



***Agency in Education: A Psychological Perspective***

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
Standard High School Psychology Courses

**Keywords:** Human Agency, Psychology, Philosophy, Choice

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** This unit teaches students to examine the different factors that affect human agency in education from a psychological perspective. Students will, after investigating the philosophical and psychological foundations of human agency, ask what they can do to enhance their own human agency. They will evaluate case studies that represent human decisions, and create action plans to enhance human agency in their educations. Students will be able to use their research, readings, and shared ideas from class discussions to evaluate the meaning of human agency. The unit will take two weeks to complete and include readings on the theme of human agency and psychology, individual research projects on a case study, an essay that links their case study with human agency in their own lives, and an action plan on how to increase the degree of control they exert over any aspect of their lives that they choose.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year in to 64 students in standard psychology.*

*I give permission for the Institute to publish my curriculum unit and synopsis in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.*

## *Agency in Education: A Psychological Perspective*

*Hannah Wenger*

### **Introduction**

“What a man *can* be, he *must* be... to become everything that one is capable of becoming.”<sup>i</sup>

Students and teachers alike think of themselves as engaged in self-creation. High school students in particular are concerned with the identity-definition that accompanies adolescence, and teachers are eager to see their profession as a guiding reinforcement to teenage self-development. The tools of education are meant to open students’ minds, provide them with choice, empower them with knowledge, and invest them with the capacity to take confident charge of their own futures. We speak with fervor about relevant curricula, differentiated choice, and student engagement. The quest for a curriculum that educates students in content and strengthens their skills is blended with the need to instill in them a passionate desire to learn.

In many high schools, teenagers connect with teachers who inspire them to pursue a lifelong hunt for learning. Some quaff the cup of knowledge eagerly, while others are more reluctant to buy what their teachers are selling. In urban schools or schools where students associate with an oppositional identity, seeking to resist the dominant culture and its educational system despite the power gained by such, students are particularly difficult to inspire with the value of education<sup>ii</sup>. Therefore, they have more to benefit from explicit learning about education from a psychological perspective than their privileged peers; they can use what they learn to actually gain control of their education and become empowered to change it.

Psychology is a multidisciplinary study that can teach students to think about why they behave the way they do, and what factors around them and inside them coincide to create their situations. Psychology incorporates biological fact, cognitive theories, and socio-cultural understandings into analysis of human behavior. Students who are acquainted with these modes of analysis will be able to apply them to their own lives, considering the philosophical question of agency in conjunction with the psychological hard realities that define it. Combining the question of whether humans truly have free will and what exactly that concept encapsulates with their knowledge of biological processes, cognitive theories, and sociocultural lenses will give a direction to their learning.

The blending of psychology and philosophy in pursuit of the question of human agency allows students to use the scientific facts about behavior that they learn in class to

address the humanistic challenge as to how much power we have over our actions and whether we are, in fact, in control of our own behavior. As students mull over what exactly human agency is made up of, and whether we have it, they will find themselves applying it to their own educations.

Urban students who see their education as a place of displacement from their primary identity, a brief stint of powerlessness where they lack self-efficacy and the ability to choose their own educational path, let alone succeed in it, can be greatly empowered by applying their understanding of psychology to their own agency in education. Student inquiry will drive their research, so that not only will they choose what aspect of educational agency to focus on, but their own questions will dictate the direction of their learning, giving them ownership of their education even as they investigate the factors that affect it. Applying their discoveries to their own personal academic schema will make their psychological studies immediately relevant and potentially transformational. It is my hope that students will emerge from their psychological research and writing of their personal academic action plans with a new sense of their individual investment in their education, as well as with the practical strategies to make their plans succeed.

## **Rationale**

In designing this unit, I hoped to combine the psychological analysis in which students must be proficient by the end of a high school psychology course with the direct personal relevance that not only gets students engaged and motivated, but that can possibly prove transformative to their educational career. Asking students to synthesize their knowledge of psychological analysis through research into individual case studies, which they will then apply to their own lives, forces students to see psychology as a living discipline.

The psychology curriculum which my class is using asks students to spend the first units investigating research methods and the three lenses of psychological analysis: biological, cognitive, and sociocultural. This unit will come after those, and I plan to have students use these three lenses as well as their skills in evaluating research to focus on the specific question of human agency in education. Students will be given a choice of what particular factor affecting educational choices they wish to research. Thus, this unit will incorporate the skills that they have studied in the semester previously and which they must hone in order to achieve success in high school psychology, preparing them with a rigorous application of their research, analytical, and writing skills.

