

Student-Centered Teaching: A Look at Student Choice in the Classroom

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Providing student choice in the classroom is a form of student-centered teaching that is intended to increase the student's level of learning and sense of ownership in the classroom by increasing his or her involvement in class administrative processes. Common techniques include allowing the students to choose when assignments are due, what assignments will be graded, what subjects to cover, and whether or not to work in groups. A large amount of research has been done in this area, and the concept's effectiveness has been demonstrated. However both students and teachers routinely express negative opinions concerning student choice in the classroom. Some teachers believe that they are giving up authority in the classroom, and some students simply do not want to be responsible for what they believe are the teacher's duties.

There are many different teaching philosophies, and teachers apply a broad range of techniques in order to increase student learning and retention in the classroom. Inevitably, many new teachers begin their teaching experience by organizing and presenting each lesson from a teacher-centered perspective. They meticulously prepare each detail of their class presentation. They know what they want to teach and how they want to teach it for each lesson. They also know which concepts they'll cover and how long they'll spend on each concept. A structure such as this provides focus and a clear progression through the course (for the teacher), so it certainly is useful. However, I believe that as the teacher matures, he will find that many students don't seem to keep up with his plan. As he probes the question of, "Why aren't they where they're supposed to be?" he may also find himself trying to determine, "Where are they, and how did they get there?" It seems that there is always a discrepancy between what teachers think their students are receiving in the classroom and what the students themselves believe they are receiving. Of course, the obvious question is, "Who's right?" An even more important question might be, "Whose opinion matters most (the student's or the teacher's)?" Surely, experienced teachers know which of their topics or concepts are most important, and one might assume that those same teachers know how to present that information in a relatively easy to receive manner that highlights its importance. However, such an assumption is not always valid.

Both teachers and students often balk at the idea of allowing students to have more freedom in the classroom, as discussed by Felder and Brent (1996). However, various student-centered teaching techniques have been introduced in order to mitigate the disparity between what the teacher thinks he's teaching and what the student is actually learning. The general idea behind student-centered teaching is to give the student a greater voice inside the classroom. On one hand, the teacher wants to get frequent and meaningful feedback from each student so that the teacher knows whether or not the student truly gets it. On the other hand, the teacher wants to increase the student's involvement in each class in order

to make the student more responsible for his own individual learning. The concept of frequently giving the students choices in the classroom terrifies some teachers because they believe that equates to the teacher giving up his or her authority. In truth, some of the techniques for offering the students choices in the classroom are so subtle that many students won't recognize them at all.

Palmer (1990) outlines a technique that I've found very useful for getting inside my students' heads. In my variation of this exercise, I give each student a small, blank index card. On one side, I ask them to write the word "question" in small letters in the upper left hand corner. I then ask them to write the most pressing question that they have concerning the current topic. If I notice that no one is actually writing anything, I'll try to motivate them to think by asking questions like: What's still confusing to you? What's your sticking point? What would you like me to explain in a different way? Do you feel that you could ace the test right now? These questions usually ignite enough inspiration for everyone to at least write something. I then ask them to flip their cards over and write a short comment telling me what they think of how I've presented the current topic so far. I also ask them to list any specific improvements that they think I should make. When they're done writing, I collect, shuffle and redistribute the index cards. I make sure that no one has his or her own card. Then, I randomly choose students to read the question on the index card. I answer some questions directly, and I direct others to the class to see if we can collectively come up with an answer. Of course, when we're finished with the questions, I collect the cards so that I can review the comments in private. Students are much more relaxed and willing to share what they're thinking in an anonymous exercise like this one. It certainly is much more effective than simply asking if there are any questions, which inevitably results in nothing but silence. A closer look at this simple exercise will show that the actual discussion is completely driven by specific questions that the students have; thus, the students chose which issues, pertaining to a given topic, to discuss. Furthermore, most of the questions simply would not have been asked in a more formal question and answer type of setting.

