

## Chapter 3: Rethinking Learners' Time

It's 12:45 p.m. on a typical Thursday —time for an afternoon check-in. As learners return from lunch, they form a circle with their educator, Brian. Brian asks learners to open their laptops and set their schedules for the afternoon. Learners quickly pull up their calendars and begin to evaluate their time and work commitments. As they do so, many ask Brian clarifying questions about the afternoon.

"Brian, should I come to the 1:30 p.m. optional presentation prep?" asks Max, a 7th-grade learner.

"Will you have all your follow-up assignments completed by then?" Brian answers. "If yes, attending the optional support session would be a great plan!"

Brian quickly peeks at 7th grader Lockhart's calendar, projecting it for others to see. "If you look up front, you'll notice that Lockhart plans to prepare for his Learner-Led Conference for 30 minutes during his white space. As conferences are coming up next week, that's an excellent use of his time. Lockhart, where do you plan to complete this work?"

"I'm going to work in a quiet room," responds Lockhart, "so I can stay super focused."

Brian reminds learners that they will all be in a mandatory lesson from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

"This means everyone in this room has at least 30 minutes of white space. Or up to an hour of white space if you aren't attending the choice quiet reading session. What are you going to do during that time?"

"I'm going to work on my reading reflection," says Macie, a 7th grader.

"Great!" responds Brian, "How long do you think that assignment will take you?"

As learners finish updating their calendars, Brian revisits a conversation he held with them earlier in the week. "On Tuesday, we discussed how much work you have been assigned this week versus the amount of white space, or free work time, available in your schedule. As we get closer to the end of the week, I'm curious: what decisions did you make to balance your workload? How did it play out for you over the last few days?"

Julian, a 6th grader, answers, "I decided to take my laptop home yesterday, and I got some work done then. I had thirteen assignments at the end of the week, and now I only have two left. I worked in a quiet room on Wednesday morning, and that helped me focus a lot."

"I was really overwhelmed on Tuesday," says Walden, a 7th-grade learner. "So I chose to complete my work in the smallest quiet room because it's where I'm most productive. I completed most of my cards to the best of my ability, but I did hit a wall where I was trying to be productive ALL the time and just couldn't focus anymore."

"Walden brings up a good point. Are humans able to focus all the time?" asks Brian.

"No!" respond the learners in unison.

“Exactly,” says Brian, “because we are humans, not robots. There is nothing wrong with having moments where we think, ‘Gosh, I just cannot get it together. I can’t focus right now.’ The most important thing is knowing what to do when you feel this way.”

Chiara, an 8th-grade learner, responds, “I like to take a break and organize a deck of cards by suit. It helps to calm and refocus my mind.”

“I go outside and do something,” says Max.

“Yeah,” adds Macie, 7th grade, “a change of scenery always helps me refocus.”

“Thanks for sharing your strategies. It looks like everyone’s got their schedules set up and are ready to tackle their work this afternoon productively,” says Brian. “It’s just 1:00 p.m., so please find your way to your first task. For those who choose quiet reading, I’ll see you in the front room in two minutes.” The circle, which lasted only 15 minutes, disperses as learners settle into their afternoon’s learning.

Hard though it may be to believe, this is a window into what time management and scheduling can look like in a learner-centered environment. Read on to learn about developing this mindset and approach to learners’ time and insight into the concrete structures that make it possible for learners to manage their own time each day.

## The mindset

At most schools, crafting student schedules occurs in the dog days of summer by a handful of administrators. With screenfuls of data detailing grades, test scores, room capacities, and Lexile brackets, adults set the coming year’s academic trajectories for hundreds of students. What is missing from this equation? The students themselves.

Embark learners set their own schedules on a weekly and daily basis. This practice grew out of a desire to accomplish multiple goals. First, in line with our mindset of radical trust, we start from the assumption that learners can and should be the designers of their own time. Second, having learners control their time allows them to increase agency meaningfully by developing valuable executive function skills. “These skills underlie the capacity to plan ahead and meet goals, display self-control, follow multiple-step directions even when interrupted, and stay focused despite distractions.”<sup>1</sup> We refer to this set of skills as agency.

