

Agency



An Empowering 30-Lesson
Curriculum for
High School Students

LESSON PLANS

Edited by
Ian V. Rowe

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Introduction



This curriculum aims to help young people untangle their own assumptions (sometimes called “mindsets” or “ways of thinking”) and challenge those that disempower them.

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

—Victor Frankl

Dear Educator,

Thank you for choosing this novel educational resource and joining us in empowering young people with a sense of their own agency in the world!

I am also grateful to the team at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Education Policy for their research support on this project. Rooted in the ideas and principles I explore in my book [Agency](#), these 30 lessons will inform young people and inspire them to employ their personal agency, defined as the force of one’s free will, guided by moral discernment.

This material was created to be used in the classroom or outside of it—by a trained teacher or a layperson who cares about kids. Whatever your role and whether you lead only a few lessons or use all 30, our goal is for young adults to complete these units with an increased sense of identity and purpose, enabling them to achieve their full potential, regardless of their background. As you begin, we’d like to offer some high-level guidance about these resources.

First, though applicable to various ages within what I refer to as “the deciding decade” (ages 14–24), this curriculum was written with a ninth-grade student in mind. The readings and content have been selected for that age, maturity level, and decision timeline.

Second, this curriculum intends to expand students’ knowledge about the world. Students will encounter classic poems, important events and figures from history, and key insights from modern psychology. You will need to do some basic prep work in advance of class discussion to familiarize yourself with these readings and potential avenues for application. Rooting discussions in the contributions of other thinkers helps students respond not merely from personal experience but also using ideas and themes beyond what they may already know.

Third, unlike many English or social studies classrooms that (rightly) seek to ensure that students retain specific content, this curriculum leverages that content for a deeper purpose: to invite them to explore various worldviews—both their own and others’. By “worldview,” we do not mean merely a fixed picture of how an individual sees the world from the outside but the different lenses through which individuals interpret reality. A worldview answers questions such as the following:

- Does life have inherent meaning?
- Why is there suffering?
- What should a fair and good society look like?
- How do I take responsibility for what I can control and acknowledge that which I cannot?

All human beings understand experience through specific lenses, whether religious, philosophical, psychological, or a combination. This curriculum aims to help young people untangle their own assumptions (sometimes called “mindsets” or “ways of thinking”) and challenge those that disempower them.



Introduction

Next, this curriculum asks a lot of you and your students. To support implementation, each lesson follows the 5E's template: engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate. (Not every lesson uses every phase, and the phases may be in different orders in some lessons.) Sam Northern's "[The 5E's of Inquiry-Based Learning](#)" provides a strong overview of each phase.



5E'S LEARNING CYCLE

- Engage
- Explore
- Explain
- Elaborate
- Evaluate

- **Engage.** The engage phase of the 5E learning cycle is student centered and should create a desire to learn more about the forthcoming topic. The engage phase is not intended for the teacher to lecture, define terms, or provide explanations.
- **Explore.** The explore phase provides students with real-world activities. These activities will help students use prior knowledge to start examining new ideas and concepts. This phase of the learning cycle nurtures students' understanding.
- **Explain.** The explain phase is more adult directed, guided by students' experience in the previous phase. Students explain their understanding of concepts, and the teacher corrects misconceptions. During this phase, you may provide formal definitions, notes, and labels.
- **Elaborate.** In the elaborate phase, students are encouraged to apply their now deeper understanding of the lesson's concepts while extending their understanding by using new skills or concepts. Students may conduct additional investigations, develop products, share information and ideas, and deepen their understanding of the concept(s).
- **Evaluate.** The evaluate phase encourages students to assess their own understanding and abilities, and it provides opportunities for teachers to evaluate student progress toward achieving the educational objectives. Formative and summative assessments are appropriate in this phase.

Throughout this curriculum, we use an exit ticket to assess student comprehension. An exit ticket is a final reflection that students must complete to exit that lesson.

