

*Learning to*  
**Choose**  
*Choosing to*  
**Learn**

*The Key to Student  
Motivation & Achievement*

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# Learning to Choose, Choosing to Learn

## The Key to Student Motivation and Achievement

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# Introduction

My son, Ethan, is not typically motivated by school work. In fact, he is often decidedly *un*motivated. In school his default is to do as little as possible, exerting the least amount of effort required. He is clearly capable of so much more, a source of constant frustration for his teachers, not to mention Heather and me, his parents.

Interestingly, Ethan is, and always has been, an incredibly motivated person. When he was 5, he spent hours “projecting” (pronounced project-ing), creating radios out of toilet paper rolls and pipe cleaners, drawing and coloring snakes and other animals, and building complex marble-run structures. When he was 8, after I read the entire *Lord of the Rings* saga to him over a five-month period at bedtime, he picked up the book and read all 1,100 pages himself. As a 12-year-old, he designed and knitted a beautiful winter hat based on the orange and tan checkerboard color pattern of his pet snake, Professor Quirrell. At 13 he got excited about writing and spent hours crafting stories modeled after some of his favorite fantasy and post-apocalyptic novels. His current passion is working at solving the Rubik’s Cube. Having received detailed instructions and algorithms from his cousin, he has been practicing this skill with vigor and can now solve the cube in less than one minute. He can clearly display passion and persistence for challenging learning tasks.

And yet schoolwork typically evokes a shrug, a sigh, and a roll of the eyes. Every now and then, however, something sparks his interest. In 6th grade, there was a particular science assignment that unleashed his motivation and strong work ethic.

Students were learning about parts of a cell. The teacher wanted to reinforce content learned in class and assigned the task of creating a labeled diagram of a cell at home. She offered a few ideas for how they might do this. They could draw with pencil or pen, use a computer drawing or painting program, press clay onto cardboard, or come up with another idea. Ethan decided to make a pillow using a combination of felted wool and beads to show various parts of the cell along with a key to accompany the pillow. Had he chosen drawing, he could have knocked off this assignment in 30 or so minutes and would have done little, if any, deep thinking about the content. Instead, over the course of the week, he spent seven hours meticulously needle felting ribosomes and mitochondria, looking at a cell diagram to make sure he was getting the shapes right and the sizes proportional. His attention to detail was impressive. To this day, he can still point to each part of the cell and name them correctly. His deep engagement led to learning that stuck. Importantly, this assignment also allowed him to practice skills of perseverance and responsibility—qualities that will provide benefits long after the need to know what a ribosome is fades.

Like Ethan, all students are intrinsically driven to learn. And, like Ethan, many students struggle to find motivation in daily schoolwork. It may lack relevance and meaning—they can't find any way to connect the work to what they personally care about. It may be that the learning is so easy that it's boring or so hard that it is overly frustrating. Perhaps the work doesn't tap into their strengths and interests. This book is about how we, as teachers, can use choice as a vehicle for tapping into students' intrinsic motivation, helping them find ways to connect with appropriately challenging work to boost their engagement and deepen their learning.

Choice is something I have been thinking deeply about for years. As a classroom teacher, I gave my students various kinds of choices about their learning in reading and writing workshop, science and social studies units, and daily math instruction, gaining many valuable insights along the way through trial and error. My first book, *The Research-Ready Classroom* (Heinemann, 2006),

which I coauthored with friend and colleague Andy Dousis, is all about how to structure independent research projects—an exciting and challenging form of choice. For many years, I worked as a consultant and developer for Northeast Foundation for Children (now Center for Responsive Schools), a nonprofit organization that supports teachers’ use of choice as a strategy to boost student engagement. Now, as an independent consultant, I work with teachers in many different schools across grade levels to help blend choice into daily teaching and learning. When I teach workshops for teachers, regardless of the topic, I often use choice to help adults find powerful learning opportunities. This book represents more than two decades of professional learning and growth on the topic of choice.

Choice as a learning strategy is often misunderstood. It is either viewed as something mindless and not connected with real academic work (“You have an extra 10 minutes, choose whatever you want to do”) or as something overly elaborate, involving Herculean planning and effort on the part of the teacher (think multi-genre, project-based, end-of-unit synthesis projects). Sadly, it may also be viewed as a relic of a bygone era (“I used to be able to give kids choice, but now we have scripted curricula and standardized tests that make it impossible”). As pressures on teachers and schools have increased, schools’ reflexive reaction has often been to clamp down on students, constricting their choices and diminishing their autonomy.

