

BOOK REVIEW

Empower: What Happens When Students Own Their Learning by John Spencer & A. J. Juliani

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Marlène J. Daicopoulos, BA, BEd, School of Health Professions, Murdoch University, Australia

Contact: marlene.daicopoulos@murdoch.edu.au

Empower. What does that mean exactly? A Google search provides many variations on the word. A commonality is the word *give*: “to give power or authority to; to enable or permit” (Empower, 2018a), and “give (someone) the authority or power to do something; make (someone) stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights” (Empower, 2018b). Giving someone the authority sounds like the willingness to work alongside them, to be their partner. John Spencer and A.J. Juliani’s book *Empower: What Happens When Students Own Their Learning* (2017) provides the reader with a map, various ideas, and some strategies on creating a partnership with their students.

Spencer and Juliani admittedly provide an unconventional publication. This easy-to-read book provokes naturally occurring thoughts and ideas as you go along. The authors do not claim to have the answers but encourage the reader to join the journey and collaborate with them (p. xlv-xlvi). Although they are primary teachers aiming to work side-by-side with students, I believe the book and its ideas are applicable to higher education and lifelong learning. Everything (curricula, maps, standards, etc.) relevant at all levels of teaching is discussed. Examples are included, with ideas that inspire creativity.

As primary teachers “practising what they preach,” they believe that when students exercise passion for something that interests them, they will own their learning, and the true learning will happen. The first obstacle for any teacher—if I may say obstacle because we often think it’s just too hard to try something new—is the need for a shift in mindset (p.xxix) from teaching students how to be compliant, to teaching them how to be empowered: a thought I am convinced most teaching professionals would agree with. “This book lays the groundwork for making this shift” (p. xxxii).

Spencer and Juliani break down, step-by-step, each shift necessary for empowering students. Consider shifting from *require* to *desire*, where a choice provides a sense of ownership. Instead of always providing the choices, shift to inspiring the possibilities by asking yourself “what decisions am I making for students that they could make for themselves?” (p. 55). They do not address the notion of creating innovators until chapter six. Not each and every student needs to be an innovator, but they do need to have the mindset and the ability to think like a self-directed learner. Spencer and Juliani are passionate about design thinking because of the ability to empower students, enabling student ownership (p. 99). Naturally, the next step

would be considering how students are assessed. Self-assessment has its challenges, but put in the correct context the authors believe that “assessment is only authentic if the students own the process” (p. 129). Next, chapter nine’s shift from *failure* to *failing* explains that “as long as we let students go through the entire process, and we support them along the way as best we can, failing is not a bad thing” (p. 155). Educators can tailor the system to the student by asking, “how can this be more adjustable? What can students do to modify this to meet their own needs?” (p. 172). Finally, in chapter 11, the authors refer to the teacher as a guide to the characters in a story. It is the student’s story and every project has one; the teacher, as the guide, is there to influence the storyline (p. 188). Spencer and Juliani feel that “the best stories occur when [we are] joining [the students] on the adventure, when we are embarking together and learning by each other’s side” (p. 187).

The last chapter provides the reader with a map and steps to follow to get started. Spencer and Juliani have laid excellent groundwork in strategies and thought processes on creating partnerships. Now they invite the reader to give it a go. I for one have started by asking how I can make those shifts.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Marlène J. Daicopoulos BA BEd, is currently working as ePortfolio Learning Support for the discipline of Nursing in the School of Health Professions at Murdoch University in Perth, WA, Australia. Her main interests are blended learning models, more specifically eportfolio learning, digital literacy, and at-elbow support for all involved.

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