Within each lesson, we provide cues to support you—but you will need to come prepared with the materials, background knowledge, and key questions in hand. Each lesson includes a list of materials, such as sticky notes or PowerPoint slides, that you will need; be sure to review that list and secure all necessary items before you begin.

As you review each lesson in advance, you may want to think about bringing in other adults to support particular conversations. The video in Lesson 9, for instance, shows young people overcoming traumatic childhoods. It may resonate too closely with some of your students, and you will need to exercise judgment about the time, place, and team you need to help them reflect and respond.



Introduction

Promoting agency requires wisdom, judgment, and intention.

Finally, we hope this curriculum brings you joy and hope in a world where both are in short supply. Promoting agency does not mean denying pain and suffering. On the contrary, promoting agency requires wisdom, judgment, and intention in the face of pain. It also requires the capacity for wonder and a willingness to ask for help.

In our experience, young people long for the kind of rich conversations that these lessons provide. It's important to remind youth that they have a say in what they do and whom they become but also that determining what is worth doing and what version of themselves is worth becoming requires wisdom. That's where you come in. Thank you for allowing us to come alongside you as you serve the next generation!

Onward,
Ian V. Rowe
Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

You will be
empowering
young people
with a sense of
their own agency
in the world!

This journey
begins with you.

Resources for Educators

- **Ian V. Rowe**, *Agency: The Four Point Plan (F.R.E.E.) for All Children to Overcome the Victimhood Narrative and Discover Their Pathway to Power*
- **Angela Duckworth** on *Building Grit*
- **Martin Seligman** on *Positive Psychology*
- **Lisa Miller**, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*

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Supporting Alignment with National Standards

Agency supports alignment with several major standards frameworks, reflected at the start of each lesson, making it straightforward to integrate into existing health, English language arts, and social studies programs:

- SHAPE America's National Health Education Standards—through lessons addressing personal health concepts, decision-making, goal setting, and advocacy
- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA): Literacy in History/Social Studies (Grades 9–10)—through engagement with primary and secondary texts on agency, meaning, and civic life
- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA): Reading; Informational Text (Grades 9–10)—through close reading, evidence-based discussion, and written reflection

UNIT 1

AGENCY

Exploring Agency in Terms of Choices

Lessons 1–10

How do your personal choices build a sense of agency?

Course Goal

Students recognize and appreciate their ability to lead purposeful lives. This course will give them tools to develop their own goals and understanding of life's meaning, the scope and constraints on the choices they make, and the consequences of their choices on their life trajectories.

UNIT 1: AGENCY

Exploring Agency in Terms of Choices

LESSON 1

Agency

Students will explore Ian V. Rowe's definition of agency



MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

- Paper and writing utensils for students
- Highlighters for students (optional)
- Sticky notes (at least three per student)
- Four signs
- Copies of excerpt from *Agency* by Ian V. Rowe

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

SHAPE America

Targets

1.12.8, 8.12.1, 8.12.4

ELA Social Studies

Targets

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1,
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2

ELA Informational Text

Targets

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1,
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2

Lesson 1: Agency



MATERIALS

- Paper and writing utensils for students

ENGAGE

10 minutes

Activity:

Discuss free will and independence.

Notes

What the Teacher Does:

1. Direct students to define *free will* and *independence*.
2. Ask students to voluntarily share their responses.
3. Provide the definitions and examples of *free will* and *independence*. Make sure students understand the difference between these terms.

What the Students Do:

1. Reflect on the meanings of *free will* and *independence*. Respond on paper.

Teacher Notes:

Definitions:

- *Free will* refers to the ability to act at one's own discretion. It is the state of being able to make choices and decisions without interference.
- *Independence*, on the other hand, refers to the state of being self-reliant and self-sufficient.