I would argue that choice is *more* relevant and important in today’s educational climate than it ever has been before. As students come to us with increasingly complex needs and abilities, they need diverse and personally relevant opportunities to learn and practice skills and content. When students leave school they will enter a world where self-motivation, creativity, autonomy, and perseverance are all critically important, and these are characteristics that are hard to practice in an environment centered on standardization and compliance. When students have more choice about their learning, they can both find ways of learning that match their personal needs and engage with work more powerfully, building skills and work habits that will serve them well as lifelong learners.

Throughout this book, you will find numerous examples of choice in action with students, ideas to try, and a step-by-step process to help guide your

planning and implementation of choice. You will also see many references to research and other great work with choice that's going on in the field of education to help place this book into the broader conversation. I think it's also important for readers to understand that this book is based on a few important foundational ideas about teaching and learning. Though these are my fundamental beliefs, which I have developed over more than two decades of work with learners of all ages and stages (not to mention my own experiences as a learner), I have also found these beliefs to be shared by the vast majority of teachers with whom I work. These beliefs should be highlighted here, before we begin to dig into more specific content and strategies, because the best teaching flows from teachers' most deeply held positive beliefs about learners and learning. Unfortunately, too often in education today, teachers are asked to adopt programs and approaches or try new ideas and strategies without any connection to their own beliefs. When this happens, teaching can become shallow and vapid—a series of activities and strategies unhinged from who we are and what we believe.

In this book you will see evidence of these beliefs in action.

- **All students are already motivated and want to be successful.** Though there are many roadblocks that might lead students, especially as they get older, to disconnect from school and appear unmotivated or even unable to learn, I firmly believe that all students are learners. When basic needs are met and when conditions are right, all people can be curious, self-motivated, and successful.

- **It is more important to be a learner than to “be learned.”** In today's world, where most people carry a device in their pocket with access to unlimited information, it is more important for students to know themselves as a learner and be able to learn than it is to simply acquire information. While content acquisition is still an important skill, the actual content acquired is less important than it once was.

- **Teaching and learning should be joyful.** Students should look forward to coming to school each day. Teachers should look forward to coming to school each day. And when students and teachers look forward to walking through those school doors each day, it should be the work that inspires us



and gets our blood pumping. Not pizza parties. Not grades. Not pep rallies. And certainly not standardized tests. The work itself should be inherently rewarding—worthy of our time, attention, and maximum effort.

This book is divided into three main sections. Section I will explore some basic ideas about choice: What does it look like when choice is used effectively, and what are the payoffs—how does choice boost student learning?

Section II will address one of the most common questions about offering students choice: “How do we help students to make good choices?” We will explore how to create safe and supportive learning environments that enable students to choose well, how to help students develop more ownership of their learning, and how to help students better understand themselves as learners. In addition, these chapters may push your thinking about topics such as how you speak to students, how you assess student growth, and the dangers and drawbacks of incentives.

Section III will focus on implementation. As teachers, how do you facilitate choice effectively? You will learn many concrete, practical examples and strategies for using choice throughout the school day. Each chapter explores a different phase of the planning and implementation process: creating good choices, helping students choose well, facilitating choice work, leading student reflection, and engaging in professional reflection. In each, you will consider ways to help students find more meaning and self-motivation for work through choice across grade levels and content areas. While you examine these varied examples, please think of them as inspiration—jumping off points for your own teaching. The examples used were chosen to offer a wide variety of possibilities, but certainly aren’t supposed to be fully exhaustive. My hope is that this book offers you opportunities to come to new understandings about how to use choice effectively to boost student learning, whether you teach high school physics, middle school literacy, self-contained kindergarten, or music across all grade levels.

Before we launch into the main content of the book, let’s think once more about Ethan’s cell pillow. Although having the choice of how to practice learning the parts of a cell might have boosted his intrinsic motivation, having choice in and of itself wasn’t what was most important. If his teacher had assigned the

project of creating a cell pillow, he probably have been just as inspired (though likely many others wouldn't have been). The key is that having choice allowed Ethan and his classmates to all find ways of engaging with work in meaningful, personally relevant, and inspiring ways. This is important. Using choice is a vehicle—a means to an end—not an end in and of itself. Teachers shouldn't blindly give students choices about learning any more than they should follow a scripted program without thought or understanding. Choice is a powerful way in which teachers can help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in school and beyond—a way to help them work with purpose, joy, and passion—and a way to make schools a place worth coming to each and every day, for students and teachers alike.

