

CHOOSING CHOICE

Giving students choice sounds nice, in theory – but in practice, it doesn't always lead to good outcomes, cautions **Colin Foster**...

Students don't choose to come to school. Given the choice, some would and some wouldn't. For most of their schooling, they don't really get much choice about what they study, how they study it, who their teacher is going to be, or even who they get to sit next to in class.

People sometimes draw parallels between schools and prisons, in terms of the restrictions on personal freedom – though the analogy is perhaps closer in some schools than in others...

It's therefore understandable that teachers can, at times, wonder if they should be trying to find more ways of giving students choices about their learning. So much is set in stone by the curriculum, school rules and structures. Where there's the possibility of flexibility, shouldn't we take those opportunities to provide students with more choices where we can?

After all, the day will come when they're 'released' from school and go out into the wider world. Young people who have been closely micromanaged up to the age of 18 might be poorly prepared for the next stages of their lives, when they suddenly have complete autonomy. How are they supposed to navigate this if they've never made a decision for themselves, or taken full responsibility for their choices?

Feel better, fare worse

While there may be some truth to this, the problem with giving people choices is, of course, that they aren't

always well placed to make them to their advantage. This applies just as much to adults as it does to young people. If I attend cooking lessons, I could try to describe the kind of dishes I want to learn how to make, but it's no good me telling the expert how I want to learn. I have to put myself in their hands, and trust them to do what they're good at.

Similarly, if you give students a choice over how to do their revision, every teacher knows that many students will opt for re-reading their notes and highlighting the key parts.

“Giving people too much choice over their learning risks imprisoning them in a silo of what they can already do”

Yet we know from research that those are two of the most ineffective ways of revising. Students should instead be self-explaining (not merely paraphrasing) their notes and testing themselves with questions – but those processes feel more difficult, and hence less immediately successful.

It isn't simply the case that students are 'lazy' and want to take the path of least resistance. They may genuinely feel that testing themselves isn't helpful, because they don't know the content well enough to answer the questions – “*I'll test myself later, but I just want to spend some time re-reading my notes first.*”

That's not a lazy student who doesn't care about their

learning, or else they wouldn't be re-reading their notes. The feelings of difficulty they experience when self-testing confuses them into thinking that it's not the best strategy, so they opt for something that *feels* better, despite it actually being worse. So-called 'desirable difficulties' like this usually feel undesirable.

The expertise deficit

This is a tricky problem to fix, because explaining to students that they should be self-testing may not be enough to change their behaviour. “*What's the point*

of doing the questions if I don't know the answers?” they might reasonably ask. Yet research suggests that even if you initially get the questions wrong, testing yourself is likely to be more effective than passively and endlessly re-reading notes.

If students desperately want to re-read their notes, I'm not saying we should make that a crime – but everything should be set up to push students towards methods that are generally found to be more, rather than less, effective. Which ultimately means, if you want to put it that way, 'denying them choice'.

There can be similar issues when giving students choices in the classroom over what and how they learn. This

feels like a nice thing to do, and besides, why should the teacher act like a little dictator? Won't students be more motivated if they have a say in what happens?

But look at this from the students' point of view. I've seen teachers ask the class whether they want to study topic A first, and then topic B, or the reverse. At that point, the class might not know much about options A or B, so how are they supposed to choose? They can't really imagine what either will entail. It may be an interesting choice for the teacher, but for the students, it's a choice that may seem a bit tokenistic.

If around half the class vote for each, then you risk ending up with more dissatisfied students than if you hadn't asked them in the first place! Surely it's much better for the teacher to use their expertise to think about which order makes more sense – or else simply flip a coin if the outcome really doesn't matter.

How hard is too hard?

The same thing can happen when students are asked to choose between 'red', 'amber' or 'green' levels of difficulty for

tasks. The teacher gets frustrated when students who should be pushing themselves more instead opt for 'easy' successes. At the same time, there will be other students who want to show off by choosing the hardest task, hoping to get credit for doing so, even though they'd benefit more from consolidating prior learning by attempting the easier tasks.

Gauging the right level of

challenge is a subtle and difficult task – and one for which the teacher will possess a far greater level of expertise than a student could be expected to have.

Choice in assessments is especially problematic. Exam questions in years gone by, which might have said “*Answer any two of the following five questions*”, risked being highly inequitable. The student had to read all five questions, try

to imagine what challenges each would provide, and then decide on which two would best play to their strengths.

This process was, in all likelihood, much harder than simply being tasked with answering two questions. The students most capable of 'gaming' this form of questioning were those most likely to do well anyway, thus increasing the attainment gap yet further.

If *all* the course content matters, then the teacher will want *all* students to learn everything, rather than specialise in certain areas to the detriment of others.

The myth of choice

The myth of 'learning styles' is still very much with us. Teachers rightly feel that every student is different, but wrongly assume that every student is an expert on what they need. We now know that students who say they prefer to learn 'visually' don't necessarily benefit from being given more 'visual' material.

In fact, everyone benefits from a variety of styles and modes of learning. The

teacher's aim should be to help all students become more balanced and skilled across the whole range. To give people too much choice over their learning is to risk imprisoning them in a silo of what they can already do.

There are many opportunities across the daily routines and procedures of school life for giving students more agency and a greater degree of choice with respect to all sorts of things – from who they become friends with, to which extra-curricular activities they want to participate in. As they get older, they'll start to settle on their GCSE subject options too – but when it comes to classroom learning, giving students more choice will likely make it harder for them to succeed.



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