Students will engage with three essential questions that develop their understanding of human agency in increasingly specific and practical directions. The questions are as follows:

What is human agency?

What role does human agency play in education?

What can psychology tell us about human agency?

How do social, cognitive, and biological factors affect choice?

How can we increase human agency in our own education?

To scaffold student understanding, the questions will be discussed in increasingly individual levels, first as a full class, then in small groups, finally in partners, and then with a writing assignment that is individual. This will allow students to see models of the necessary modes of thinking, which they can then use in their groups, with their partners, and through individual thinking.

The unit will begin with activities and learning strategies that offer students a broad reading foundation in the philosophical and psychological background of the question of human agency, to allow them to discuss, debate, and analyze the roles that biology, cognitive processes, and social or cultural dimensions have upon human behavior, assessing as they do the meaning of human agency. This will give them the starting point they need to answer the essential questions of the unit.

Students will then progress to individual research of an aspect of education and the degree of choice exerted in it, assessing the factors that influence this area of their lives. Previous discussion as a group of the meaning of human agency means they will have a solid foundation to engage with the question of efficacy in education on an individual, particular level. They will choose research studies related to their particular question, evaluating its conclusions about human agency and reporting their findings to the class before composing essays on how human agency in this particular case enters into their own lives. This intense engagement with a specific facet of human agency in education means that students will become experts in a certain area that is relevant to their lives.

The final project of the unit will directly facilitate student application of their learning to their own lives. They will write an action plan on how they can increase their control over the aspect of education that they have chosen, whether that be by changing their biological condition through healthier habits, using their cognitive findings to change their study habits or make decisions more rationally, or mobilizing their community around a cause they find important. The unit will thus progress from foundational, broad discourse, to individual research and analysis, to personal application of their learning.

### **Demographic Background**

I will be teaching both IB and regular psychology (which has no set curriculum or exam standards to teach to), so I will calibrate both classes with the IB curriculum, since it emphasizes critical skills and conceptual lenses rather more clearly than other curricula at which I have looked. My curriculum unit will fit in with the IB curriculum's emphasis on psychology education as requiring an understanding of the synthesis of biological, cognitive, and social effects upon human psychology. The unit will allow students to use

these three lenses to further their own research and specific ideas. However, I also hope to create a unit that is not simply academically rigorous and enlightening, but empowering.

My students will be 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who take psychology as an elective, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade IB students. In my school, many of the students in standard psychology have been forced there by nonresponsive counselors, and will be in no way delighted to take psychology nor convinced that they must pass it in order to graduate high school. All IB students in the school must take IB psychology in order to achieve their IB diploma, so they will hopefully be more invested in the course than the standard students. Either way, I think it's particularly important that my students see the course as relevant and directly applicable to their lives, as well as helping them prepare for the IB exam at the end of the course.

The school at which I teach is a Title I school with students who are surrounded by an environment of repression and discouragement. The school is around 1,700 students large, and two years ago changed from a magnet school with an IB program by combining with a local school that closed, creating a schism in its identity. A majority of the students (above 80%) are African-American, with an increasingly growing Latin American population. Most students are on free or reduced lunch.

The subject of human agency in a psychology class offers a chance to mobilize students around their own education, and to allow them, through a medium of student choice and attention to what concerns them, to think about a chance to change. Learning about the factors that affect human behavior and discussing what, exactly, leads to increased human agency means that students are excellently positioned to take behavior into their own hands and begin to address the biological, cognitive, and social aspects of their education, whether that be making certain they get enough food to power their minds, learning how to study correctly, or mobilizing around community movements towards success in school. I hope to position their final project in the unit so as to achieve some measure of this by the students who take this class.

### **Content Background**

As the concept of human agency is a notoriously hard one, I will be pulling from many different texts to allow my students to formulate their ideas around it. I will also be particularly careful about helping them narrow their thinking into the direction of human agency in education, a particularly relevant area for them. There are several different areas of research that I have looked into. All of it will inform the construction of this curriculum, though in general students will only access excerpts of some.

#### *Foundations of Human Agency*

Albert Bandura offers the idea that the foundation of autonomy is self-efficacy, a belief in one's own ability to control one's life. Alfred Mele, on the other hand, notes that autonomy and agency come from intention. The two together combine into a recipe for human agency simple enough for students to grasp—that a belief in one's ability to do, as well as intention that directs one's actions, can lead to human agency in whatever arena they choose. Students will use these texts as a starting point for offering their own foundation of human agency.