We feel so strongly about the importance of these skills that agency is one of the six competencies upon which we design our instruction and provide graded feedback. We will explore our competency-based instructional design fully in Chapter 8. For now, know that our scheduling practice is one intentional way we help learners develop and regularly practice agency skills, such as

- Setting goals that support their development as a learner and a human,

- Planning for the time and resources needed to complete weekly tasks and responsibilities,
- Adjusting schedule as needed based on shifting priorities and,
- Staying focused on a task, knowing when and why disengagement or distraction happens, and developing strategies to refocus.

Through regular scheduling practice, learners discover their preferred work patterns and how best to budget their time for different tasks. In his eighth-grade year at Embark, Quinn explained, "Embark is trying to change how we think about education, which has stretched my brain all over the place. I really get to pick my learning path, so I have learned more. Making my own schedule has helped me learn that I work best in the morning. So, I try to work on my most challenging assignments in the mornings."

Meanwhile, Maddie, a 6th grader, realized that, as a verbal processor, she prefers to schedule times to work on assignments with peers. This way, she can clarify her thinking by discussing it with others before submitting her work for educator feedback. In his second year at Embark, Lachlan decided to complete his independent reading in larger chunks of time. "It takes me at least 15 minutes of reading to really get into the story. And then, I don't want to stop. So, I like to schedule my quiet reading times for one hour or more whenever possible."

The deep knowledge learners develop about themselves, their personal preferences, and their work habits are priceless. As an 8th-grade learner, Maura explains, "Scheduling is all about agency...I have the freedom to construct my days the way I want. And I feel like a big part is learning how to manage your time." After just a few months at Embark, most learners are better at planning, prioritizing, and adjusting their time and workload than many adults. For any learners who struggle, educators are ready to have supportive conversations and provide additional structures.

## The approach

While learners are in charge of their schedules, that doesn't mean educators are not deeply involved in planning and facilitating their learning. We develop the necessary underlying structures so that learners can successfully exercise agency over their learning.

In keeping with our radical trust design questions, we start by asking what *could* learners be doing? Our answer - planning and managing their entire calendar to accomplish the learning outcomes set forth by their educators. Then, we consider the question - what *should* learners be doing? Our answer here differs from the one above. Could learners be solely responsible for managing their weekly calendars and scheduling time to meet all their learning goals? Sure! Is that something that they should be doing? Probably not. Instead, learners should design

**enough** of their schedules to develop a high degree of agency and learn about themselves and their learning preferences.


Now comes our final design question - what conditions are needed to successfully center this power in learners' hands? Learners start each week by scheduling their time and learning priorities. This work begins on Monday morning when learners open their calendars and see numerous calendar invites from their educators, many of which overlap. This weekly calendar view can initially feel overwhelming, but learners are guided by a waterfall structure, in which "each stage of the workflow needs to be completed before moving on to the next step," and naming norms that streamline the process.<sup>2</sup>

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## Waterfall instructions for weekly scheduling

### Scheduling, Week of July 22

What will you accomplish this week? Follow the steps below to craft your schedule of work for the week.

1. Accept all Mandatory (M) events.
2. Tentatively accept the Choice (C) events that best fit your schedule. Do NOT decline the other C options yet, as you may still need to make changes.
3. LE Specific Instructions
  - **Coffee Roasters:** During scheduling, accept choices as "Maybes." Brian will give out groupings and will be able to support you here.
  - **Magnificent Mocha:** None
4. Click on your advisory & sign up for a 15-minute Advisory Conference.
  - [Jimmy's Advisory](#) - everyone :)
  - [Brett's Advisory](#) - Natty, Macie, Walden, Natalia
  - [Carissa's Advisory](#) - Keller, Maura, Mateo, Chiara
5. [Jade's appointment schedule](#), or drop in if the Wellness and Training Room door is open and say hello!
6. Schedule 1.5 hours of independent reading this week, remembering that at least 1 hour should be during quiet reading sessions with Carissa.
7. Sign up for [Pinwheel Shop Shifts](#)! All learners must sign up for at least one Pinwheel Shop Shift this week. 

