# RESOURCE TOOL
STUDENT CHOICE

HELPING YOUR STUDENTS "**OWN**" THEIR **LEARNING** BY MAKING GOOD CHOICES

"I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul."

—from the poem "Invictus"
by William Ernest Henley (1888)

ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH CHOICE

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> "Having a say in a project creates a sense of ownership in students; they care more about the project and work harder. If students aren't able to use their judgment when solving a problem and answering a driving question, the project just feels like doing an exercise or following a set of directions."
> Mergendoller, 2015

Giving students "choice" can be seen by some educators as akin to inciting a state of anarchy in the classroom. Even those educators who incorporate a modicum of choice in their programs, still determine what options students can chose between. The reservations that teachers have about student choice are not wholly unfounded, and are too often dismissed by student-centred advocates as merely the reactions of self-aggrandizing teachers who refuse to relinquish control in their classrooms. This view doesn't jibe with what really motivates teachers: they want to ensure granting to students greater choice will actually benefit their students. This is the real question opponents of student choice have; do students learn better when their teachers hand over control of their education to the students themselves? Ivey (2010) observes that some educators perceive "that when you give choices, [students] will choose something that's not good for them. But that is not the case at all…" (Ivey, 2010 as cited in Anderssen, 2010). The research Ivey (2010) and others have conducted show the opposite is true. Under the right circumstances, students will make good choices. The purpose of this resource tool, then, is to help show that choice does enhance learning and this resource tool highlights essential ways to create the right circumstances for effective implementation of student choice—without unleashing bedlam in the classroom! *NB: The focus will be on secondary school educators and learners, although the ideas can be applied in varying degrees at all levels of education.*

Choice & Voice = Ownership and Engagement

Both experience in the classroom and research indicate that effective learning occurs when "the whole person, including his or her feelings and cognitive aspects, are involved in the learning event" (Wang, 2012, p.6). But how do you engage the whole person in their learning? One way to *not* engage the whole person is to be overly prescriptive: according to Dewey (1938), "when a learning environment is overly tailored, it begins to feel more like school work and become less experiential" (Dewey, 1938/1997 as referenced in Barab and Dodge, 2008, p.99). Similarly, Mergendoller (2015) states that if students "aren't able to use their judgment when solving a problem and answering a driving question, the project just feels like doing an exercise or following a set of directions" (Mergendoller, 2015, n.p.). Teachers often devote hours of preparation time plotting and planning the perfect lesson; sometimes the smooth progression of

the lesson fires up the students' interest, as though they are an audience for a well-orchestrated performance. The dynamic delivery and the novelty of something new can be very engaging; however, the long term effect— sometimes on the very next day when the real work begins—leaves the students unenthused or unengaged. Students cannot be engaged if they are passive; they may complete the tasks assigned them, but they don't "own" their learning. As Mergendoller notes, "Having a say in a project creates a sense of ownership in students; they care more about the project and work harder." (Mergendoller, 2015, n.p.). A 2008 meta-analysis of 41 studies "found a strong link between giving students choices and their intrinsic motivation for doing a task, their overall performance on a task, and their willingness to accept challenging tasks" (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008, as cited in Goodwin, 2010).

Student Voice & Choice

"The bigger picture here, which transcends and predates national standards, features top-down control all the way along the education food chain, from legislators and state school officials to school boards to superintendents to principals to teachers. That means the pivotal question for teachers—a moral as well as a practical question—is whether they will treat students the way they, themselves, are being treated ... or the way they wish they were being treated" (Kohn, 2010, n.p.).

