

Problematizing 'Student Choice' in Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades children's rights to exercise choice in educational settings have slowly gained currency. Children's rights advocates highlight the role of choice in empowering children to become critical and productive citizens. However, in this paper, the role of choice in interactions between teachers and students is problematized. Using Foucault's notion of governmentality, the paper explores 15 teachers' use of choice in classrooms and considers how 'student choice' can, far from empowering children, be used as a way of reinforcing extant adult-child power relations. The paper argues that students are often responsabilized to exercise choice wisely in order that they find themselves in a position in which they can enjoy everyday classroom privileges disseminated by the educator. When used this way, the strategy of affording students 'choice' can frame students' transgressions as individual failings to conform. The paper concludes that practitioners who advocate children's rights need to reflect on the relationship between notions of choice and institutional power relations in order to ensure choice is used in a way that leaves space for power relations to be challenged by the students being asked to 'choose'.

Are you looking to engage students on a whole new level? Harnessing the power of choice in the classroom may be what you need. While this is proven through research, sometimes it can be difficult to transfer best practice research to something tangible (and possible) in the classroom. In the book *The Highly Engaged Classroom*, Dr. Robert Marzano explains why student choice is essential in our classrooms, and he offers tips for teachers on how to incorporate choice in practical ways.

Marzano found that students perceive classroom activities as more important when they are given choices. It increases intrinsic motivation, increasing student effort and task performance, which therefore boosts the amount that students can learn from an activity. To see these benefits, we need to make sure to "...create choices that are robust enough for students to feel that their decision has an impact on their learning." Students, especially advanced learners, can easily identify when activities are not meaningful.

The concept of student choice is hard to argue, but it can be hard to make the dream become a reality. In my classroom, I have had a lot of success using a workshop approach which includes a combination of brief and explicit, targeted instruction and choice. Depending on the subject I'm teaching, this looks slightly different. It usually takes some time to guide students to make smart choices, but it takes even longer to help parents understand. Either way, the benefits outweigh this challenge, since I am helping to empower my students to become life long learners instead of passive consumers of content. In addition, it helps students practice decision making, self-regulation, time management, and organization. User-Friendly Ideas for Student Choice:

Below, you will find some ideas for managing student choice. When it comes to task development, it is important to really get to know your students and their collective interests. This will allow you to tailor learning activities to create more buy-in since students will know you have their interests in mind. However, some choices should be flexible so that students can personalize them.

Marzano explains that choice can be provided in four ways: choice of task, choice of reporting formats, choice of learning goals, and choice of behaviors. I find that it is important to offer a bit of all of these, however, it is also important to limit them so that students don't get overwhelmed by decision making. I create learning menus and choice boards for students in an attempt to rotate choices of task

and reporting formats, but when it comes to learning goals, I assist students by conferencing with them individually.

Learning Menus

During my Language Arts Class, I use a workshop approach, and many of my arts integrated, project-based units occur here because I have an extended block of time. I have found that Learning Menus work best for this model. These function as a flexible “to do” list. Students have “Must Do’s”, which are their “Main Courses”, “Side Dishes”, which are available if students finish the main dishes, and “Desserts” if students finish a side dish. This ensures that students know my idea of the order of importance, and it provides them with a checklist to chunk larger projects, making them less overwhelming.

Sample Language Arts Learning Menu

Editable Learning Menu

Choice Boards

Choice boards are great for independent work time, or as an anchor activity for students when they do finish before others in the class. I design mine with a variety of enrichment choices, based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, related to a topic. I use these in my math class and create one per chapter or topic. The lower level activities are worth one point, and higher level activities are worth three points. Sometimes I ask students to reach a certain amount of points by the end of the chapter, and sometimes I tell students there is a certain “mystery” box activity that will be rewarded, just to keep it interesting. Or, I ask students to complete a Tic Tac Toe pattern. Choice Boards also prevent students from ever having a moment with nothing to do. It helps with behavior problems, and it ensures that students are consistently working their brains. Below, find a sample math choice board, which I call a “contract” and a template to use when creating your own.

Sample Math Choice Board

Blank Spelling Choice Board

Blank Choice Board Creator Template

Monitoring Learning

Formative assessment is crucial for all students, and it is so helpful when differentiating for our learners. When using this student choice based approach, it is very important to actively monitor the learning that occurs, so that you can assist students in making wise decisions. It is also great to get a “read” on class knowledge. If many students haven’t grasped a concept you expected them to, I reteach to clear up misconceptions if necessary and design a targeted activity as a “must do” that gives some extra practice. By strategically providing this targeted choice, we are able to respond to the needs of individual learners and still tap into all the benefits that choice provides.

There are many ways to end a lesson with a quick check for understanding or misconceptions. Below, I’ve included a sample “Ticket Out”, or exit ticket from my math class. I pass it out at the beginning of class so that we can discuss our essential question, and then we begin with a review. At the end of class, we stop 5 minutes early for students to complete the Ticket Out the Door. The information I gather with this ticket out allows me to form my small groups for the following day. If you have access to iPads or laptops, there are some awesome tech tools for this type of quick check.