Learner's weekly schedule on Monday morning, before any learner input

	MON 22	TUE 23	WED 24	THU 25	FRI 26
GMT-07	📍 Saturn	📍 Mars	📍 Bottom of Ocean	📍 McDonalds	📍 Pluto
8 AM					
9 AM	Embark Running Club [Mindset & Lon] (M) Advisory, M 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, [Check-in & Circle, M] Critical Thinking, C, 9:15am, Back Room	Embark Running Club [La Raza Laps], (M) AM Check, M, [Check-in & Circle, M] Embark Visits Middle State- Sample Roasting and Label Design 9:15 - 11:30am	AM Check, M, 9am, [Check-in & Circle, M] Collab-Group Meeting, M, 9:15am	Embark Running Club [La Raza Laps], (M) AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room
10 AM	Week Launch, M, 10am, Back Room	Embedded Shift 1, M, 10am, [Critical Thinking, C]			Cupping Prep, O, 9:45am Weekly Cupping, M, 10:15am, Back Room
11 AM		Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm		Group 2 Roast, M, 10:30am Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	
12 PM	Group 2 Roast, M, 11:30am Embark Running Club Lunch, M, 12pm	Lunch, M, 12pm	Lunch, M 11:30am - 12:30pm Embark Running Club	Lunch, M, 12pm	Embark Running Club Lunch, M, 12pm
1 PM	PM Check, M, 12:45pm Geo-Politics, C, 1pm, Back Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm Growth Mindset, M, 1pm, Learning Hub	PM Check, M, 12:45pm Quiet Reading-C, 1pm, Front Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm Quiet Reading-C, 1:30pm, Front Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm Men & Gender Identity, C, 1pm, Learning Hub
2 PM	Geo-Politics, C, 2pm, Back Room	Women & Gender Identity, C, 2pm, Learning Hub	Group 2 Roast, M, [Quiet Reading-C, 1] CT Support, O, 2pm [Quiet Reading-C, 2]	Quiet Reading-C, 2pm, Front Room	Quiet Reading-C, 2pm, Front Room
3 PM	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm Embark Running Club	Clean-up & Closing, M Embark Running Club	Clean-up & Closing, M Embark Running Club	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm Embark Running Club	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm

First, learners must accept all invitations marked as mandatory (M). These are usually when direct instruction, movement, or off-campus learning occurs.

Learner schedule with all Mandatory events accepted

	MON 22	TUE 23	WED 24	THU 25	FRI 26
GMT-07					
9 AM	Advisory, M 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, B Critical Thinking, C 9:15am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, B Embark Visits Middle State- Sample Roasting and Label Design 9:15 - 11:30am	AM Check, M, 9am, B Collab-Group Meeting, M 9:15 - 10am	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room Quiet Reading-C, 9:15am, Front Room
10 AM	Week Launch, M 10am, Back Room	Embedded Shift 1, 9:15am, Pinwheel C		Group 1 Roast, M, 10am	Cupping Prep, O, 9:45am
11 AM	Group 1 Roast, M, 11am	Critical Thinking, C 10:15am, Back Room		Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	Weekly Cupping, M 10:15am, Back Room
12 PM	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	Lunch, M 11:30am - 12:30pm	Lunch, M 11am - 12pm	
1 PM	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm
2 PM	Geo-Politics, C 1pm, Back Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Group 1 Roast, M, 1 Quiet Reading-C, 1	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm
3 PM	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Growth Mindset, M, 1pm, Learning Hub Women & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Le	Quiet Reading-C, 1:30pm, Front Room	Quiet Reading-C, 1:30pm, Front Room	Men & Gender Identity, C, 1pm, Learning Men & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Learn
4 PM		Women & Gender Identity, C, 2pm, Learn	CT Support, O 2pm, Back Room	Quiet Reading-C, 2pm, Front Room	Quiet Reading-C, 2pm, Front Room
		Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Clean-up & Cl Clean-up & Cl Clean-up & Cl	Clean-up & Cl Clean-up & Cl Clean-up & Cl	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm

Next, learners select the choice (C) invitations that best fit in and around their mandatory events or best suit their learning needs. Choice invitations often indicate a small group lesson, targeted skill instruction, or required group collaboration times.