The ultimate goal of "student choice" is to give students opportunities to customize their plan of study by focusing on aspects and learning objectives that are meaningful and useful to them; this is achieved by learners working alongside their teacher to co-create a curricular blueprint for their learning. This is similar to the ideas presented by Goulart and Roth (2010), who examined ways that "the teacher and her students work together to create a task to the liking of the children" (Goulart & Roth, 2010, p.535). This is not to suggest that a "teacher should 'cave in' to the interests of the child" (Phillips, 1998, p.406). Instead, teachers and learners use the interests of the students to foster intrinsic motivation and springboard into further learning. Learners teach the teacher about what they know, what they want to know, and why they want to know it (Goulart and Roth, 2010). Dewey (1902) argues that "somehow and somewhere motive must be appealed to, connection must be established between the mind and its material" (p.27). He says this because "The subject-matter does not appeal; it cannot appeal; it lacks origin and bearing in a growing experience" (Dewey, 1902, p.7). The motivation to learn the "nuts and bolts" of a subject—the motivation to set sail on the educational journey—is to achieve an authentic, personal goal.
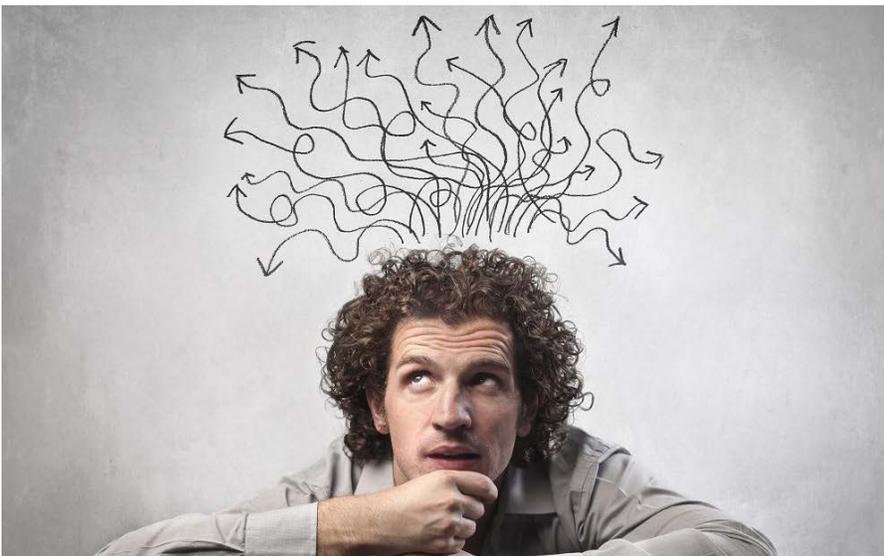
CHOICE IN ACTION

A powerful example of the benefits of choice can be seen in FINLAND. The Finnish education system is consistently ranked the top system internationally according to PISA. One of the most commonly cited factors of their success is their systematic incorporation of student choice (Lombardi, 2005). Student choice is greatly increased in the secondary level; an article on Finland's educational system reports that "by the time students enrol in upper secondary school, they are expected to be able to take sufficient charge of their own learning to be able to design their own individual programme" (OECD, 2010).
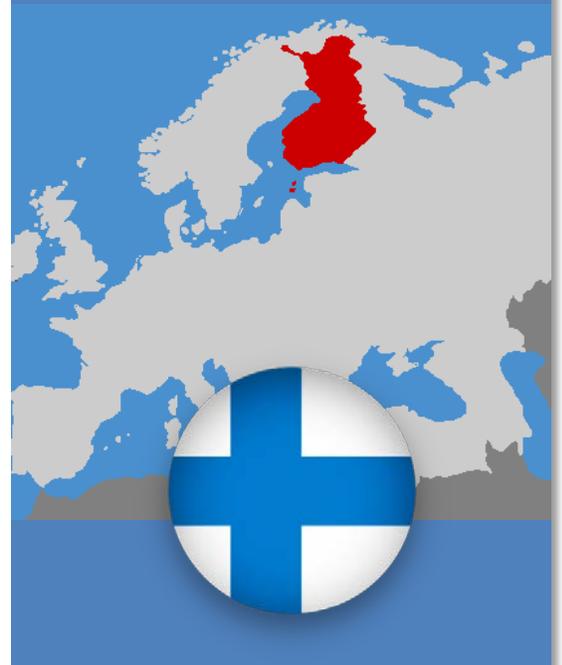
QUALIFYING CHOICE

Giving students more choice in their own education does not mean teachers abandon all control and influence over their education. Choice must be qualified.