### *Social Construction and Agency*

An important facet for students to consider is the degree to which our environment and social milieu determines or composes our degree of agency. Albert Bandura suggests that people create social systems, which in turn create them. It's possible that all of our decisions are actually socially constructed by the norms around us. In this light, freedom must be understood through the lens of communal responsibility that actual human agents are enmeshed in. Students must grapple with the extent to which their human agency is determined by the society around them.

### *Choice Parameters and Agency*

As students narrow in on the psychological lens of human agency, they will immerse themselves in psychological literature on the subject of choice. They will consult Iyengar and Schwartz on the way too much choice demotivates people and Patall's meta-analysis of the research done on choice, as well as other studies. Gollwitzer's advice on how to actually implement one's intentions will be a critical part of their reading. Students will use these to consider not merely what makes up global human agency, but how individual decisions are affected by their specific parameters.

### *Education and Agency*

Hanan Alexander discourses on the relationship between agency and education. He offers a framework for allowing students and teachers choice and agency in the classroom. He discusses the paradox of guidance and freedom that evolves when any kind of teaching is, by definition, ideology, since teaching necessitates deciding to invest students in a certain mindset and values. Students will use this as a launching pad from which to consider their own educations and the factors that inhibit or enable their choices.

### *Research Studies on Psychology and Choice*

Students will be offered a wide variety of psychological research studies detailing various biological, cognitive, or sociocultural realities that can either interfere with or enhance our free will. Each student will choose one study to focus upon, reading and evaluating it

with the analytical skills they've developed over the course of the semester, and then applying its findings to an evaluation of their own educational initiative.

### **Content Objectives**

Students will begin the unit by defining human agency through use of examples. They will then enhance their personal definitions through reading and evaluating philosophical definitions of human agency, connecting the foundational philosophical concept to psychological discourse.

Students will next read, replicate, and evaluate psychological experiments on the nature of choice. Students will engage in psychological discourse as they participate in research. They will read psychological studies with the purpose of assessing their aim and reproducing their results in the school environment.

Students will then complete the analytic part of the course. They will express their opinions about the factors that constitute human agency in a Socratic Seminar with evidence from their experiments and the readings with which the class began. They will be able to formulate an opinion and support it with their own research as well as published research.

### **Teaching Strategies**

This unit will take two weeks to complete. It will be a primarily inquiry-driven unit. Students must first define human agency, by way of examining several scenarios of people making choices. They will use the scenarios to decide whether we consider certain factors to be more under the control of people and others to be outside their control. The conclusions students reach here will propel the rest of the unit. They must then think about what the criteria for having human agency are, what factors affect human agency, whether human agency is individual or collective (or situational?), whether human agency is merely a social construct, who we see as having more or less human agency in the world and why, and lastly, how we can increase human agency in our own lives. The curriculum unit will thus move from theoretical grounds to highly personal ones.

We will begin to address the essential questions raised above through class readings and discussion, focusing on philosophical and psychological texts that shed light both on the nature of human agency and on human agency in education. Together, we will read excerpts from Griffith's introduction to *Free Will: The Basics*<sup>iii</sup> and Bandura's foundational ideas about human agency. These philosophical and psychological readings on the nature of human agency will supplement students' prior knowledge about what comprises the causes of human behavior. Students will read, discuss, and debate the roles that biology, cognitive processes, and social or cultural dimensions have upon human behavior, assessing as they do the meaning of human agency. Next, they will use these readings to create their own model of the

factors that go into decision-making and which factors or criteria are highly necessary for human agency to exist.

Students will then move to inquiry-based reading of experiments on choice, which they will replicate in the school environment. They will already be accustomed to reading psychological texts at this point in the semester, and so can engage with them in groups without requiring the whole-class teaching that the philosophical texts needed. After students have been exposed to numerous ideas and, through scaffolded questions, begun to formulate their own, they will participate in a Socratic Seminar around the question of “How do social, cognitive, and biological factors affect human agency?” This will allow students full engagement with the psychological factors that enter into the philosophical concept of agency.

Students will then isolate a specific factor of human agency in education to research. Teacher guidance will help them choose case studies to research that are related to their particular question, whether it be connected to social manipulation, biological pressures, or cognitive reasoning. Students must evaluate what the case study tells us about human agency and how it applies to their own lives. They will report their findings to the rest of the class in a roundtable discussion, with other students offering comments and feedback. Finally, students will compose essays on how human agency was affected in their case study, and how the factor they examined enters into their own educations. The final project of the unit will be an action plan by the student on how they can increase their control over the aspect of their own educations that they have chosen, whether that be by changing their biological condition through healthier habits that enhance learning, using their cognitive findings to change their study habits or make decisions more rationally, or mobilizing their community around a cause they find important to their education. Whichever they choose, they must create a plan and state what they think the outcome will be.