Keller's schedule with all Choice lessons selected

	MON 22	TUE 23	WED 24	THU 25	FRI 26
GMT-07					
9 AM	Advisory, M 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room
10 AM	Week Launch, M 10am, Back Room	Embedded Shift 1, M 10am, Pinwheel Coffee, 3659 Navajo St.	Embark Visits Middle State- Sample Roasting and Label Design 9:15 - 11:30am	Collab-Group Meeting, M 9:15 - 10am	Quiet Reading-C, 9:15am, Front Room
11 AM	Group 2 Roast, M, 11:30am	Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	Lunch, M 11:30am - 12:30pm	Group 2 Roast, M, 10:30am	Cupping Prep, O, 9:45am
12 PM	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm		Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	Weekly Cupping, M 10:15am, Back Room
1 PM	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	week reflection work 11am - 12pm
2 PM	Geo-Politics, C 2pm, Back Room	Growth Mindset, M, 1pm, Learning Hub	Quiet Reading-C, 1pm, Front Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm
3 PM	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Women & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Learning Hub	Group 2 Roast, M, 1:30pm		Men & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Learning Hub
4 PM		CT Support, O 2pm, Back Room	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm

	MON 22	TUE 23	WED 24	THU 25	FRI 26
GMT-07					
8 AM					
9 AM	Advisory, M 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room
10 AM	Week Launch, M 10am, Back Room	Embedded Shift 1, M 9:15am, Pinwheel Coffee, 3659 Navajo St.	Embark Visits Middle State- Sample Roasting and Label Design 9:15 - 11:30am	Collab-Group Meeting, M 9:15 - 10am	
11 AM	Group 1 Roast, M, 11am	Critical Thinking, C 10:15am, Back Room		Group 1 Roast, M, 10am	Weekly Cupping, M 10:15am, Back Room
12 PM	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	Flag Football, M 11am - 12pm	Lunch, M 11:30am - 12:30pm	Flag Football, M 11am - 12pm	
1 PM	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm	Lunch, M 12 - 12:45pm
2 PM	Geo-Politics, C 1pm, Back Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Group 1 Roast, M, 1pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm
3 PM	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Growth Mindset, M, 1pm, Learning Hub	CT Support, O 2pm, Back Room	Quiet Reading-C, 1:30pm, Front Room	Men & Gender Identity, C, 1pm, Learning Hub
4 PM		Women & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Learning Hub	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Quiet Reading-C, 2pm, Front Room	

Maddie's schedule with all Choice lessons selected

At this point, learners add individualized events and meetings to their schedules based on what best works for them. For example, a learner may be asked to schedule the following:

- A 30-minute shop shift working behind the bar at Pinwheel Coffee,
- A 15-minute one-on-one conference with their advisor,
- An hour of independent reading time and
- Two hours of collaborative time with their current project group.

Learners look at the calendars of the shops, peers, and educators to see how to fit these appointments into their week best. Learners will often leave optional (O) invitations, most likely additional support sessions offered by their educators, unanswered, waiting to see whether or not they need support on any given assignment. When learners have completed all these steps, their weekly calendar is full of lessons, meetings, and conferences.

Then, at the start of each day, learners assess their “white space” or unscheduled time, using this time to complete any independent work, shop shifts, assignments that might come up, read, take a break, or various time-flexible tasks. Educators work to ensure that 50% or more of learners' school hours are white space - meaning time when they do not have any required educator-facilitated lessons, lunch, or movement. Then, educators provide direct instruction to help learners determine which tasks to complete during their white space. A favorite tool at Embark is the Eisenhower Matrix.<sup>3</sup> By helping learners prioritize tasks on any given day or week using this matrix, they internalize such practices and use them organically throughout their day.