Examples:

Free will:

- Choosing to go to school
- Choosing to follow or break the law
- Choosing to complete your homework
- Choosing not to choose

Independence:

- Financial independence: Becoming self-sufficient rather than relying on others for financial support
- Personal independence: Making decisions and taking responsibility for one's own life choices
- Political independence: When a nation governs itself without external control or influence
- Emotional independence: Having the ability to manage emotions and not rely solely on others for validation or happiness

Lesson 1: Agency



MATERIALS

- Paper and writing utensils for students

EXPLAIN

10 minutes

Activity:
Introduce agency.

Notes

What the Teacher Does:

1. Present Rowe's definition of agency: *Agency is the force of one's free will guided by moral discernment.*
2. Focus on the first part of the definition: *Agency is the force of one's free will.*
 - a. Consider students' definitions of *free will*. Ask students to put this in different terms. (The teacher can also highlight that agency does not mean complete independence.)
3. Focus on the second part of the definition: *guided by moral discernment.*
 - a. Define *discernment* for students.
4. Ask students to put the definition of agency in their own words.
5. On the whiteboard, add students' rephrased definition of agency.

What the Students Do:

1. Write the definition in the center of a piece of paper, leaving room for notes around it.
2. Rewrite the definition in their own words below the main definition.

Teacher Notes:

Rowe's definition of agency: *Agency is the force of one's free will guided by moral discernment.*

Moral discernment refers to the ability to

- Make discriminating judgments and recognize the moral implications of different situations and actions;
- Distinguish good from bad, accurate information from misinformation, and primary values or priorities from secondary ones;
- Draw conclusions from discernment to develop convictions; and
- Decide between truth and error, right and wrong.¹

1. Moral discernment definitions are adapted from Sinclair Ferguson, “What Is Discernment?,” Ligonier, January 6, 2023, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/discernment-thinking-gods-thoughts>.

Lesson 1: Agency



MATERIALS

- Highlighters for students (optional)
- Sticky notes (at least three per student)
- Copies of excerpt from *Agency* by Ian V. Rowe

Notes

ELABORATE

**15
minutes**

Activity:

Read an excerpt from Rowe's book *Agency* to expand on the definition.

What the Teacher Does:

1. Before distributing the reading, make sure each student has at least three sticky notes.
2. Explain instructions: Students will read the excerpt. As they read, they will look for phrases, words, or lines that
 - a. Help explain what agency is,
 - b. Explain what agency is not, or
 - c. Demonstrate agency (agency in action).
3. Distribute the reading. Read it aloud. (Either read to students or have students read.)
4. Provide time for a second, silent read to complete the sticky note assignment.

What the Students Do:

1. Read the excerpt. Highlight or underline lines that
 - a. Help explain what agency is,
 - b. Explain what agency is not, or
 - c. Demonstrate agency (agency in action).
2. In addition, highlight any lines, words, or phrases that just “pop.”
3. Write their responses on separate sticky notes.

Teacher Notes:

- Definition: Agency means embracing empowerment instead of victimhood.

Lesson 1: Agency



MATERIALS

- Sticky notes (from previous lesson)
- Four signs titled:
 1. What is agency?
 2. What is not agency?
 3. Agency in action
 4. Lines or phrases that popped

Notes

EXPLORE

**10
minutes**

Activity:

Reflect on classmates' findings about agency.

What the Teacher Does:

1. Put four signs up in four locations in the room:
 - What is agency?
 - What is not agency?
 - Agency in action
 - Lines or phrases that popped
2. Have students place their sticky notes around the signs. Then, direct students to read what others wrote, thinking about commonalities or strong phrases and quotations that resonate with them.
3. Going around the room, ask students whether they noticed specific commonalities, which phrases stood out, and whether they had additional thoughts about each question.
4. If there is time, solicit responses on what students added to their journal definition.

What the Students Do:

1. Place their sticky notes in the proper location.
2. Read their classmates' sticky notes, thinking about commonalities, strong phrases and quotations that resonate with them, and relevant thoughts they'd like to explore.
3. After reviewing sticky notes from classmates, discuss with the class.
4. Add to their journal definition.