Another technique for offering student choice in the classroom is letting the students choose whether to work independently or in groups. Some students simply don't like to work with other people. For the most part, that's alright as long as those students understand the concepts that are introduced in the class. In such cases, there's no reason to force the student to work with others to practice something that he will be tested on at an individual level. Students who may not completely understand a concept can benefit from sharing and discussing ideas with others. Ideally, all students who would benefit from group work will actually choose to become part of a group that contains members who know enough about the subject to be helpful. In practice, the teacher may need to alter some of the students' choices. For example, students who share a common interest, such as membership in specific clubs or teams, may decide to gang up just to talk about an upcoming competition. Maybe they'll all talk about how lost they are in the class and how much they hate being left to figure things out for themselves. To minimize the formation of such ineffective groups, the teacher may have to direct some students to change their partnerships.

Another technique that facilitates student choice in the classroom is the practice of letting the students decide which topics will be covered throughout the semester. While this approach may seem a little extreme to many teachers, it certainly provides an opportunity for the students to develop a sense of empowerment in the classroom, as discussed by Flowerday and Schraw (2000). This type of

empowerment would certainly also lead to some sense of ownership of the course. Since most courses have certain objectives that must be achieved by the end of the semester, it is probably necessary to place a few constraints on the actual choices that the students can make concerning the course. For example, there may need to be a set number of topics to be chosen, and those topics may have to come from a predetermined list of possibilities.

In some classes, teachers may actually allow their students to decide whether or not to turn in certain graded assignments. For example, a computer programming class could have six graded projects. Five of the projects could each count for twenty percent of the course grade and the sixth one could count for extra credit. The student could choose which five projects to submit for a grade and whether or not to submit the sixth one at all. This technique could prove equally effective in a number of other types of classes. Aycock and Uhl (2005) present a variation of this technique in which the student must submit the assignment; however, the student can adjust the due date within a certain predetermined time bracket. Yet another similar technique allows the student to submit all graded assignment at anytime during the semester. As long as the assignments are submitted before the last day of class, the student is not penalized.

An often overlooked way to incorporate student choice into classroom activities is to minimize, or even eliminate the need for students to raise their hands or otherwise ask permission to temporarily leave the classroom. This allows the student to choose which part of the daily class activity he will miss when he chooses to go to the bathroom, get a drink of water, or make a phone call. It's also less disruptive to the rest of the class since the student doesn't have to interrupt the teacher who may be lecturing on a topic or helping another individual. For this technique to be effective, the teacher will have to provide some guidelines. For example, the teacher may want to know if the student does not plan to return before the end of class.

As Prins (2009) points out, it can be very difficult to cover the necessary content in a completely student choice driven course. The main reason for this difficulty is that the course will proceed from one topic to another at a pace that is defined by when a majority of the students feel that they have adequately mastered the present topic. Inevitably, that pace will be significantly slower than the pace that a teacher would set if the teacher were simply allocating a certain amount of class time to each topic. Rather than creating a course that is completely student choice driven, a more realistic approach would be to allow students to choose between acceptable alternatives at key benchmarks in the course. For example, the students could choose whether to have a midterm exam in which they are tested and graded individually, or they could choose to have a group project in which they share their grade with other team members. Students could also choose to take daily quizzes to demonstrate their understanding of pre-class learning objectives, or they could choose ungraded board work instead.

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Pintrich, P., DeGroot, E. (1990) Motivational and Self-Regulated Learning Components of Classroom Academic Performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Volume 82, Number 21, 33-40.

Annotated readings:

Aycock, J., Uhl, J. (2005) Choice in the Classroom. *Inroads—The SIGCSE Bulletin*, Volume 37, Number 4, 84-88.

In this article, the authors present research in which students were allowed to choose assignment due dates (*Time Banks*) and assignment weighting (*Contract Weighting*). The most interesting point from this paper is that some students did not like being responsible for determining their own due dates and assignment weights. The authors hypothesize that these negative responses probably came about because some of the students were uncomfortable taking responsibility for tasks that the teacher historically handles.

Bills, R. (1952) An Investigation of Student Centered Teaching. *The Journal of Educational Research*, Volume 46, Number 4, 313-319. www.jstor.org/stable/27529480.

