-2](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/meta-2)

[thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/meta-3](http://thelearningfuture.com/the-learning-future-podcast/meta-3)





CHARLES LEADBEATER

### About the author

Charles Leadbeater is an internationally renowned author and advisor on innovation, including to the OECD's 2030 framework. He is a co-director of the System Innovation Initiative at the Rockwool Foundation in Copenhagen. From *Personalisation through Participation* (Demos, 2004), through to his last CSE Seminar Series Paper *Student Agency: Learning to make a difference* (2017), he has advocated student agency should be core to effective and engaging learning.

### About the paper

This paper, in partnership with the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia, presents lessons participating schools learned from the three-year Student Agency Lab project. The 'A Lab' helped schools help one another develop practical approaches to achieving greater agency among students; and to explore the role of teachers, as well as the organisation and leadership of the whole school. The lessons learned come under the following headings: Learning on purpose; Dynamic capability; Philosophy, product, practice; Students bring it to life; Teachers as agents; Creating new patterns; Recognising agency; Strategies for change; The power of narrative; and Whole-school leadership. The paper concludes with comments on the implications for student agency and school systems.