### Maddie's complete weekly schedule

	MON 22	TUE 23	WED 24	THU 25	FRI 26
GMT-07					
9 AM	Advisory, M 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room	AM Check, M, 9am, Back Room
10 AM	Week Launch, M, 10am, Back Room	Critical Thinking, C, 9:15am, Back Room	Embarc Visits Middle State- Sample Roasting and Label Design 9:15 - 11:30am	Collab-Group Meeting, M, 9:15am	Quiet Reading-C, 9:15am, Front Room
11 AM	ixl, 10:45am	Embedded Shift 1, M, 10am, Pinwheel Co		women card, 10am	Cupping Prep, O, 9:45am
12 PM	Group 2 Roast, M, 11:30am	Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	Lunch, M 11:30am - 12:30pm	Group 2 Roast, M, 10:30am	Weekly Cupping, M, 10:15am, Back Room
1 PM	Lunch, M, 12pm	Lunch, M, 12pm		Volleyball, M 11am - 12pm	week reflection work 11am - 12pm
2 PM	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	Lunch, M, 12pm	Lunch, M, 12pm
3 PM	reading, 1pm	Growth Mindset, M, 1pm, Learning Hub	Quiet Reading-C, 1pm, Front Room	PM Check, M, 12:45pm	PM Check, M, 12:45pm
	Geo-Politics, C, 2pm, Back Room	Women & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Lea	Group 2 Roast, M, 1:30pm	group time 1 - 2pm	Men & Gender Identity, C, 1:30pm, Learni
	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	geo card, 2pm	CT Support, O, 2pm, Back Room	pw shift, 2pm	men card, 2pm
	Selling for Take the A	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm	Clean-up & Closing, M, 2:50pm

Working through the scheduling setting practice each week indeed takes time. Time for educators to plan the week's layout to best meet learner needs, time for learners to sit and design their schedules on Monday morning, and time for educators to guide learners throughout the week into effectively managing their time. We start from a place of radical trust, assuming that, with minimal guidance, all learners can step up and successfully manage their own schedules. Educators are also constantly in the background to serve as guardrails. If learners struggle, we are ready to step in, providing more guided time, personalized check-ins, and support to scaffold the process. But, in our experience, most learners master the practice quickly.

## Concrete structures

A common practice in working with youth is to provide them with a false or limited choice. For example, an adult might ask a child if they would like an apple or a banana for a snack. Yes, that child can choose apple or banana, but you have eliminated anything other than fruit by narrowing the snack options to just those two. You have dictated that the child will have a fruit for their snack, and they can only control which fruit to select. Adults often think we are super slick when we use this move. We believe that youth will feel empowered because they can choose. However, youth catch on to this trick real quick.

False or limited choices are precisely what Embark seeks to avoid in our learner-designed scheduling practice. We work hard to ensure learners have real opportunities to schedule their time. Ensuring we don't fall back into the easy gravity of false choices requires constant adult vigilance. We check ourselves and each other at our weekly Next Week meeting to ensure that the schedule framework for the following week aligns with our mindset of radical trust and promotes true learner agency.

In addition to the practices discussed above, we have developed several lesson and assignment structures that best promote actual learner choice. The four structures described below are examples of the kinds of things learners have full agency to schedule. Learners fit these and many other flexible pieces into their schedules during their white spaces each week. They also use their white spaces to complete any independent work assigned during direct instruction or small group lessons.

### Background work

Embark learners rotate through six-week learning experiences, but some skill sets need consistent practice. We call these skill background work, and literacy and math skill development fall into this category. While most learning experiences incorporate some direct instruction in these areas, we use background work to ensure learners grow and develop consistency in these areas. Each week, learners are invited to several writing and math choice lessons, which learners fit into their schedules as they choose. They must also complete 2 hours of weekly independent reading and 30 minutes of math skill practice on IXL, an online personalized learning platform.