## SECTION I

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# THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF CHOICE

This first section of the book explores the many and varied benefits of offering students choices about their learning. Before digging into *why* teachers should consider using choice more often as a learning strategy, it is important first to be clear about *what* it is. There are four key characteristics of choice when it is used effectively.

### Choice Can Be Highly Varied

When you think of “choice” in school, what comes to mind? It may be images of preschoolers or kindergartners exploring open-ended centers or having “free choice” time. Or perhaps you envision project-based learning in the upper grades where students spend weeks researching complex topics and designing elaborate showcase projects. Or maybe you think of choice as a classroom management strategy—something students do if they finish their work early.

While each of these examples can be an effective use of choice, there are also many other possibilities—ones that can be simple or complex, short or

A A Few Effective Uses of Choice	
Simple Choices	More Complex Choices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1st grade, music: Students choose one of three percussion instruments to explore for five minutes: symbols, triangles, or rhythm sticks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1st grade, reading: Students study an author of their choice over the course of two weeks. They both choose the author and select the books they want to explore.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4th grade, reading: Students choose a good place in the classroom to read during reading workshop. The spot must be physically comfortable and a place where they can focus on their reading.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5th grade, math: Students design their own quilt square design using pattern blocks. Each design must incorporate the various geometric principles studied in the unit.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8th grade, science: Students watch the same video about Newton's Third Law of Motion. They choose one of three note-taking sheets to capture important information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8th grade, science: Students use clay and toothpicks to construct three different molecules (of 30 possible options), demonstrating how atoms join together.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12th grade, science: Students either draw a comic strip, create a diagram, or write an explanation about what happens to trash to reinforce what they've been learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12th grade, senior project: Students have 11 weeks to work on a cross-curricular research project of their choice.</li> </ul>

long in duration, and used in any content area at any grade level as a part of daily instruction. Although there are some common elements of well-planned choice experiences (see Section III), good choice is not formulaic. It is highly flexible, designed to meet the particular learning needs of students given the particular content at hand. Figure A includes a few examples that highlight various choices.

## Choice Should Be Used with Purpose

If choice is used as a filler after students finish their “real” work, invariably, some students rush through work trying to get some choice before the period ends, while other students never get any choice since they have a hard time finishing assigned work as quickly as others.

Choice should instead be used as a vehicle for boosting student learning as a part of their regular work. Choices should flow directly out of standards

and the daily curricula as well as the interests, strengths, and needs of your students. The examples below offer some ways choice might be used as a part of daily teaching and learning.

- Kindergarten, science: Students choose one insect to study and draw as a part of their science unit.
- 2nd grade, reading: Students are learning about “just so” stories and either read stories on their own, listen at the listening center, or join an adult for a read-aloud.
- 7th grade, health: Students choose one category of drug to learn about: depressants, stimulants, or hallucinogens.
- 10th grade, drama: To prepare to produce their own version of *Hamlet*, students choose to read either the original or annotated version of the play.
- 12th grade, calculus: Students choose which differential equation to solve that is at the “just right” difficulty.

## All Students Should Have Choices

Often the students who are labeled as “gifted” or “high performing” are likely to have the most autonomy and opportunities for creative work. They build models, create hands-on projects, and engage in independent research. If there’s any population of students who is most desperate for appropriately engaging and personally relevant learning, it’s the students who most struggle. And yet, for many students who are labeled as “learning disabled,” “remedial,” or “low-functioning,” what they tend to get is dose after dose of drill-and-kill, rote seatwork. Imagine what schools would be like if all students received the benefits of a “gifted and talented” education!

Choice is one of the most effective vehicles teachers have for differentiating learning in a truly inclusive setting. I vividly remember one scene from my own classroom during a social studies unit. All students had chosen a topic within the theme of Conflict in U.S. History, such as Jackie Robinson, the Battle of Little Round Top, Rosa Parks, and the Space Race. I helped each student create a personally specific set of goals and requirements that complemented the whole-class learning objectives for which everyone was responsible. The

diverse class included students who could read college level texts, several with various diagnosed special needs (including Down syndrome, ADHD, bipolar disorder, and several learning disabilities), and a wide range of students in between. Within this setting, all students could fully participate in appropriately challenging and personally interesting work because they had meaningful choices about what to study, what goals to challenge themselves with, and what projects to create to share their learning.

