

You Say You Want an (Education) Revolution: Student Ownership of Learning is the Key

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The familiar Beatles' song *Revolution* was popular at a time when social and political change was needed in our world. The education system has needed the same kind of revolution for a long time. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines revolution as "a fundamental change in the way of thinking about or visualizing something: a change of paradigm". The revolution in education that needs to take place is in the method used to achieve the main goal of education: to create learners. The emphasis in education should be on *student ownership of learning* in which students develop a personal drive to learn and pursue knowledge.

If you stopped anyone in the hallowed halls of a school and asked what *student ownership of learning* means you would get a myriad of responses. In most contexts ownership implies that something has been purchased (such as a house or car) and that the owner now has complete control over it. When talking about *student ownership of learning* that interpretation does not hold up.

In 2009, Justin Wiley, a Master's candidate at the University of Hawaii, wrote a thesis that examined what *student ownership of learning* truly means. Wiley suggests (and any personal searches will corroborate) that most **educational** definitions or uses of the phrase involve one or more of the following: Ownership as Right and Responsibility, Ownership as Buy-in, and Ownership as Identifying With.

1. Ownership as Right and Responsibility

This is the most frequently used definition. Authors speak of students taking responsibility for their learning. Often this involves a 'loosening of the reins' by the teachers allowing students to make choices in the classroom. Allowing students to decide what course of action will lead them to the goal of mastering a subject is giving them the responsibility.

2. Ownership as Buy-in

This definition is when an author "is referring to one's commitment, involvement with, or loyalty toward something" (Wiley, 2009, p. 29). The ownership is not necessarily because the person helped in decision making, but still he or she agrees with the plan and are willing to move forward. The problem with this definition is that it simply means a person has made a decision, which he or she will abide by, but may not feel passionate about it.

3. Ownership as Identifying With

This definition is when an author believes that "'ownership' of a thing suggests pride over, intense commitment to, or a personal connection with that thing" (Wiley, 2009, p. 31). While many aspects of this definition of ownership overlap with the previous two, the emphasis is on helping students to feel a sense of accomplishment in their work.

As Wiley points out, the problem with these definitions is that they are really *educational definitions of ownership* which must be distinguished from *student ownership of learning*. Each of the definitions of ownership described certainly contribute to what we are striving for with *student ownership of learning*, but this educational revolution needs to dig deeper. In his attempts to explain his definition, he makes the following statements:

Practically speaking, *ownership of learning* is the attitude of laying claim to one's personal charge for learning—of assuming a specific course of learning as one's own. In search of a beginning for this attitude, we are interested in the point at which a student's interests and priorities are adjusted towards an intentional and directional thirst for learning (Wiley, 2009, p. 37).

In order to distinguish the difference between *love of learning* and *ownership of learning* he states

Ownership of learning is more than a strong preference for learning; it is a preference with direction and focus—the desire to solve one's problem or complete one's quest, to understand it, communicate it better, or create something with it (Wiley, 2009, p. 39).

Love of learning is driven by being enamored, while *ownership of learning* is driven by mission which finds its fulfillment in the degree to which it gains focus, clarity, or momentum.

Ownership of learning more resembles a quest—with a specific starting point and path of progression as the question gains definition, focus, or changes direction altogether (Wiley, 2009, p. 40).

Ownership of learning emerges (in part) because of the presence of a certain type of learning environment—it is a quest at that point, but not a quest that will

necessarily continue automatically. It is fragile at first and highly dependent upon the learning environment. It does not immediately become something robust, but is developmental, and either strengthened or inhibited according to the inputs and support it receives (Wiley, 2009, p. 40).

Ownership of learning does not occur innately, but has a very clear beginning. It is triggered by some catalyzing experience which has the effect of illuminating or opening up new avenues in a learner, ordering and drawing new connections between ideas, or simply revealing a proficiency or interest that was not there before" (Wiley, 2009, p. 40).

Ownership of learning is not something that is "given" or "provided," from one to another. It is awakened within an individual in response to given stimuli" (Wiley, 2009, p. 45).

Going back to the original goal of education to create learners, Wiley presents the following question and answer:

What variable, on the part of the student, is most fundamental, foundational, and both potentially and presently empowering to the enterprise of education?...

It is easy to see how our view of *ownership of learning* fulfills each of these requirements (Wiley, 2009, p. 53-54).

Taking Wiley's work into consideration what should the next steps be in this revolution? Anyone in education knows that there is no silver bullet and if there was one, someone would have found it by now. As it true of most revolutions it takes a lot of thoughtful planning and dedicated people to carry it out.

First of all, it is important to state that ownership (in its educational definition) is actually a part of the *student ownership of learning* we are striving towards. The revolution needs to move beyond this by taking steps to do research on a grander scale. Current research in education tends to focus on very specific areas such as student engagement, student empowerment, student success, effects of peer-tutoring, etc. While all of these are noble, necessary, and will further the education agenda, each one is just a part of a student's education. To use a cliché "sometimes we cannot see the forest for the trees". The educational world has done a great job on focusing on the "trees" and needs to take a step back and look at the "forest". *Student ownership of learning* begins when a valuable catalyzing experience occurs, therefore research needs to focus on what can be done so that every student has this experience.

As this research begins, it is easier to see the obstacles that a revolution like this involves than to see how to make it to the finish line.

1. By the very nature of ownership, there is nothing that can be done to MAKE people take ownership of their learning.
2. Different methods will work for different people.
3. People will be on different timelines. The catalyst necessary to begin the path toward *ownership of learning* may not happen for some until they are 30 years old or may happen when they are 10 years old.
4. This is not going to be formulaic.

Even though we have these obstacles (and many more) the question still needs to be asked: What would an educational system look like that increases the chances of everyone finding their catalyst for ownership of learning? This is where it gets exciting! At this point we don't know what we don't know. The conversation must be started so that this question can be answered. Once we know what this new revolutionary system should look like we have to fight our way through a lot of established systems and structures to make changes. If you are one of the fortunate people who have achieved ownership of your learning then take up the mantle and join the revolution. Let's start the conversation and begin doing research to create a society of people with a personal drive to learn and pursue knowledge.

References

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