### Independent breaks

Probe into any adult's work habits, and you will quickly discover that no one works productively for eight hours straight. Our brains and bodies need breaks to move, chat with a friend, enjoy a snack, step outside, or solve the wordle. Yet, most schools expect students to sit, listen, and stay on task all day. Sure, students get lunch as a break, but lunch is often so short that students barely have enough time to eat, let alone relax and restore.

Embark recognizes all humans' genuine need to take breaks. Therefore, we designed a structure that allows learners to control their breaks. Here's the graphic we use with learners.

# I NEED A BREAK!!

## Do I need a break?

You might need a break if you feel overwhelmed, tired, stuck, grumpy, or have too much energy.

## How long should my break last?

A good break is between 5 - 15 minutes. Sometimes, a 30-minute break is necessary, but that shouldn't be the norm.

## How many breaks should I take?

There is no one right answer here. But a break implies that you have already done some work and will return to work when you finish your break.

## What should I do on my break? Well, that depends... What do you need!?

Need to Move?	Need Friends?	Need Alone Time?
Go on a walk	Walk with friends	Walk alone
Play wall ball, volleyball, or something in the backyard	Play wall ball, volleyball, or something in the backyard	Give a doodle. Get a doodle with Dot
Shop shift	Shop shift	Eat a snack outside
Ask Carissa for something to clean/organize	Ask Carissa for something to clean/organize	Ask Carissa for something to clean/organize
Challenge Dot to a latte art throwdown	Make some art with friends	Make some art
Mess with a fidget	Do a puzzle	Do a puzzle
Dance party or sing-along	Play a card or board game	Peace corner mindfulness



## What is NOT an approved break?

Computer games & YouTube videos. Basically, anything that involves technology!



## Shop shifts

Embark is truly privileged to be embedded in Pinwheel Coffee and Framework Cycles. This allows us to design and run much of our instruction through authentic shop needs that result in tangible real-world impacts on shop functions. (See Chapter \_\_ for more information on our embedded learning practices.) Another boon of this design is shop shifts. Learners sign up for these 30-minute shifts, during which they work behind the counter in either shop. During a shop shift, a learner might pull espresso shots, take customer orders, sweep the floor, replace a bike tube, or stock merchandise. Shop shifts give learners greater involvement and ownership over daily shop operations, and the customer service piece provides authentic social-emotional learning.

## Collaborative work

Learning experiences often include group or collaborative work. In fact, Embark values collaboration so much that it is one of the six competencies upon which we provide direct instruction and graded feedback. (See Chapter 8 to learn more about Embark's competencies.) Educators do not schedule group time for our learners when collaboration is a required part of a learning experience. Instead, we define the collaborative task they must accomplish within a week and recommend how long it should take. Then, learners are responsible for scheduling the work time with their groups.

## Impacts of learner-centered scheduling

Learner-designed scheduling is a powerful and concrete tool for building learner agency through which learners develop the skills necessary to direct most aspects of their learning. Because they drive their schedules, learners feel comfortable advocating for their learning needs and asking for support when needed. It's magical to observe learners sending calendar invites to their peers to facilitate group work or keep each other company while working independently. Educators also receive learner-generated invites from those who need to talk with us about a personal issue or extra support. In both these circumstances, learners know that they should view others' calendars before sending invites to ensure their invite doesn't conflict with the other person's commitments.

We have also seen this agency extend beyond our school day's bounds. Learners have formed clubs, from a Dungeons and Dragons Group to a Running Group. They schedule their club meetings, set their agendas, and determine their norms of engagement. Learners have also created their own on-campus businesses, presenting business plans and philanthropic strategies to adults for approval before opening their doors. (Yes, these businesses usually involve the sale of candy, chips, or soda, but in their expression of agency, they are impressive nonetheless.)