This unit on human agency through the lens of psychological analysis will help students make sense of the components of psychology with real-life cases. They will be able to apply what they have learned in their own lives, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and practical insight. They will apply the same evaluative abilities that they use to conduct academic research and write critical papers, to the question of control and power in their own lives, thus leading to an empowering, transformative educational experience.

### **Learning Activities**

This unit on human agency and psychology will be divided up into several lessons. They will progress to allow students to engage in critical thinking, evaluate philosophical approaches to human agency, discuss the role of psychological studies in understanding human agency using evidence they’ve read, research their own individual topics with regard to human agency, present on their research project, and formulate personal action plans to enhance their control over their own educations.



## *Lesson 1: Choice Scenario Gallery Walk*

To start their learning, students will begin by being introduced to human agency as a concept. They will receive a rudimentary definition of human agency as the question of how we make our decisions and whether we have control over them. In support of this definition, they will read several scenarios, and must consider whether each scenario actually allows for real choice. Thus, before they are presented with a stock model of what human agency means according to philosophic thinkers and psychologists, they will work to construct their own model of it in their minds, drawing from experiences which are directly relevant to themselves. The scenarios will center primarily around high school students' experiences so as to be relevant to their daily decisions.

Students will travel around the classroom to each scenario, reading and rating each by leaving a sticky note with a number from 1-10. The lower the number, the less agency the student believes that the character had in that scenario—the less the character made an authentic choice that came from the character's own inner being. Students who are English Language Learners or with reading difficulties will be told that the scenarios are color-coded; they only have to read and respond to the scenarios that have their color on the page, and those coded with their color will be easier to read.

### Scenario 1:

Kahmiyah has three older brothers, two of whom are in gangs. Everyone she knows has been in fights at one time or another. Her mother has told her never to take anything from anybody. She's sitting in class when another girl pushes Kahmiyah's desk back, rudely telling her to get out of the way and cursing at her. Kahmiyah reacts in a split second with a quick swing.

### Scenario 2:

Jawuan is in the army and every day his officers tell him when to wake up, what to do every second of the day, what to eat, what to wear, and how to behave. Jawuan is happy to follow their orders because he wants to become a professional soldier.

### Scenario 3:

Someone tells Jasmine that Alejandro has been talking about her behind her back. She is hurt, and decides that she's through with Alejandro. She ignores him from then on, and spends the rest of the semester with other friends, until they graduate. After graduation, she finds out the person lied—Alejandro never said anything about her—the other person was just jealous of Alejandro. Jasmine feels as though she's been used.

### Scenario 4:

Markael is walking down the street when a police officer tells him to stop. Markael is in a hurry to get home and babysit for his siblings, but he also doesn't want to get into trouble with the police. He stops to let the policeman ask him questions.

Scenario 5:

Sarah just bought a new dress. She's a little uncomfortable in it, since it's so short, but all her friends are wearing dresses just like it, and they tell her she looks really cute in it.

Scenario 6:

For the past two years, Zach has been going to rallies and protests to keep marijuana illegal. He has lots of arguments with his friends about it, and one day, one of them makes a really good point. Zach thinks he might have changed his mind, but there's a rally against marijuana that he was supposed to speak at tonight, and he doesn't want to look weak or break his commitment, so he goes.

Scenario 7:

Rashawn is walking past a gas station when he suddenly hears gunfire. His instincts take over. When he's conscious of what he's doing again, he realizes that he's hidden behind a big dumpster and is hugging himself. He doesn't even remember running.

Scenario 8:

Yakira knows she should stop eating, but it just tastes too good! The other times she's eaten this much ice cream, she got sick afterwards. She keeps eating, and sure enough, she gets sick. Her brother yells at her, telling her that she knew she was going to get sick and that eating that much ice cream was choosing to get sick.

After the gallery walk of scenarios, the class should pull together for a full-group discussion of the scenarios, with students explaining how and why they ranked the scenarios for choice. The following discussion questions will also be answered full-group.

Post-Scenario Discussion Questions:

Can choice be a matter of degree? As in, can something be partially our own choice, partially another impetus?

What factors besides our conscious choice affect our behavior?

What factors does a choice have to have to make it our own free will?

On the board, come up with a class definition of human agency that incorporates these questions. Students are free to construct their own in addition if they disagree.