Lesson 1: Agency



MATERIALS

- Paper and writing utensils for students

EVALUATE

**5
minutes**

Activity:

Reflect on classmates' findings about agency.

Notes

What the Students Do:

1. Complete the sentence starters.

Agency means _____ .

Agency is not _____ .

To demonstrate agency, an individual _____.

Lesson 1: Agency

Reading

Excerpt from *Agency* by Ian V. Rowe

Chapter 1: What Is Agency and Why Do We Need It Today?

Pages 18–21

But exactly what is agency? The word *agency* is a linking of two Latin roots: *ag*—to “do, act, or drive”—and *ent*—“that which does something.” Deriving from the medieval Latin word *agentia*, the word *agent* refers to one who does something in the “mode of exerting power or producing effect.” Thus it is a small wonder that the word *agency* and the words *agenda*, *agile*, and *agitate* share the same Latin root concerning action. All four involve the tasks, movement, and drive we need to get things done. For me, however, the essence of agency goes beyond one’s capacity simply to achieve. The concept also encompasses one’s ability to persevere despite adverse conditions or hostile environments while simultaneously following a North Star of righteous behaviors. . . .

The practical wisdom of [Martin Luther King Jr., Martin Seligman, and Albert Bandura] holds that each of us has the . . . ability to make informed choices that determine our own fate. However—and this is the key—no human acts alone. Agency is individually practiced, yet socially empowered. . . . All three men stress that social forces from a range of morally formative institutions can create the conditions under which people exercise free will and build the mental muscle of agency.

Reverend King was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize “for his non-violent struggle for civil rights for the Afro-American population.” He had inspired a movement of largely young people (as he said in his acceptance speech in Stockholm) who were eager to move forward with “a majestic scorn for risk and danger, to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice.” . . . King was keenly aware that black Americans were being victimized by subhuman treatment based on racial animus, but he believed that being victimized did not mean taking on a victim mind-set; nor did it mean that his followers had to respond in kind. King knew that if black Americans adopted and internalized an identity defined by victimhood or resorted to the vicious tactics they were condemning, they would sacrifice their moral authority and undermine the goal of self-determination. . . .

King rejected powerlessness and passivity; but he firmly believed that substituting revenge for powerlessness was not the way for humans to achieve true freedom and flourish. . . . In the end, he believed that while circumstances do impact and shape a person, they are not the sole determining factor in their life. Each person is responsible for their own choices and can choose to grow from mistakes and hardships. In short, Reverend King advocated agency.

. . . Seligman defines agency as one’s belief that she or he can change the world *for the better*, which is the component of Seligman’s definition that I find most compelling. Free will exists for all humans. . . .

. . . Agency is not free will alone. Rather, agency is the force of free will when it is governed by morally discerned choices that dictate its eventual impact. Efficacy, optimism, and imagination give free will a direction. They create the vector of agency. . . .

Albert Bandura was one of the first psychologists to argue that a sense of personal efficacy forms the foundation of self-determination. “Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives,” he wrote. “Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act, or to persevere in the face of difficulties.” . . .

Herein lies the paradox of agency, both its true promise and its peril. Its presence creates the conditions for unprecedented human advancement. It allows us to surmount previously insurmountable obstacles and endure the seemingly unendurable—while on a self-determined path to achieve widespread improvements in our social well-being. But the absence of agency is not a neutral, no-fault state of benign existence. An individual or society immersed in self-disbelief, pessimism, and close-mindedness is like a planet in retrograde: it moves backward.

UNIT 1: AGENCY

Exploring Agency in Terms of Choices

LESSON 2

Choices, Good and Bad

Students explore the benefit of thoughtful choices.



MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

- Paper and writing utensils for students
- Copies of excerpt from *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine
- Copies of the poem "I Choose"
- PowerPoint slide
- Equipment (computer, projector, and whiteboard) to project the PowerPoint

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

SHAPE America

Targets

1.12.4, 1.12.8, 5.12.1, 5.12.2,
5.12.5, 7.12.2, 7.12.3, 8.12.1

ELA Social Studies

Meets

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1

Targets

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2

ELA Informational Text

Meets

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1

Targets

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2,
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.8,
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.9

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad



MATERIALS

- Paper and writing utensils for students (optional)

ENGAGE

**10
minutes**

Activity:
Identify choices.

Notes

What the Teacher Does:

1. Ask students to reflect on choices they made today or in the past week.
2. Write out students' responses on the whiteboard to allow students to see all the choices they make.
3. Ask students to come up to the whiteboard and circle decisions that are easy decisions and box decisions that seem more difficult.

What the Students Do:

1. Reflect on choices they made today or in the past week.

Teacher Notes:

If the class completed the first lesson on agency, the teacher can connect that students are not adults and so they are not fully independent (they are not self-sufficient and self-reliant), but they still have free will: the ability to act at one's own discretion and control one's own behavior. The choices students make are expressions of free will.

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad



MATERIALS

- Copies of the excerpt from *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine

EXPLORE

**20
minutes**

Activity:
Read the excerpt from *The Age of Reason*
by Thomas Paine (Chapter 13).

Notes

What the Teacher Does:

1. Explain Thomas Paine was a political philosopher who wrote *Common Sense*, which argued for America's independence from England and the creation of a democratic republic. This excerpt is not from *Common Sense* but from *The Age of Reason*—a philosophical writing on the power of reason.
2. After students have reread the excerpt, pose questions about the reading to explore how students' thoughts can support their learning and growth.

Discussion questions:

- What are the two types of thoughts, according to Paine?
- Of these two thoughts, which would be voluntary?
- According to Paine, what is the value of the involuntary thoughts that “bolt into the mind”?
- What evidence in this passage suggests that formal education is a starting point but that students eventually have to take responsibility for their own learning?
- Do you think Paine would encourage you to act on thoughts that bolt into your mind? Explain your reasoning.
- How can impulsive behavior affect the outcome of your choices?
- Why might it be important to consider some unintended outcomes of a choice?
- For our choices boxed on the whiteboard, what might Paine recommend we do? Immediately respond or stop and reflect?

What the Students Do:

1. Reread the excerpt from *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine (Chapter 13) and respond in a group discussion to the questions about the reading to explore how their thoughts can support their learning and growth.

Continued on the next page

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad



- Copies of the excerpt from *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine

Notes

EXPLORE, continued

Teacher Notes:

This passage argues that there are two types of thoughts: those we actively generate through reflection and those that spontaneously appear in our minds. Paine emphasizes that “involuntary” thoughts are often the source of new ideas and knowledge. He also argues that formal education is a starting point, but true learning comes from self-reflection and critical examination of one’s own thoughts. “Small capital,” as Paine uses it, is an analogy to an investment in one’s education. Formal education is a seed investment, metaphorically speaking, in future learning.

Discussion questions and answers:

- What are the two types of thoughts, according to Paine?
Answer: those that we produce ourselves by the act of thinking and those that “bolt into the mind”
- Of these two thoughts, which would be voluntary?
Answer: those that we produce ourselves by the act of thinking
- According to Paine, what is the value of the involuntary thoughts that “bolt into the mind”?
Answer: “It is from them I have acquired almost all the knowledge that I have.”
- What evidence in this passage suggests that formal education is a starting point but that students eventually have to take responsibility for their own learning?
Answer: “As to the learning that any person gains from school education, it serves only, like a small capital, to put him in the way of beginning learning for himself afterwards.”
“Every person of learning is finally his own teacher.”
- Do you think Paine would encourage you to act on thoughts that bolt into your mind? Explain your reasoning.
Answer: No. He treats these thoughts with civility, taking care to examine if they’re worth entertaining.
- Answers will vary for the following questions: For our choices boxed on the whiteboard, what might Paine recommend we do?
Immediately respond or stop and reflect?