## **Choice Is Taught, Not Simply Given**

Giving students choices involves so much more than simply saying, “Here are your choices—have at it!” Instead, teachers need to help students think about choices before they make them and teach the skill set involved in making appropriate choices (more on this in Section III). Once students have made their choices, teachers continue to play a powerful role—that of coach. And then, after students have finished, teachers help them reflect on their work and the choices they have made so they can get better at being self-directed learners. This all takes some work and effort, but it is what makes choice so incredibly effective and powerful.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Key Benefits of Choice

Offering students choices about their learning is one of the most powerful ways teachers can boost student learning, and this chapter will dig into why this is the case. You'll learn about why choice can help increase intrinsic motivation and how that can affect student learning. You'll also learn about many other benefits of using choice as a part of daily teaching.

## Choice Helps Overcome Two Common Challenges

Students learn more when they are motivated. I know this isn't exactly an earth-shaking statement. We all know from experience that when students have energy and passion for their work and are driven to excel, they can accomplish incredible feats. I also know that all students are motivated. However, like my son Ethan, students aren't always motivated to do the school work that's in front of them. Sometimes, the learning task is so easy that it is boring or so hard that it is overly daunting. Or it may be that the learning doesn't seem to have any personal relevance or doesn't connect with a student's strengths or interests. When choice is used well, it can help overcome both of these common classroom challenges.

## Challenge #1: Differentiation

Four students are hunkered down together in beanbag chairs, exploring character analysis through books they have chosen. Although all in 5th grade, their books represent a wide range of reading levels: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Stuart Little*, *Jennifer Murdley's Toad*, and *Eragon*. Each student takes notes as they read independently, preparing for a group discussion they will have at the end of the period.

A chemistry class is learning about the Ideal Gas Law. The teacher has taught a focused 10-minute lesson, and students are now solving problems in which they apply this law. They have a variety of problems from which to choose as they practice the skill—some are quite basic, some are more moderately challenging, and some are very difficult. Although students each choose which problems to solve, they help each other as they work, supporting each other, and deepening their own understanding through collaboration.

In both of the above scenes, students of varying abilities and skill levels are working together. One of the great challenges of teaching is differentiating instruction for students—creating learning experiences that reach all of the learners in a heterogeneous group. (And let's be clear—*all* groups are heterogeneous. Ability grouping and tracking only create heterogeneous groups with a narrower range. There will be variations in skills and experience in any group.) We can feel overwhelmed by differentiation, thinking that we should create multiple learning experiences for any given group in order to meet everyone's needs. The idea of teaching four different lessons and structuring multiple activities for a given class is enough to make many teachers not attempt differentiation in the first place.

One of the main purposes of choice is to provide a few options for students and have them *self-differentiate*. In the reading example above, each student has chosen their book carefully. It had to be at an appropriate reading level so they could read it fluently. It also had to be fictional, so they could examine character development, which was the main goal of the learning experience. In the science example, the teacher provided a set of problems to solve that represent a wide range of difficulty and complexity. Students were challenged to find problems hard enough to provide some challenge, but not so difficult as to be overwhelming. Since they're all working on problems involving the



Ideal Gas Law, they can support and coach each other, even as they work on different problems.

Understanding why this is so important requires us to examine a fundamental idea about human motivation.

**Finding an appropriate challenge.** It takes me a long time to pick out a new crossword puzzle book. Standing in Barnes & Noble, faced with several shelves of options, I am overwhelmed. I flip through book after book, scanning the puzzles and clues, searching for a certain difficulty level. If the puzzles have few clues and it looks like I'll know the answers with little effort, the book goes back on the shelf—it's too easy to be any fun. Clues that are so hard that I don't even know what they mean are just as much of a turn-off. They're too difficult. Like Goldilocks looking for the perfect bed, I want one that's juuust right.

I'm also both proud and embarrassed to reveal that as of the writing of this chapter, I am currently stuck on level 245 of Candy Crush. I'm far from alone. Though there may be many reasons that games like Candy Crush (or Bejeweled, Angry Birds, or even Pac-Man—if you can remember back that far) are so addictive, one feature is that they are leveled. They are easy to learn and provide quick success and then become more and more challenging as you progress through the game. This added level of challenge is, in part, what makes them so fun. If they were too easy, you'd get bored and quit. If they were too hard, you would get overly frustrated and quit.