*Lesson 2: Class Readings: Philosophical Foundation of Human Agency*

After establishing a class definition of human agency, it's time for students to engage with philosophers' definitions of human agency. Students will, as a class, using the popcorn method of a student calling on another after they've read, read the following excerpts. They will annotate using the system they've become accustomed to in class:

Underline the main ideas, exclamation points beside things they find surprising, question marks beside things they have questions about, and stars beside things they found interesting. Students will read excerpts from Meghan Griffith's<sup>iii</sup> text as a foundation for their thoughts on human agency.

Students will begin with Griffith's Introduction to *Free Will: The Basics*, reading the first section, "The Problem of Free Will." After finishing reading each subheading, they will pause to outline that section in their notebooks, following the class routine of title, subheading, key words, quick summary, and fascinating information. As they outline, they will share one note for each subheading with a partner, trading their thoughts on the reading. Afterwards, students will share their partners' best ideas with the class, allowing for a full-class discussion of the basic concept of free will outlined in the excerpt, and how it relates to human agency.

Students will very soon begin to wonder why this topic, which seems philosophical in nature, is being brought up in a psychology course. To answer that question, they will brainstorm the role of psychology in understanding free will, and come up with psychological factors that could affect free will as discussed by Griffith. Students will consider the three core lenses of psychological analysis already studied (biological, cognitive, and sociocultural psychology) and their impact upon a person's degree of human agency.

Last on their reading list is Albert Bandura's 2006 article, "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency." Students will read an excerpt entitled, "Core Properties of Human Agency," in which Bandura breaks human agency down into four components. His list, which includes intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness, will be compared to the student-made definition of the first lesson, and examined for comparison with what students already know about cognitive psychology from an earlier unit. Most importantly, students will grapple with Bandura's famous statement that "belief of personal efficacy" is the foundation of human agency. They will be invited to consider whether other factors could perhaps have more importance in determining the degree of one's human agency.

### *Lesson 3: Inquiry-Based Experiments—Psychology and Choice*

The next step for students is engaging with psychological literature on the nature of choice. By this point in the course, students should be comfortable with the format of an experiment and have replicated and written up their own experiment, so the academic language will not scare them, though the experiment reports will be cut down so as to be more readable. Students will read an excerpt of one of the famous case studies researched by Iyengar and Lepper in their 2000 study on choice, and will move to a table with the third of the class that is reading that study. The studies are differentiated by length, so as to allow stronger readers a text with more details with which to engage, and weaker

readers an easier task. The class will be divided by Lexile level so as to facilitate learning for each student at their level.

Students will be aided in their reading by the Analysis Guide I provided for them. It asks them pre-reading questions as well as questions for during the reading and after it. The questions prompt them to remember the purpose of their reading, helping them assimilate it into their view of human agency and choice as a psychological phenomenon.

Next, students will replicate their research in the school lunchroom. After they have run the experiments, they will analyze their findings and compare them with the original research. They will engage in small-group discussion to prepare for a Socratic Seminar on the nature of human agency and how psychological principles surrounding choice can be used to optimize our behavior, with particular reference to student learning. The small groups will be sets of three, with one student from each of the case studies to share their learning with the other two who read a different case study. They will pool their knowledge as they prepare for the Socratic Seminar.

#### *Lesson 4: Socratic Seminar on Human Agency*

Students will engage in a Socratic Seminar investigating the factors that affect human agency and who, in particular, has it. They will arrange themselves in a circle or square so that all students can see each other. If the class is too large to permit of comfortable conversation, have an inner and outer circle, fishbowl style, with the outer circle recording the conversation inside and adding to it in writing, then switch. Students who are leaders in the classroom will be called upon to run the Socratic Seminar, choosing discussion questions and generating conversation with their thoughtful comments.

Students will answer the overarching question: “What psychological factors affect human agency, and who in our society can be considered to have human agency?” They will approach this question through multiple more focused questions which allow them to build up to the concept. As in any Socratic Seminar, they will be required to use evidence from the texts discussed to support their opinions and statements. As they consider the ways that human agency can be defined, they will, through verbal consideration, polish their model of human agency. Students will end their Socratic Seminar by writing a paragraph to answer the overarching question.

#### *Lesson 5: Individual Research on Agency in Education*

Students will, individually, choose a specific factor of human agency in education to research. They will be prompted to consider one of several themes of choice in education: social manipulation, biological pressures, or cognitive reasoning. Students will then be given a list of case studies related to these themes. For example, a student interested in how students lose the ability to determine their own educational direction in the face of

peers who are all performing at a certain level will be directed to read about the Asch Conformity Experiment. Students interested in the effects of identity on education, and whether one's race or gender has more effect upon educational success than one's personal choice, will be directed to Beck's article on race and gender's effect on youth's perceptions of education. Students who are more inclined toward a biological approach to human agency will read about the effect of sleep deprivation or hormones on learning.