1. LIMITING CHOICES

The first area of choice is to offer limited choice. Too much choice or not enough boundaries or guidelines actually stifle students from taking risks and branching out into new areas of exploration. A number of researchers have found "diminishing returns when students had too many choices: giving more than five options produced less benefit than offering just three to five" (Goodwin, 2010; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000 as cited in Goodwin, 2010; see also Gladwell, Blink, pp. 142-43, 180-81). The spectrum must be balanced between too few choices and too many choices. Teachers need to provide the parameters and guidelines from which students are able to navigate their own educational experience. Klauda and Guthrie (2012) boldly state that they "are not recommending that teachers let students choose whether to read a textbook or whether to complete assignments. Rather, we are suggesting that teachers provide limited choice" (Klauda & Guthrie, 2012).

"For transformative learning to occur, the instructor must strike a careful balance between support and challenge" (McGonigal, 2005, n.p.)

2. INCREASE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHOICE GRADUALLY

Students need to develop experience in decision making. The ground work for students to make informed choices needs to be established gradually from early education to intermediate level. Researchers in the area of student choice emphasize that "the transition from fewer to more choices should be gradual" (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004 as cited in Goodwin, 2010).

In a report on Finland's high performing educational system, this notion of gradually introducing choice is also highlighted: "by the time students enrol in upper secondary school, they are expected to be able to take sufficient charge of their own learning to be able to design their own individual programme" (OECD, 2010).

The choice is not only gradual from an age-and-stage perspective; the choices should be incrementally expanded and introduced to the students within a course and will vary from student to student, as their proficiency for decision-making improves. Mergendollar (2015) suggests a range of opportunities for student choice: "students can have input and (some) control over many aspects of a project, from the questions they generate, to the resources they will use to find answers to their questions, to the tasks and roles they will take on as team members, to the products they will create. More advanced students may go even further and select the topic and nature of the project itself; they can write their own driving question and decide how they want to investigate it, demonstrate what they have learned, and how they will share their work" (Mergendoller, 2015, n.p.).

> *"The sad irony is that as children grow older and become more capable of making decisions, they're given less opportunity to do so in schools. In some respects, teenagers actually have less to say about their learning—and about the particulars of how they'll spend their time in school each day - than do kindergarteners. Thus, the average American high school is excellent preparation for adult life ... assuming that one lives in a totalitarian society" (Kohn, 2010).*

3. STUDENTS NEED TO MAKE "INFORMED CHOICES"

Dewey (1902) rightly observes, "It is certainly futile to expect a child to evolve a universe out of his own mere mind as it is for a philosopher to attempt the task." (p.13). Learners must begin with what they know, and set out to build on that knowledge: "nothing can be developed from nothing" (Dewey, 1902). This is where educators as facilitators play a necessary role in the process of education. Teachers guide learners to new opportunities and help learners determine sub-goals, means, and methods to achieving their ultimate goal. This is similar to Dewey's notion of the map (1902): "the

map, a summary, an arranged and orderly view of previous experiences, serves as a guide to future experience; it gives direction; it facilitates control; it economizes effort, preventing useless wandering, and pointing out the paths which lead most quickly and most certainly to a desired result" (p. 34). Students cannot make "good" choices if they don't have enough information to "inform" their choices. "Cognitive scientists have long recognized that the key to acquiring knowledge and mastering skills is to possess a considerable amount of background knowledge" (Willingham, 2009 as cited in Munson 2011). Students need to "know" enough information in order to make good choices for their learning. Choices made blindly are rarely effective or useful.