Learners' agency transfers to their home lives as well. Parents often report that their kids are better self-starters at home - helping siblings with homework, cooking family dinners, and engaging in meaningful conversations. After sixth grade, one student astonished his parents when he was accepted as the youngest camp counselor ever at a local summer day camp. His mom says, "Older teens have been counselors, and camp leaders said that [my son] is one of the best. Picture this: twelve five and six-year-olds at their first activity, introducing themselves and selecting a group name. Josh jumped in, led the campers with some pretty kick-ass facilitation...and managed a situation where no one knew each other. That is not an easy situation to manage, and boy, did those kids have ideas!! But he was masterful."

Finally, Embark alums report that these practices continue to serve them well in high school. In her ninth-grade year, Embark alum Bianca told a group of current 8th graders, "Because of the way Embark is set up, you guys are way more mature than lots of the kids at my high school. You know how to manage your time and advocate for yourself. Those things are a huge help in high school."

## Implementation in your home environment

Your path to rethinking learners' time will depend on your locus of control in your home environment. Here are two possibilities to consider.

If you're a classroom teacher,

You likely only control students' time during your class period. The good news is that's a great place to start. You might try allowing students to design the order in which they complete independent tasks and assignments over a week. First, define the instructional components you have planned for a given week. For example, let's say you are a language arts teacher in the middle of a unit on *The Giver*. In the coming week, your students need to:

- be introduced to the elements of setting in fiction,
- practice selecting text evidence to support a conclusion (evidence to be used in this week's Socratic seminar),
- write a concise summary of events in two chapters,
- read chapters 11-16 of *The Giver*,
- learn four new vocabulary words, and
- participate in a Socratic seminar exploring the ideas of "sameness" in *The Giver*.<sup>4</sup>

Second, estimate how much instructional and independent work time you control each week, including your class periods and homework expectations. Let's assume you see your students for five hours of classroom time each week and plan to assign two hours of homework. Third, determine the instructional setup and time needed for each learning component. For example, students can read independently, but you must give whole group instruction about setting

elements and plan to pull small groups to participate in the Socratic seminars. When taken in this light, the breakdown of your instructional components might look like this:

- Introduction to Setting, 30 minutes, whole group instruction
- Text Evidence Practice 1, 30 minutes, small group practice
- Text Evidence Practice 2, 30 minutes, independent practice
- Summary Writing, 30 minutes, independent practice
- Read Chapters Eleven-Sixteen, 2-3 hours, independent reading
- Vocabulary, 10 minutes per word, whole group
- Socratic Seminar, 30 minutes, small group

You now have all the information needed to craft a schedule that gives your students some agency. Using Embark’s scheduling norms and conventions, you can build your weekly schedule, including timing and group sizes, and label each component as mandatory, choice, or optional.

### Teacher’s schedule for the week

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Scheduling, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class
Intro to Setting, M 30 min Whole Class	Summary Support, O 20 min Extra Support	Text Evidence 1, C 30 min Small Group	Socratic Prep, O 20 min Extra Support	Socratic Sem, C 30 min Small Group
	Text Evidence 1, C 30 min Small Group		Socratic Sem, C 30 min Small Group	
Student Self-Assigned Homework	Student Self-Assigned Homework	Student Self-Assigned Homework	Student Self-Assigned Homework	Student Self-Assigned Homework

One additional component has been added to the teacher’s weekly schedule - scheduling on Monday. This time is reserved for students to select their choice and optional sessions for the week and pencil in their plans for what independent work they will complete during their white space and at home. When students sit down to craft their weekly schedules, each student’s schedule may look slightly different. But by the end of the week, the sum total of their learning should be the same. Here are just two examples of how students might allocate their time.