Students will consider whether the topic they are researching presents an external threat to human agency, or whether it's merely a factor to be considered which in no way affects one's personal control over one's life. They will address whether it is something to be overcome, and in that case, how to subdue this external factor, or how to absorb it helpfully into their personal choices as a factor that in no way limits them.

As students choose their area of interest, they will construct an outline that uses the information gathered to answer the question of what can affect their own personal agency over their education. They will list relevant examples from their own experiences, media representations, and firsthand observations that are related to their research, confirming or challenging the academic ideas they learn. They will also measure their psychological research against the philosophical ideas of human agency read as a whole class earlier in the unit.

The research will likely take students two to three days. During this time, students will also plan a five to ten minute presentation on their research, complete with a script to read and a visual to aid their presentation. The students will be required to make a recommendation to their listeners on how to enhance human agency and the ability to choose, given their particular factor researched.

#### *Lesson 6: Roundtable Research Presentations*

Lesson 6 is the presentation of research to the class by peers. Students will engage in roundtable presentations with three other students, each taking turns to share their research and to listen to each others' presentations. Students will be required to ask at least one question after each presentation, and then to give their presenters a "grade" using a teacher-provided rubric, so as to engage with each others' work. Students may also suggest alternative ways for enhancing personal human agency in education with regard to each particular avenue of research. If possible, divide students into groups so that they are presenting to a diverse audience who will present on different topics from themselves.

#### *Lesson 7: Writing Lab and Personal Action Plan*

The last lesson in the unit will assess students' learning and allow them to formulate their ideas formally. This will likely take 2-3 days. Students will write essays in which they

consolidate all that they have learned to answer the overarching question of what human agency is, what affects it, and specifically, how it can be threatened and enhanced in education for students. They will use all of the readings and research that they have done to achieve this.

Students will be provided with varying degrees of scaffolded support, differentiated by their writing ability as determined in previous work. Top students will simply write their essay after submitting an outline, while students of average capability will use an outline provided for them to guide their work. Students of more limited writing skills will be provided with sentence starters, and those students who are still in the process of learning English will fill in the blanks in generic worksheets that allow them to display their knowledge about human agency without formulating their own sentences.

The last part of the essay will be a personal action plan for students, in which they explain how they will enhance their control over their personal education. Applying all that they have learned about the factors affecting human agency will allow them to engage with their learning in a directly relevant fashion. They can consider changing their biological condition through healthier habits that enhance learning, using their cognitive findings to change their study habits or make decisions more rationally, or mobilizing their community around a cause they find important to their education. Whichever they choose, they must create a plan with a timeline and state what they think the outcome will be.

As part of their writing practice, students will engage in a writing lab, critiquing each others' writing using the essay rubric put into question form. This will allow students to evaluate others' work by the same standards the teacher uses, giving them additional insight into the requirements of a good essay. As they return to their own draft with the critiques of their partners, they will bring both the edits of their classmates, and their enhanced understanding of the requirements, to their final draft.

## **Appendix I: Implementing Teaching Standards**

Students will read and compare texts that address the concept of human agency. They will analyze the factors that affect student agency in education in terms of their influence and interaction through classroom discussion. They will use the fruits of their analysis to narrow their ideas, and research psychological studies for the purpose of answering a self-identified research question. Lastly, they will form action plans for their own educations that make use of their research discoveries and analysis of agency in psychology. These objectives will both enhance student skills that are necessary in psychology, and offer direct application to their own lives.

There are several NC Essential Standards of Psychology that students will perform. From 12.B.1.5, they will use biological knowledge to manage daily problems and improve the quality of life. The Essential Standards of 12.LC.1.2 through 12.LC.1.4 will

allow them to use the behavioral and cognitive factors they've learned about to understand consciousness, motivation, and emotion, as well as to improve their quality of life. The Essential Standards 12.S.1.2 and 12.S.1.7 offer them the chance to compare diverse cultural norms and use various theories of sociocultural psychology to consider societal impact on behavior. All of these content objectives will inform their construction of a definition of human agency as well as lending complexity and evidence to their individual research projects.

Students will, over the course of the unit, practice many of the Common Core Standards as well. They will engage with literacy standards that require them to cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis, integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information, and introduce precise, knowledgeable claims while creating an organization that logically sequences the claims, reasons, and evidence. Their written texts will allow them to practice these standards and improve in them.

