To engage students, give them meaningful choices in the classroom

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It's important to give students influence over how and what they learn in the classroom. But not all choices are equa Teachers should structure learning scenarios that equip students with opportunities to strengthen their autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Giving student real choices in the classroom — having to do with the material they study, the assignments they complete, the peers whom they work, and so on — can boost their engagement and motivation, allow them to capitalize on their strengths, and enable meet their individual learning needs. But, like most teaching strategies, the structuring of choices for students can go very well, and go very badly — the nuances make all the difference.

Teachers need to understand how individuals and groups of students are likely to respond to any given opportunity to make consequential choices about the goals, activities, and experiences they wish to pursue in the classroom. To illustrate, we describe th cases in which high school mathematics teachers presented their students with choices. (Although these three vignettes feature sec math classrooms, we argue that their lessons can generalize to other settings and subject areas.) We begin with the case of Ms. R, w found that when she gave her students a specific choice to make, she saw noticeably improved engagement in learning. Next, we de the case of Ms. C, who provided a similar choice to her students but was disappointed with their response. We then discuss the way which students' feelings determined how they responded to the given choices, and we describe a third case, which illustrates how t can structure choices that are likely to support student engagement.

The Case of Ms. R – Choice improving student engagement

Once a week, Ms. R gave students in her Algebra I class a choice of activities to work on. On these "work days," as students called th[e]
R offered a set of three to four activities. Each student could select the activity that featured the skill that they thought they needed
on the most. Before implementing these work days, Ms. R was concerned that students might not use their time wisely, so she made
to give them plenty of work to do, including supplemental practice problems.

Initially, when she introduced the work days, students found it difficult to choose an activity. Ms. R believed this was because stude[nts]
little experience making choices in school, and they were in the habit of letting their teachers make all the decisions. Thus, she mad[e]
priority to teach them, explicitly, how to choose an appropriate activity.

By the third week, students were comfortable selecting activities and were productive in their work. Ms. R was pleasantly surprised
observe that her students spent more time helping each other and even policing each other's behavior, calling out peers whose beha[vior]
was distracting or who weren't being productive. Overall, she found that students knew what they needed to work on and when the[y]
needed help, and they used their time accordingly. This meant students spent more time on-task and asked for her help less often. A[s a]
result, Ms. R. was able to spend more time checking on students' progress and helping those who genuinely needed her assistance.
was happy to learn she could trust students to make positive choices.

The Case of Ms. C – Choice not improving student engagement

In her Algebra I class, Ms. C offered a choice activity that appeared to similar to the one that Ms. R offered, only the result was quite
different. During a unit on inequalities, she presented students with four problem sets (each consisting of eight problems), each on[e]
pegged to a certain level of difficulty. They should each choose one or two problems from two of the four levels, she explained, advi[sing]
students to choose problems based on their self-assessment of their readiness for each level.

By the end of class, Ms. C was disappointed with her students. Most were treating the problems like busywork, rushing through the[m]
without giving them much thought. Further, most students picked problems from the easiest two levels, even though Ms. C knew th[at]
some of them were ready to work at levels three and four.

What makes choices engaging? Autonomy, competence, and relatedness Judging by the research literature on choice in th[e]
classroom, itʒs not unusual to see the very different outcomes experienced by Ms. R and Ms. C — some studies show that choice po[sitively]
influences student motivation and learning (e.g., Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002), while others indicate that choice has either no or ev[en]
negative effect (e.g.,D'Ailly, 2004). To explain these conflicting outcomes, psychologists Idit Katz and Avi Assor (2006) have argued
what matters most isn't the kind of choice given to students but, rather, how students perceive the choice provided to them: When s[tudents]
associate feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness with choice, then choice is most likely to result in beneficial outcomes
as student engagement.

Autonomy

Students feel autonomous when they understand the value or relevance of a task, particularly if they believe that the task aligns wi[th their]
values, interests, and goals. It comes not just from participating in the process of choosing but, rather, from having a sense that the
is personally meaningful. Students must see real differences in the importance or relevance of the choices at hand, and they must f[ind at]
least one option to be worth choosing. In short, while Ms. R and Ms. C each gave students a choice of tasks, there was something ab[out the]
set of choices that Ms. R created that made her students feel that those choices were meaningfully different. Evidently, Ms. C's stude[nts did]
not feel this way.

Competence

Students feel competent when they believe they know what to do to be successful and feel capable of mastering challenges. To eng[age]
competence, students must perceive choosing the task and doing the selected work as appropriately difficult. When people are con[fronted]
with too many choices or believe the selection process is too complex, they opt for an easier choice method such as choosing a defa[ult,]
choosing randomly, choosing not to choose, or letting someone else choose for them. Teachers, then, must make the selection proce[ss]
appropriate for students in terms of the number of choices and the ways in which students are expected to choose.

Ms. R provided only three to four choices, she was explicit with her students that they choose activities they felt would best address their learning needs, and she made a point of providing explicit instruction in how to make good choices. In contrast, Ms. C told students to choose two out of four problem levels and then one to two problems out of eight problems in each level. This required two stages of choice, and it wasn't clear that students knew how to make a good choice at either of those stages. It seem likely that they were overwhelmed by the range of choices at hand, so they opted for the easiest choices they could make.

