

## **Getting Started with Autonomy Support**

### **Four ways to start supporting autonomy in the classroom**

Researchers have pointed out seven or eight strategies proven to help foster autonomy in the classroom. These four, universally recommended by SDT researchers, are a good place to start.

#### **1. Work to develop an “invitational” style**

The goal here is to use fewer commands and directives (anything intended to make students feel forced or pressured to do something), replacing them with suggestions, invitations, or information. This helps students feel like you’re there to help, and that commands will be saved for situations that could become dangerous or hurtful.

What an autonomy-supportive teacher might say (rather than “Do it this way,” or “You should do it like I said”):

“Many people find it helpful to start like this...”

“You might consider sketching out some ideas first, before working on the final product.”

“Adding a comma here might make it easier for readers to understand the meaning.”

#### **2. Increase efforts to take students’ perspectives**

Understanding and responding to students’ perspectives supports intrinsic motivation and builds trusting relationships. Students’ perspectives can be sought with questions like:

- How do you feel about this material?
- Is what we are doing in class relevant to your life?
- What are you most interested in learning about?

Students understand that a class cannot be tailored to what they want to learn, but if their perspective is sought with sincerity, they appreciate both the effort and the teacher who asked. Plus, it’s all the better if occasionally something can be done to tailor a lesson in favor of interests students have shown.

Perspective seeking also helps autonomy because it allows student “voice” to develop as students feel free to express their opinions to someone who listens respectfully; confidence and trust grow when students know they are listened to and accepted regardless of what they say.

#### **3. Acknowledge and accept students’ expressions of frustration or negativity**

Learning is best when it takes a little effort. Yet sometimes the effort feels over the top. Or it’s been a bad day even before class started. Sometimes, even, students get to the point where they think “I hate this material, and I hate this class.” Autonomy is supported when the teacher can listen to what seems to be the cause of the frustration, and can show acceptance of the student’s frustration, negativity, or even anger.

Things a teacher might say:

“I realize this is hard! Do you know which part is the hardest for you?”

“I know it seems impossible, but I promise it will get easier if you give it a chance.”

“Let me tell you what I felt like the first time I tried to do this!”

#### **4. Provide rationales: explain why this material might be useful or relevant to students' lives**

A rationale is an explanation. It offers a reason (or reasons) why what is being learned in class might be important, might be helpful in some way, or relevant to a student's life. Offering a rationale is one of the most powerful tools teachers have for helping students' motivation become more internal, more autonomous. It may be additionally helpful if the teacher gives students a chance to come up with rationales.

Things a teacher might say:

"Can anyone think of a reason for why a basketball player might use fractions?"

"Today I want to introduce you to ways that mammals are different from the frogs and salamanders we were studying earlier. I know lots of you have cats or dogs at home, so this might be interesting to you."

"Tomorrow is our day to go to the food pantry and meet the staff. I'd like to tell you a few things that I've learned about the people who work there. It might help you appreciate what they're doing and why it's helpful to the community."

The four strategies above are a synthesis of top recommendations from the following, each of which offers further suggestions for the teacher:

Deci, E.L., Eghrari, H., Patrick, B.C., & Leone, D.R. (2000). Facilitating integration: The self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of Personality*, 62, 119-142.

Patall, E.A., & Zambrano, J. (2019) Facilitating student outcomes by supporting autonomy: implications for practice and policy. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 6, 115-122. doi: 10.1177/237273219862572

Vansteenkiste, M., Aelterman, N., De Muyndck, G.-J., Haerens, L., Patall, E. & Reeve, J. (2018). Fostering personal meaning and self-relevance: A self-determination theory perspective on internalization. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 86, 30-49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2017.1381067>

Niemiec, C. & Ryan, R.M. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7, 2, 133-144.

Reeve, J., Ryan, R.M., Cheon, S.H., Matos, L., & Kaplan, H. (2022). *Supporting students' motivation: Strategies for success*. New York: Routledge.