The philosophic nature of the unit will lend itself to development in all of these areas as students engage with the ideas and juggle experimental evidence in their development of a position on human agency.

## **Appendix II: Teacher Materials**

Alexander, Hanan. "Human Agency and the Curriculum." *Theory and Research in Education* 2005. 3:343. This article draws on Neo-Marxist analysis to suggest that all education is ideological in nature, and then indicates how to surmount this by guiding students towards independence. Alexander's conclusion is that teaching children to make intelligent choices gives them control of their lives. This will open student dialogue about the degree to which education enables or restricts their choices, about what they should be taught. Alexander's suggestion of teaching rational skills, not content, will be highly explosive to many of them.

---. "Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory." *American Psychologist* Vol. 44, No. 9. Sept 1989. Here Bandura conceptualizes human agency as reliant upon self-efficacy. This evolves, in his later article (2006), into a four-part definition, but the basic notion of human agency as lying in self-efficacy emerges from this foundational article.

Baumeister, Roy. "Free Will in Scientific Psychology." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 3, No.1, Part I (Jan., 2008), pp. 14-19. This article provides a concise explanation of free will as it interacts with psychology. It covers historical perceptions of choice as well as the psychology of choice from a philosophical angle.

Leotti, L., & Delgado, M. "The Inherent Reward of Choice." *Psychological Science*, 22, 10, 1310-1318. January 01, 2011. This psychological study examines the effect of perceiving that one had control, using brain-imaging techniques to check reward

processing centers in the brain while triggering the anticipation of choice. The correlation between biological change and philosophical choice in this study allows a deeper look at how analysis of behavior involves many arenas of psychology.

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### **Appendix III: Student Materials**

Bandura, Albert. "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jun., 2006). Pp. 164-180. Web. Jstor. Accessed 12/6/14. This article articulates Bandura's first idea that human behavior is the result of interaction between personal and environmental factors. His list of the core elements of human agency offers a starting point for defining the foundation of the concept.

Griffith, Meghan. "Introduction." *Free Will: The Basics*. Routledge, 2013. This chapter provides a basic overview of free will with entry into some of the more interesting points of human agency. It introduces it as a philosophical quandary that presents several dilemmas: do we even want free will, can we have it, and does it matter.

Iyengar, S. S., & Lepper, M. R. (December 01, 2000). When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing? *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 79,6.)

*Research Studies on Psychology and Choice:*



Students will be offered a wide variety of psychological research studies detailing various biological, cognitive, or sociocultural realities that can either interfere with or enhance our free will. Each student will choose one study to focus upon, reading and evaluating it with the analytical skills they've developed over the course of the semester, and then applying its findings to an evaluation of their own educational initiative.

#### **Appendix IV: Analysis Guide for Case Studies**

Big Question: How should choice be utilized to optimize student learning?

Before Reading:

- What type of research would I use to assess the benefits, and risks of choice? What would be the advantages of an experiment, case study, interviews, or observations?
- What would be the aim of my research?
- How would I set up the experiment (procedure, independent variable, dependent variable, and control), or interview (structured, unstructured), or observations (participant, non-participant, covert or overt), or case studies?
- Do I have any predictions about my research? How can I keep them from interfering with the research?

While Reading:

Highlight:

- Yellow: The year, aim, independent variable, control condition, and findings.
- Red: Any part of the study that seems to affect its validity.
- Green: Any part of the study that you think could have particular relevance to student choice in their educations.

Describe the Research:

1. When was this study done?
2. What is the aim of this study?
3. Who is the target population of this study?
4. What was the independent variable in the study? What was the control condition?
5. Were there any confounding variables?
6. What was the procedure?
7. What were the findings?

Assess the Validity of the Research:

1. Were the participants a representative sample of the target population? Was there sampling bias?

2. Was the research ethical? Did it get informed consent, involve deception or debriefing, was it confidential, and were the participants protected from physical or mental harm?
3. Does the study have ecological validity—did it study what happens in real life?
4. Does the study have cross-cultural validity, or is it only based on one group? Does it say something timeless about human behavior, or only pertinent to when it was done?
5. Is the study reliable—can it be replicated?
6. Was researcher bias possible in this study? Where?
7. What factors would you change to improve the study?

After Reading:

Comparison of Research:

1. What does this study say in comparison to the other study?
2. Do you think one of the case studies is more valid than the other? If so, why?
3. When looked at together, what overall conclusions can you come to about human behavior around choice?