The other part of engendering competence is that students must be able to choose tasks that are appropriately challenging. That is, possible tasks should not all be too easy or too hard. In Ms. R's case, students appeared able to find tasks that engaged them and that they could successfully complete on their own or with help from peers or Ms. R. The problems in Ms. C's packet may been similarly appropriate but perhaps due to the high cognitive demand of choosing from among 32 problems, most students did find problems best suited for them.

Relatedness

A sense of relatedness stems from feeling close to people or a sense of belonging in a group. Choice can influence student's feelings relatedness differently depending on their beliefs. Students with more collectivist beliefs value relationships and making contribu group efforts and can see individual choice as a threat to group harmony. Students with more hierarchical beliefs value the role of authority figures and can see choice as a threat to acceptance from people in authority, such as teachers. People with individualisti value personal goals over group goals and tend to value choice as a means of demonstrating independence and expressing individ However, choice can undermine a sense of relatedness for students with individualistic beliefs if they perceive their choices could l rejection, humiliation, or teasing. Ms. R gave students choices that did not seem to interfere with, and possibly supported, students of relatedness as they worked more closely on "work days" than on other days. But students' sense of relatedness in Ms. C's classroo not clear because she provided the choice for only one day, and students didn't appear to perceive the choice as supporting autonor competence.

Learning from choice outcomes

So, how might Ms. C learn from her disappointing experience in providing choices to her students? First, she could have conjecture students might not have associated feelings of autonomy, competence, or relatedness with the choice she provided them. Reasonin described above, she might hypothesize that the process of choice was too complex, and students might not have had good strategi choosing appropriate problems. To check her thinking and get more ideas, Ms. C could then ask students why they responded to th worksheet as they did. For instance, she might ask:

- Why did you pick only levels one and two?
- Why did you do only one problem at each level instead of two?
- Did you find the problems helpful to do? Why or why not?
- What might have made this activity better for you to practice solving problems involving inequalities?

Students are often quite insightful about their learning needs. In talking with students, teachers might find that the fundamental st of the choice they provided the students was not conducive for students' feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Howe Ms. R, teachers might find that changing the choice structure is not necessary; instead what is needed is helping students understa rationale for the choice and how to productively make choices. And, of course, improving choice may involve some combination of changing the choice structure along with educating students about how to use choice to learn.

Next, we provide one more case to show a different choice structure, how this choice related to students' feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the type of student engagement choice can foster. Student engagement can sometimes be garner providing relatively small and simple choices to students. The case of Ms. H illustrates this.

The Case of Ms. H — Small choice, big engagement

Every day, Ms. H prepared two warm-up problems, each with the same mathematical content but situated in different contexts — fo[r] example, one problem might have to do with hiking and the other with flying. The two contexts were always on the board, and during the first minute of class, students were allowed to vote for the one that interested them. In order to make sure that they could vote, some students began to arrive to class early, and overall, the number of students who were late went down. The motivation to select a context carried over into actually doing the warm-up problem. According to Ms. H, all students began to actively engage in doing the warm-up, which had not occurred before she began offering students the choice of contexts.

After the first week of voting for the warm-up problem context, students asked Ms. H if they could suggest contexts. Ms. H agreed and students put suggestions in a hat, from which she drew contexts for the next day's warm-up. After two weeks of doing the warm-up voting, Ms. H tried to stop, but students loudly objected, so Ms. H continued providing the choice. Tardies continued to remain low, and student engagement in the warm-up problems remained hig[h.]

The success of Ms. H's warm-up context choice can be explained by its influence on students' feelings of autonomy, competence, an[d] relatedness. Students' feelings of autonomy were likely fostered because most students found at least one context meaningful to th[em,] which was probably strengthened when students began suggesting contexts. Students likely felt competent making this choice beca[use] choosing was relatively simple, and the actual warm-up problem appeared appropriately challenging for most students, as indicate[d by] their level of engagement. The fact that students worked productively on whichever warm-up problem was selected suggests the ch[oice] did not interfere with students' sense of relatedness. Thus, Ms. H's experience demonstrates that relatively simple choices can foste[r] key feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and consequently even simple choices can improve student engagement.

Conclusion

Teachers have described to us any number of ways in which they provide choice to students, including giving them opportunities t[o] choose work partners, seating arrangements, homework problems, assessment problems, and ways of being assessed.

Like Ms. R, many teachers are initially concerned that students will not respond well to having choices. Ms. R addressed her concer[n by] making sure to have plenty of work available for students to do; other teachers make it a point to be explicit with students about wh[y they] are providing choices, and they request student feedback on whether they value the choice. Whatever strategy they choose, though, teachers can increase the likelihood their students will value choice by analyzing how students associate feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness with the choice provided them. While this might take some trial and error, finding the right choice str[ategy] for students can be a powerful tool for fostering student engagement.

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