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad



MATERIALS

- None needed

EXPLAIN

10

minutes

Activity:

Discuss how considering the consequences can affect the quality of our choices.

Notes

What the Teacher Does:

1. Provide explicit instruction: Not all decisions will be easy, but every decision will have immediate, short-term, and potentially long-term effects. We make the choice; we reap the rewards or consequences. Making a decision without regard to the logical consequences (thinking through the immediate, short-term, and long-term effects or considering one's values and beliefs) is more likely to result in a bad choice.
2. Have students return to their "engage" responses. Ask them to think about their identified choices; consider the immediate, short-term, and long-term effects of those decisions; and connect this to which choices were good or bad. This discussion is intended to reveal the range of ideas and experiences, centered around choices students have made.
3. Note to students that as we mature, we transition from having choices made for us by guardians to making our own life decisions.
4. Before deciding: Stop and reflect! Between stimulus and response, there exists a moment when we can pause and consider our options. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. Taking time to reflect before making decisions allows us to respond more thoughtfully, benefiting ourselves and those around us (resulting in better choices).
5. If there is enough time, introduce [Decision Education](#) for more specificity on exactly what to stop and reflect on.
6. Ask students to consider their choices from the engage activity, picking students who raise their hands to share.
7. Have students consider the statement: "Taking time to reflect before making decisions allows us to respond more thoughtfully, benefiting ourselves and those around us." Ask students to share with a partner what this means to them or how their experiences related to this statement.

Continued on the next page

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad



MATERIALS

- None needed

Notes

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EXPLAIN, *continued*

What the Students Do:

1. Listen to their instructor's explicit instruction.
2. Consider their choices from the engage activity. Participate in a discussion about the effects of their choices.
3. Consider this statement: "Taking time to reflect before making decisions allows us to respond more thoughtfully, benefiting ourselves and those around us." Share with a partner what this means to them or how their experiences relate to this statement.

Teacher Notes:

If the class completed the first lesson on agency, the teacher can remind the students of Rowe's definition (*Agency is the force of one's free will guided by moral discernment*), noting that this lesson focuses more on moral discernment.

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad



MATERIALS

- Copies of the poem "I Choose"
- Paper and writing utensils for students
- PowerPoint slide

EVALUATE

10
minutes

Activity:
Students silently read the poem "I Choose."

What the Teacher Does:

1. Invite the students to read the poem and answer the questions from the PowerPoint.
2. Ask students to share responses if time allows.

Notes

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What the Students Do:

1. Read the poem and answer the following questions:
 - Which line suggests the importance of thinking about a choice before making it? Explain your selection.
 - How does this poem reflect, or not reflect, the full definition of "agency"? Remember: Agency is free will *guided by moral discernment*.

Lesson 2: Choices, Good and Bad

Reading

Excerpt from *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine

Any person, who has made observations on the state and progress of the human mind, by observing his own, can not but have observed, that there are two distinct classes of what are called Thoughts; those that we produce in ourselves by reflection and the act of thinking, and those that bolt into the mind of their own accord. I have always made it a rule to treat those voluntary visitors with civility, taking care to examine, as well as I was able, if they were worth entertaining; and it is from them I have acquired almost all the knowledge that I have. As to the learning that any person gains from school education, it serves only, like a small capital, to put him in the way of beginning learning for himself afterwards. Every person of learning is finally his own teacher.

I Choose

To live by choice, not by chance.

To be motivated, not manipulated.

To be useful, not used.

To make changes, not excuses.

To excel, not compete.

I choose self-esteem, not self-pity.

I choose to listen to my inner voice,

Not to the random opinion of others.

I Choose to be me.

Origin and author unknown