Metacognitive Analysis:

1. What questions did you ask while you read the studies? What challenges did you make towards the validity?
2. Using the studies, describe the role of cognitive, biological, and sociocultural factors in choice.
3. Is choice affected by all three levels of psychological analysis? One more than another?
4. To what extent do psychological studies provide a legitimate way of understanding human behavior? What other ways of knowing exist?
5. Do these studies prove anything, or merely give statistical likelihoods?
6. Do the claims made in the discussions of these studies imply ethical responsibilities?

Application to Student Choice in Education:

1. What kinds of choices do students regularly make in their education?
2. What choices do *you* regularly make in your education?
3. Using what you've learned from the studies, how should teachers use choice to optimize student learning?
4. Using what you've learned from the studies, how can *you* use choice to optimize your own learning?

Your Personal Conclusion:

Based on this case study, how should choice be utilized to optimize student learning? Where should it be applied and when?

## **Bibliography**

Alexander, Hanan. "Human Agency and the Curriculum." *Theory and Research in Education* 2005. 3:343. This article draws on Neo-Marxist analysis to suggest that all education is ideological in nature, and then indicates how to surmount this by guiding students towards independence. Alexander's conclusion is that teaching children to make intelligent choices gives them control of their lives. This will open student dialogue about the degree to which education enables or restricts their choices, about what they should be taught. Alexander's suggestion of teaching rational skills, not content, will be highly explosive to many of them.

Bandura, Albert. "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jun., 2006). Pp. 164-180. Web. Jstor. Accessed 12/6/14. This article articulates Bandura's first idea that human behavior is the result of interaction between personal and environmental factors. His list of the core elements of human agency offers a starting point for defining the foundation of the concept.

---. "Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory." *American Psychologist* Vol. 44, No. 9. Sept 1989. Here Bandura conceptualizes human agency as reliant upon self-efficacy. This evolves, in his later article (2006), into a four-part definition, but the basic notion of human agency as lying in self-efficacy emerges from this foundational article.

Baumeister, Roy. "Free Will in Scientific Psychology." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 3, No.1, Part I (Jan., 2008), pp. 14-19. This article provides a concise explanation of free will as it interacts with psychology. It covers historical perceptions of choice as well as the psychology of choice from a philosophical angle.

Gollwitzer, Peter M. "Implementation Intentions: Strong Effects of Simple Plans." *American Psychologist*, Vol. 54, No. 7. July 1999. Gollwitzer suggests a number of ways to improve one's ability to follow through on intentions. His study of drug addicts, schizophrenic patients, and frontal lobe injury patients allows a direct, realistic entry-point into the question of practical accomplishment of one's choices by free agency.

Griffith, Meghan. "Introduction." *Free Will: The Basics*. Routledge, 2013. This chapter provides a basic overview of free will with entry into some of the more interesting points of human agency. It introduces it as a philosophical quandary that presents several dilemmas: do we even want free will, can we have it, and does it matter.

Iyengar, S. S., & Lepper, M. R. (December 01, 2000). When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing? *Journal of Personality & Social*

*Psychology*, 79,6.) This review of studies indicates the effects of too much choice in several different well-known psychological experiments. In all situations, participants had better outcomes when given a limited number of choices rather than too many. This offers a focused look at the particular psychology surrounding choice, narrowing it down from the philosophical field into a psychological framework.

Leotti, L., & Delgado, M. "The Inherent Reward of Choice." *Psychological Science*, 22, 10, 1310-1318. January 01, 2011. This psychological study examines the effect of perceiving that one had control, using brain-imaging techniques to check reward processing centers in the brain while triggering the anticipation of choice. The correlation between biological change and philosophical choice in this study allows a deeper look at how analysis of behavior involves many arenas of psychology.

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Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Robinson, J. C. (March 01, 2008). The Effects of Choice on Intrinsic Motivation and Related Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Research Findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134, 2). This meta-analysis collects data from numerous psychological studies on choice and its effect on motivation and performance. It also marks an interesting differentiation between the types of choice and their effects on motivation. As a practical, psychological application of the philosophical principles with which students will be working, this meta-analysis provides an avenue from which to connect the two disciplines under the umbrella of choice.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maslow, Abraham. "A Theory of Human Motivation." PDF version, *Psychological Review*. July 1 1943, p. 382.

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<sup>ii</sup> Ogbu, J. U. (September 01, 1995). Cultural problems in minority education: Their interpretations and consequences--part one. *Urban Review*, 27, 3. p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> Griffith, Meghan. "Introduction." *Free Will: The Basics*. Routledge, 2013.