4. GUIDANCE FROM TEACHERS IS ESSENTIAL

"[Teachers] are the single biggest in-school influence on learning, meaning they're the builders of economic growth and prosperity" (Hammer, 2011). This truth is not diminished by shifting from teacher-choice to student-choice; on the contrary, the influence of teachers is ironically increased by the implementation of student choice. One of the key factors is the role teachers have in providing expertise to help inform students of choices and options available. Researchers Metzler and Woessmann (2010) have found that "teacher subject knowledge exerts a statistically and quantitatively significant impact on student achievement" (Metzler & Woessmann, 2010). A host of other researchers have made similar finds: "[Effective teachers] have sound content knowledge of the subject and understand what it means to make progress" (Gipps, 1999; Porter & Brophy, 1998; Wrag, Hayes & Cahmberlain, 1998, as cited in Jones & Moreland, 2006). A student may make choices, but he or she still needs to have guidance as to progress and success. The facilitation and feedback teachers-as-experts provide their students is essential: "with sufficient content and pedagogical knowledge, teachers can respond to students productively" (Jones & Moreland, 2006). Again, Jones and Moreland (2006) emphasize that "successful facilitation of student-teacher conversations requires a reasonable grasp of the subject matter being explored" (Duschl & Gitomer, 1997, as cited in Jones & Moreland, 2006).

5. ESTABLISH A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS TO MAKE CHOICES

Ultimately educators want their students to make choices that challenge them. This requires the establishing of safe and secure environment for students to take intellectual risks with their decision-making. Establishing an environment of safety is done—in no small part—by creating a rapport with students. Commenting on teacher-student attachment, Bergin and Bergin (2009) state that "secure attachment *liberates* children to explore their world." (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p.142). They go on to say that giving student choice further facilitates this sense of security and rapport: "Be responsive to students' agendas by providing choice whenever possible. This may help students feel greater rapport with teachers." (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p.159). The benefits of a positive relationship goes beyond risk0-taking and engagement: "When teachers develop relationships with students by learning about their lives, interests, and hopes, everyone benefits. Numerous studies have tied positive student-teacher relationships to increased student achievement (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2006 as cited in Ferlazzo, 2012). Time is needed to build, establish, and sustain student teacher relationships, but this positively impacts student success (Hancock, 2011).

In addition to creating a safe environment for students to choose intellectual risks, educators also need to combat what Carol Dweck calls "fixed mindsets" (Dweck, 2015, n.p.). If students believe that a task is impossible for them, then they will not choose to tackle it. Key to encouraging "challenging choices" is for educators to foster "growth mindsets" in their students. See the accompanying chart; see also Carol Dweck's book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.

HOW TO FOSTER A GROWTH MINDSET

Growth Mindset
What to say:

Fixed Mindset
What not to say:

"When you learn how to do a new kind of problem, it grows your math brain!"
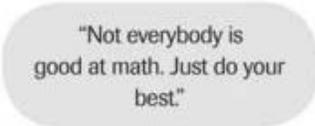
"Not everybody is good at math. Just do your best."
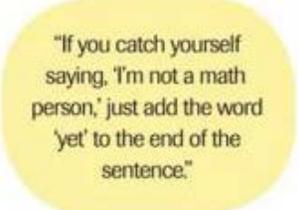
"If you catch yourself saying, 'I'm not a math person,' just add the word 'yet' to the end of the sentence."
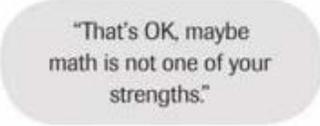
"That's OK, maybe math is not one of your strengths."

"Don't worry, you'll get it if you keep trying."*

*If students are using the wrong strategies, their efforts might not work. Plus they may feel particularly inept if their efforts are fruitless.
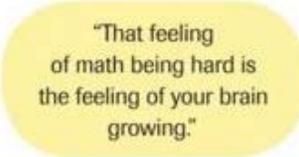
"That feeling of math being hard is the feeling of your brain growing."
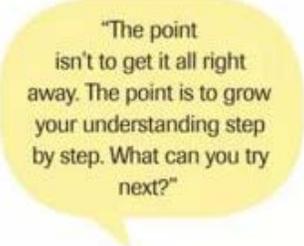
"The point isn't to get it all right away. The point is to grow your understanding step by step. What can you try next?"

"Great effort! You tried your best."*

*Don't accept less than optimal performance from your students.

SOURCE: Carol Dweck

"Sometimes really hard thinking can be pleasurable—that's what our kids experience. Pleasure doesn't have to be a no-brainer." (Ivey, 2010 as cited in Anderssen, 2010)

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