This place of ideal challenge has been called by many the Goldilocks Zone. In the early 1900s a Russian psychologist had another term for this—one that might take you back to your undergraduate days in education or psychology classes.

**The zone of proximal development.** Lev Vygotsky theorized that there is a place for every learner in any given domain between their current level of independence and their potential for development within that domain. He termed this space the “zone of proximal development” and asserted that in this space, collaboration and coaching, either by a peer or teacher, will help bring the learner closer to their potential (Moll, 1990).

There are a couple of important ideas to understand about the zone of proximal development in order to truly appreciate its connection with student choice (see Figure 1.1). First, this is the sweet spot where significant cognitive growth

1.1 The Zone of Proximal Development and Engagement	
Level of Challenge	Student Engagement
Learning is too hard.	Excessive frustration leads to disengagement.
Learning is appropriately challenging ( <b>zone of proximal development</b> ).	Joyful challenge leads to high engagement.
Learning is too easy.	Excessive boredom leads to disengagement.

can happen. Students learn most when appropriately challenged, so offering choices that help get students in this zone will help students learn more. There is another less discussed but just as powerful connection between the zone of proximal development and choice. In this zone, learning is *most enjoyable*. Whether it's a crossword puzzle, video game, math puzzle, or science exploration, the right amount of challenge—that place where the distance between where we are and where we're trying to get is challenging and surmountable—is motivating. In their book *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*, John Hattie and Gregory Yates explain that “we are motivated by knowledge gaps, but put off by knowledge chasms” (2014, p. 6). In his best-selling book about human motivation, *Drive* (2009), Dan Pink asserts that one of the key drivers of human motivation is a sense of mastery—it feels good to learn and grow. When a task is appropriately challenging, and students meet with success, a job well-done and the completion of the challenge is positive reinforcement for the work itself. Since this zone is where learning is most pleasurable, when teachers empower students to choose elements of their work, they tend to settle into this zone on their own. They know their own abilities better than teachers ever can and want to be engaged in appropriately challenging work, so they will *self-differentiate* when conditions are right. These conditions—a safe environment, a true sense of ownership of work, and understanding themselves as learners—are the focus of Section II of this book.

## Challenge #2: Apathy

Of course, students vary in ways other than their skills and abilities. In any given class, you will have students with a wide range of interests and pas-

sions. Some students are interested in nature, others history, others sports. Some students love working with others while some prefer to work on their own. Craft projects and artwork may be appealing to some and computer and technology may be preferred by others.

When you can tap into students' interests and passions, they will be more joyful and invested in their learning, and you're on your way to overcoming a second common challenge in schools: apathy. For many of us, this can be the greatest frustration of our work. We spend hours crafting lessons and creating units only to watch students' eyes glaze over and their heads drop. "Do we *have* to do this?" they groan. "These kids just don't care!" it's tempting to cry in frustration. Perhaps instead we should answer with a question of our own: "Why should they?" What does the learning in front of them have to do with them? How does it pique their interest or tap into their strengths? A reluctant writer who loves science fiction may be excited to write a *Star Wars* sequel. A student who is unenthusiastic about learning about the American Revolution but is excited to work with computers may be excited to put together a Prezi showcasing key causes of the war. A student who doesn't always love math but loves to play games may enjoy playing a simple game with dice and cards as they practice working with fractions.

Beyond simply connecting with interests, choice can help combat apathy in several other ways as well.

**The power of positive emotions.** As a middle school student, I was convinced that I didn't like to read. The bulk of my reading experience in school involved assigned books or giant anthologies filled with short stories with questions at the end. Reading was about completing assignments, which I did compliantly with as little effort as possible. Then my 10th grade English teacher assigned a new kind of reading task: Choose a novel to read and share with the class. As a lifelong Red Sox fan, I'll always be a bit perplexed as to why I chose *The Mick*, Mickey Mantle's autobiography. I suppose that for a 15-year-old boy, it had everything I could wish for in a book—adventure, humor, bawdy behavior, and baseball. This is the first time I remember loving a school-related reading task, and 30 years later I still remember much about the book.

Some may argue that feeling good about schoolwork isn't a good enough reason to structure work in a particular way, but as it turns out, positive emotions

aren't as soft and unimportant as they may first appear. Brain research sheds light on some of the important connections between emotions and learning. Neurologist and educator Judy Willis makes the compelling case that the human brain is more available for learning when learning is joyful. She also points out that boredom and excessive frustration put the brain in stress-response mode, which effectively shuts down learning (2006). As Eric Jensen notes in *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, "Teachers who help their students feel good about learning . . . are doing the very things the student brain craves" (2005, p. 77). In short, positive emotions pave the way for greater learning, and offering students choices about their learning is a powerful way you can help them feel good about their work.

