



How to Give Students More Control Over Their Learning

By Carl Draeger and Daniel Wilson

Pressures from parents, administrators, communities, and policymakers keep the education profession in a state of flux. It has been said that the only constant in teaching is change. Fortunately, the foundation for what teachers, administrators, and support staff do on a daily basis remains constant: We care for children. Most educators enter the profession due to their unquenchable passion for working with kids. It is out of this love for "our kids" that we cultivate a caring classroom culture.

A key component of a culture of caring is the power of choice. The power of choice—where students have input regarding what and how they learn, coupled with individualized opportunities to demonstrate their understanding—begins the empowering transfer of the control of learning to the rightful owner. Here are some simple things you can do to enhance your students' learning while they do most of the heavy lifting of growing.

Since every student learns differently, it is critical that we focus more on the student than the content. The power of choice provides students the opportunity to choose how they learn the material. One way to allow student choice in how they engage in their own learning is through the use of **learning menus**. Think of content in terms of appetizers, entrées, and desserts. You can opt to provide as many 'courses' for your students as you see fit. Each 'course' has a variety of activities the students select from. Students work through the activities and report on their reflection on learning after each 'course'.

Another strategy to include the power of choice is problem-based learning. Supply students with an open-ended problem to solve (e.g. How might we encourage more students to eat healthier outside of school?) and resources to explore, study, and present their findings.

You can create a student-centered environment by allowing your class to select, from a list of your

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teaching strategies, how they want to approach their learning. Suppose your learning target for the day is to understand how Freytag's Pyramid applies (or doesn't) to Oedipus Rex. Your students have been given an **anticipatory set** at the start of class and have now organized their previous learning about Freytag's Pyramid and their previous knowledge, if any, about Oedipus Rex. It is time now to dive into the reading. You can let the class (or a randomly selected student) determine whether they do a **GIST** summarization, **Think-Pair-Share**, or a **cubing activity**. It doesn't really matter which strategy you use as long as you include the learners in the decision. Offering students choices in how they learn gives them insight into their own metacognition as well as helping them become their own learning advocates. A side effect of relinquishing some pedagogical control is that the classroom becomes a warmer, more joyful place. You are demonstrating your compassion for them by allowing them to select their options.

While the opportunities for student choice vary greatly across content areas and age levels, offering students choices on what they learn can be a true motivator. Planning a lesson aligned with a mandatory learning standard can still allow for student choice on the specifics they learn. A teacher can teach constitutional law by allowing students to study the procedures followed in the repeal of the Volstead Act, the adjudication of Roe v. Wade, or whatever issue peaks their interests. Even a subject like AP Calculus can allow for some student choice. Giving students total freedom in finding examples of applications of derivatives which are interesting to them results in increased student ownership of learning as well as accessing previously untapped creative outlets. Watching their presentation videos, movie parodies, and their recently created websites reminds us that learning, while requiring active engagement and effort on the part of the student, should be more joyful and less like a chore.

In the area of assessment, choice can be an ally. While the traditional pencil and paper method of assessment is still beneficial to prepare students for standardized tests, this limits student opportunity to express what they know. It is not enough for a student to simply memorize information to show knowledge. Students should be able to apply their learning in situations meaningful to them. Technology advances give today's students incredible opportunities to demonstrate their learning in ways unimaginable only a few years ago. Students can collaborate globally, construct CGI videos, record and mix music, and even modify their untrained voice to sing with perfect pitch. The power of choice provides students many opportunities to show they are meeting (and even exceeding) the standards for each content area. If you are differentiating your instruction, why not differentiate your assessments? In the era of value-added teacher evaluation, this is another opportunity to measure student growth.

We certainly don't advocate that every lesson be project-based or that students have daily choice on how and what they learn. We do, however, advocate for being intentional in making student choice a valued part of your classroom culture. By asking for and responding to students' preferences, you are saying, "I trust you to do what you need in order to be successful." You give credence to their thinking, shift the balance of the work of learning towards them, and allow students to create and demonstrate their understanding in ways meaningful to them. In essence, the power of choice demonstrates your caring for your students by giving them a learner's permit to drive their own learning.

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