This article discusses research conducted with students enrolled in two general psychology classes. One class was taught using the lecture-discussion method for an entire semester. The other class was taught using this method for the first half of the semester and using a student-centered method for the second half of the time. Interestingly, the results showed that both classes learned and retained roughly the same level of information. However, the class that was exposed to the student-centered method expressed better overall feelings and opinions about the course.

Felder, R., Brent, R. (1996) Navigating the Bumpy Road to Student-Centered Instruction.

This article is a very good resource for anyone considering including student-centered instruction (SCI) in their course. The authors give a thorough definition of SCI, and they present a lot of useful background information. After discussing why incorporating SCI is so beneficial to teachers and students, the authors provide common sense advice on how to handle the most common objections to SCI methods.

Flowerday, T., Schraw, G. (2000) Teacher Beliefs About Instructional Choice: A Phenomenological Study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Volume 92, Number 4, 634-645.

This article explores why and under what circumstances teachers implement student-choice in the classroom. The authors' focus was to gather information from various teachers concerning the use of student-choice in the classroom, and to use those findings "to codify teachers' beliefs about choice," (635) and to formulate a basis for an "emergent theory of choice" (635).

Kohn, A. (1993) Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, Volume 75, Number 1, 8-16, 18-20. www.jstor.org/stable/20405017.

In this article, the author argues that students should be given various levels of choice in the classroom at practically all levels of education. Kohn's chief reason for this stance is that he believes that it is unreasonable to train students to blindly and unquestioningly follow directions throughout their school years and then expect them to become a functional part of a democratic society. This article does an excellent job of addressing *why* students should be given an adequate degree of freedom to choose

what and *how* they learn. According to the author's findings, students who are given such freedom are far more engaged in the learning process and less likely to burnout.

Motschnig-Pitrik, R., Holzinger, A. (2002) Student-Centered Teaching Meets New Media: Concept and Case Study. International Forum of Educational Technology & Society (IFETS).

This paper provides a wealth of information concerning student-centered teaching and providing student choice in the classroom. The authors present specific research that combines the use of student-centered teaching techniques with extensive use of the internet. In their approach, the instructor assumes the role of a supportive facilitator and the students conduct their own communication and self-guided research using the endless resources provided by the internet.

Prins, S. (2009) Student-Centered Instruction in a Theoretical Statistics Course. Journal of Statistics Education, Volume 17, Number 3. www.amstat.org/publications/jse/v17n3/batesprins.html.

In this paper, the author argues that active learning techniques are more beneficial to overall student learning than standard teacher-centered methods such as lecture. Additionally, she outlines her own research which included restructuring a semester long course to incorporate student-centered teaching techniques. The techniques that she presents rely heavily on peer assistance and peer evaluation. The techniques seem to work well for a small class (this class consisted of 4 students), but, as the author pointed out, instructors would have to make further accommodations for larger classes.

Shang, Y., Shi, H., and Chen, S. (2001) An Intelligent Distributed Environment for Active Learning. ACM Journal of Educational Resources in Computing, Volume 1, Number 2, Article #4.

In this article, the authors propose an intelligent software system to assist with active learning. To use this software, each user provides a profile that contains information concerning their current proficiency in an academic area. The software tracks the user's progress and recommends new topics and levels of difficulty. Rather than providing choice in the classroom, use of this software supports the student's learning with a customized program at an individual pace, thus encouraging a greater degree of active learning.

Sparmacher, D. (1950) Student-Centered Teaching. The American Journal of Nursing, Volume 50 Number 12, 787-789. www.jstor.org/stable/3459063.

This article presents research in which several classes of nursing students were taught using student-centered techniques. Participants in each class collectively chose the objectives (both individual and common) that they would cover during the course. As the course advanced, students received feedback in the form of nondirective counseling, and they assessed their own growth through self-evaluations. This article gives great insight into how to apply student-centered techniques, offer more choice and foster more student-level involvement in a class where each student has their own unique reason for taking the class.