**Intrinsic motivation flows from ownership.** Many years ago I heard a fantastic author and presenter speak about the importance of student ownership of work. He shared a story about a 7th grade student who had produced a poor piece of writing on a standardized writing prompt. He asked the student why he had put in so little effort, and the response his student offered has informed how I think about motivation and learning. It was something akin to "That was a writing prompt. You made me do that. That was your work, not mine." The presenter then looked directly at us and challenged, "Think about your students' typical school day. How much of the day do they spend doing your work, and how much do they spend doing their work? And if they spend all day doing your work, how do they feel?" As Dan Pink says, "Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement" (2009, p. 108).

Too often in schools, teachers own the work. We create and teach lessons, dole out assignments, and assess the results, leaving students feeling like worker bees, dutifully completing assigned tasks with little power or control. However, when we give choice, we both empower students and help them develop and take more responsibility for their own learning.

**An important shift in responsibility.** The increased emphasis on differentiated instruction and the momentum of project-based learning and personalized learning highlight an important shift happening in education: the move toward a more student-centered approach to teaching and learning. Interestingly, this movement comes on the heels of the push toward standards and academic accountability that caused everyone to tighten their collective

grips on what students did and how they did it. It's important to recognize that these two seemingly very different movements don't need to be at odds with one another; teachers should be able to personalize learning within the context of academic standards. It does, however, require that teachers shift their instructional strategies, and choice may be one of the best vehicles for getting there, for it allows teachers and students to share in the responsibility of teaching and learning. Teachers can create viable options that students will find compelling and appropriately challenging, and then students take responsibility for choosing options that will best help them learn.

## Many Additional Benefits of Choice

Through choice, you can help students self-differentiate their learning so work is more appropriately challenging. You can also combat student apathy, helping students connect with their strengths and interests and giving them more autonomy, power, and control over their work, which boosts their intrinsic motivation. These are perhaps the two most compelling reasons to use choice as a part of daily teaching and learning in schools, but there are many other additional benefits that are important to recognize as well, for they help highlight the true power and potential of choice.

- Students engage in deeper, richer learning.
- Students display more on-task behavior.
- Students' social and emotional learning increases.
- The learning environment becomes more collaborative.
- Teaching is more fun.

## Students Engage in Deeper, Richer Learning

Students who are given choices about their learning can engage in higher-level learning for multiple reasons. For one thing, when students are more joyfully engaged, their brains are able to process learning and store it in long-range memory more effectively (Willis, 2006). It is perhaps not surprising that I remember a lot more about *The Mick* than I do *The Red Badge of Courage*. Research has also indicated that choice enhances creativity and leads to many

other positive student work habits such as self-initiated revision and editing and better organization (Denton, 2005, p. 208).

Also consider how much richer and more varied learning can be in a classroom when everyone isn't doing the same thing. If all students are reading the same book, for example, conversations about the topic will naturally be limited to that one text. In a classroom where students read three novels about a specific topic or theme, they'll have richer and more varied discussions since there are multiple texts to discuss. Steven Johnson, author of *Where Good Ideas Come From*, argues that great innovations are more likely to come from diverse environments. Cities are more likely than small towns to produce great innovations, simply because there are more people, engaged in different kinds of work, who can bump into each other and spark new thinking (2010b). Steve Jobs famously demanded common spaces that would lead to collaboration when the new Pixar studio was in the planning stages. He pushed for a large atrium, a communal space where people from various departments would mix and mingle, as well as centrally located bathrooms which would lead to spontaneous conversations at the sink (Schlender & Tetzeli, 2015, p. 315).

I've seen the power of diverse work time and time again in my own classrooms. I remember Phoebe using a quadrama—a three-dimensional project that shows four scenes at once that she learned at Girl Scout camp—to share about a book she read. Several other students, inspired by her project, asked her how she constructed it, and within the next few weeks, multiple other students used quadramas to share books and present content in research projects.

When all students are engaged in the same task in the same way, there is a limit to how far the work can go. The teacher and the task define the boundaries and it's almost impossible to go beyond them. When you share more of the power and control with students, giving them more flexibility and choice about how they accomplish learning goals, suddenly everyone can inspire each other, spurring on new ideas and prompting more creativity.