## Student A's Schedule for the week

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Scheduling, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class
Intro to Setting, M 30 min Whole Class	Read 20 min	Summary Writing 30 min  Read 20 min	Socratic Prep, O 20 min Extra Support	Socratic Sem, C 30 min Small Group
Read 30 min	Text Evidence 1, C 30 min Small Group		Read and/or finish any remaining work 30 min	Read 20 min
<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> Read 1 hour	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> None	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> Text Evidence 2 30 min	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> Finish any remaining work	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> None

## Student B's Schedule for the week

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Scheduling, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class	Vocabulary, M 10 min Whole Class
Intro to Setting, M 30 min Whole Class	Read 50 min	Text Evidence 1, C 30 min Small Group	Read 50 min	Socratic Sem, C 30 min Small Group
Read 20 min		Text Evidence 2 20 min		Read and/or Finish any remaining work
<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> None	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> Summary Write 30 min	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> Finish Text Evidence	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> Finish any remaining work	<u>Self-Assigned HW</u> None

Giving students autonomy over much of their time has many benefits. It allows students to move at their own pace, choose in which environment (school or home) they are most successful at different tasks, and elect to attend optional support lessons as needed. Teachers also benefit. You can tailor instruction to different group sizes depending on the needs of the lesson, you can ask students to attend two choice lessons on the same topic if they struggled to grasp the concept the first time around, and it also provides you with white space during which you can provide targeted support or hold individual conferences.

If you are a school leader

Consider adopting a team teaching approach. The Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) defines a team teacher as someone who “teaches as part of an integrated team with two to four other educators and approximately 50 to 80 students in a public school district.”<sup>5</sup> I have seen at least two schools use this approach to reimagine students' use of time effectively. Mayfield Middle School in Ohio<sup>6</sup> and Mountain View High School in Arizona<sup>7</sup> have divided each grade level into teaching teams where four core content teachers are collectively responsible for educating a set group of students. Each teaching team is able to design instructional time independently from the rest of the school. One result of this freedom is that different teams within the same school often run different bell schedules each day, depending on their instructional needs.

At Mayfield Middle School, instead of a traditional bell schedule with preset periods, each team views the day as containing five hours of instructional time, which they can divide as needed. Mayfield teacher Shannon Saunders explains that each team can “change the schedule each day to best suit our instructional goals.” She has found that by restructuring time according to her team’s needs, they are able “to:

- create larger chunks of time for students to work on in-depth instructional tasks,
- maximize focus by minimizing instructions,
- allocate time for small group intervention or individual conferences, and
- allow flexibility and choice for students in terms of how they spend their time.”<sup>8</sup>

This approach allows for flexible time, which functions like white space in an Embark learner’s schedule, and gives teachers space to hold small group lessons and individual conferences. If this strategy interests you, I strongly encourage you to visit [Mayfield Middle School's video presentation](#) that thoroughly explains its team teaching structure.

Sarah Keel teaches biology at Mountain View High School. There are 3,400 students in the high school, but Sarah’s teaching team, including a humanities teacher, a Spanish teacher, and Sarah, is responsible for just 99 freshmen. Sarah’s team also finds lots of time-related benefits to team teaching. “We are allowed to do flexible seat time, which means we have our kiddos technically first, second, and third hour. And anytime within those three hours, we can flex groupings. We can follow the bell schedule, [or] we can choose not to follow the bell schedule.”<sup>9</sup>

While team teaching provides a great structure to rethink students' time, it has many additional benefits. CRPE’s research has shown that “Teacher teams...made peer collaboration a... part of some educator roles...One of the most highly cited benefits of peer collaboration was the ability



for educators to learn from and with each other. One team teacher described ‘the opportunity to see other people teach all day long’ as a huge benefit. ‘I was really becoming a better teacher because I was seeing other people teach, learning things that worked, and seeing things that I wanted to apply. But also, as I was teaching, they were watching me teach, so they got to ... give me support in ways that I needed,’ she said.” Their research also found that team teaching allowed teachers to work with fewer students, which allowed them “to foster deeper relationships with [students] and their families.” Finally, teachers see benefits to the academic integration that team teaching enables. Sarah loves integrating her immunology and viruses unit into historical comparisons between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Spanish flu outbreak during WWI. Team teaching allows us “to make much easier connections with the kids among the subjects...my students are getting strong real-world skills and [building] stronger real-world connections versus [learning] isolated subjects.”

## Endnotes

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