## Students Display More On-Task Behavior

A conversation I once had with a principal highlights another important benefit of choice. We were discussing the many behavior challenges that were prevalent in his school: talking back to teachers, staring out of the window, angry eruptions during work periods, wandering in the hallways, refusals to do

work, and other such common problems. I asked him, “Does it seem that most of the kids who struggle with behavior are the same ones who struggle with academics?” He conceded that they were. “And do these kids get really interesting school work—projects, challenges, fun puzzles, and choices about their daily work, or do they spend most of their day doing quiet seatwork?” He acknowledged that the latter was usually the case. In fact, in his school it was more typical for advanced students to get these kinds of enriching academics. We both knew the answer to my next question as I asked it: “Could it be that many students are acting out because they are bored and frustrated?” (As noted education speaker and advisor, Sir Ken Robinson [2013] quips in his widely viewed TED talk, “How to Escape Education’s Death Valley,” “If you sit kids down, hour after hour, doing low-grade clerical work, don’t be surprised if they start to fidget.”)

Judy Willis, prominent neurologist and middle school teacher, has noted that excessive boredom and frustration lead to the stress-response in the brain (2006). Students in this state are very likely to move into the classic “fight” (arguing back or erupting in anger), “flight” (wandering in the halls), or “freeze” (zoning out) mode. Research has shown that students with conditions such as ADHD and emotional disturbances that often lead to behavior problems have significant decreases in problem behaviors when they are given choices about what or how they learn (Denton, 2005, p. 209).

Students come to school each day craving interesting and engaging work. When school work is purposeful, appropriately challenging, and personally interesting—all qualities that can be satisfied through appropriate choice—students’ needs for engagement are met through the work, making them less likely to seek other sources of entertainment. This isn’t to say that offering students choices about their learning will result in a perfectly behaved class. However, students will be less likely to escape to the bathroom, wander around the room, or text a buddy in another class if they are engaged in stimulating and purposeful work.

## Students’ Social and Emotional Learning Increases

There is a broad range of social and emotional competencies and skills that students need to learn in order to be successful in school and beyond. Students are better able to learn and practice many of these skills when engaged

in learning activities in which they have some power and control and when they are joyful about their work. Though there are many such skills, several of which will be explored throughout this book, let's consider a just a few for illustrative purposes.

- **Grit.** For many, the first association that comes to mind when they hear the word grit has to do with compliance under duress (think of *gritting* your teeth). I prefer to think of it instead as a state of persevering through challenges within the context of truly engaging work. For students to display grit, there must be a connection between hard work and interest, otherwise we're merely talking about compliance under duress. "But isn't it a reality that we all have to accomplish tasks we don't enjoy?" you might ask. Absolutely. There are many teacher tasks I don't cherish: Making tough phone calls to parents, attending certain committee meetings, and wiping down tables during flu season are just a few. However, since these tasks fall within a job I love, I can attend to them with care and attention. Similarly, students have better energy for citing sources in a research project, editing writing, or even practicing math facts or vocabulary words if it's in the context of work about which they truly care. A sense of power can give them the motivation needed to push through challenges.

- **Social awareness.** When students are working in ways that are personally relevant and allow for creativity and autonomy, students' various strengths, abilities, interests, and challenges come to the surface. Students can see that everyone is different and can begin to see schoolwork through a variety of lenses and perspectives, learning to work with diverse partners and practicing empathy for those who learn differently.

- **Effective decision making.** You can't practice responsibility without having some control. Being responsible, independent, and making reasoned decisions are skills that many of students need to develop—ones that frequently surface in "skills for the 21st century" or "skills for the workplace" lists. Today's jobs and careers require people to accomplish tasks off-site with flexible hours without relying on a manager or boss to direct every aspect of the work. When students practice how to make effective choices on a regular basis in school, they develop stronger decision-making skills. They grow in



their ability to be self-reflective, thoughtful, and responsible people who can advocate for themselves and make appropriate decisions based on a wide variety of criteria.

## The Learning Environment Becomes More Collaborative

When all students are doing the same thing at the same time, students are more likely to view each other as competitors. Who can finish first? Who can get the most answers right? Who can create the best map or graph? It's almost impossible for students not to compare their work with those who are nearby when the task is the same. (This is true for learners of any age, by the way. Consider how self-conscious you may be of your own reading speed when you are with a group of colleagues reading an article in a professional development setting.) And once, as a learner, you start judging your own work based on the work of those around you, you have just taken your eye off the ball. You're no longer focused on the learning task at hand, but instead are paying attention to everyone else. Additionally, if you are now competing with classmates, their loss is as good as your win. "Don't look at my paper!" or "Ms. Costa! Lisa's cheating!" suddenly ring through the room as students view each other as competitors not collaborators.

One of the wonderful benefits of choice is that as the work becomes more diverse, it's harder to compare the apples with the oranges. For example, a class is practicing multiplying fractions, but instead of everyone using the same workbook page, students are making up their own problems. As they work, they chat and share problems they're working on, even helping each other as they go. Since the problems are all different and there are several algorithms students may choose to solve the problems, some students are completing more problems than others, and problems all reflect a variety of challenge and complexity. Students are less likely to worry about competing with each other since they're all concentrating on their own work. This allows them to relax, focus on their work, and even be more supportive of each other. Will some students still compete with each other—vying to see who can create the most challenging problem? Probably. And this sort of competition is more likely to be healthy, since it is likely to be mutual and self-induced. As a

general rule, the room will have a more positive, collaborative, and supportive tone as the work becomes more varied and diverse.

## Teaching Is More Fun

This topic may be placed toward the end of this chapter, but it is far from the least powerful benefit. Teaching is one of the most stressful professions (Anderson, 2010, pp. 4–5), and in the past two decades it has seemed to get worse and worse. The pressures to teach to standardized tests and deal with unrealistic curricular demands makes it easy to lose sight of why most of us entered the profession in the first place: We enjoy teaching. There’s something truly remarkable, even magical, about being part of the learning process. When students have those light bulb moments or when they become so engrossed in an activity that they lose track of time, it is truly joyful to be a teacher.

Having some power and control over work isn’t just important for students. Autonomy is a critical component in our sense of positive connection to the profession and energy for teaching as well (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Through finding even simple ways to offer students some choices about their learning, we fire up our own creative engines, reigniting our passion and love for teaching.

In addition to being more creative as we plan, we also enjoy the teaching itself more. After all, when students are more engaged, having more fun, and learning more, we have more fun as well. As I’ve worked with many different teachers to help them bring more choice to their students, I’ve heard a common refrain: “This is so much fun. My students aren’t the only ones who are enjoying class more!”

## Conclusion

Here’s one final idea to keep in mind: Choice is most powerful when used with purpose. It can be easy to fall into the false line of thinking, “If choice is such a great strategy, then everything should involve choice.” Like any other effective strategy, it isn’t always the best one to use. It all depends on your goals. For example, perhaps you want to expose all students to a specific strategy or

project so it can become a choice later in the year. In this case, there are no choices since there really is just one option. Or perhaps you are creating book groups based on very specific reading skills that students need. In this case, students might choose in a way that won't allow them to work on the skill you are targeting—you should create the groups and not offer choice.

After all, it's important to remember that choice is a *means to an end* not an end in and of itself!

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## About the Author



**Mike Anderson** has been an educator for more than 20 years. An elementary school teacher for 15 years, he has also taught preschool and university graduate level classes. He spent many years as a presenter, consultant, author, and developer for Northeast Foundation for Children, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping create safe, joyful, and challenging classrooms and schools. In 2004, Mike was awarded a national Milken Educator Award, and in 2005 he was a finalist for New Hampshire Teacher of the Year.

Now, as an education consultant, Mike works with schools in rural, urban, and suburban settings across the United States. He has also taught workshops and presented at conferences in Canada and Mexico. Mike supports teachers and schools on a wide variety of topics: embedding choice in everyday learning, blending social-emotional and academic teaching, using respectful and effective discipline strategies, staying healthy and balanced as an educator, and many more.

Mike is the author of many books about great teaching and learning including *The Research-Reading Classroom* (Heinemann, 2006), *The Well-Balanced Teacher*

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Mike lives in Durham, New Hampshire, with his incredible wife Heather, who is also an educator. Together, they co-teach the most challenging and rewarding class they have ever had, comprised of their two independent and curious children, Ethan and Carly, and their somewhat anxious and totally adorable dog, Olive.

To learn more about Mike and his work, visit his website: [www.leadinggreatlearning.com](http://www.leadinggreatlearning.com). You can also follow him on Twitter at @balancedteacher.