Using Choice and Autonomy to Connect Students to Content and Increase Engagement

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Abstract: This paper explores methods to enhance student engagement and motivation in social studies classrooms by offering students choice and autonomy in their assignments. We describe the importance of choice and autonomy for students in the classroom and theories to support those pedagogical decisions. However, to observe strategies implemented in social studies classrooms, preservice teachers must participate in and perceive assignments modeled that provide them choice and autonomy during their Educator Preparation Programs. We present several strategies that have been successfully employed in college classrooms to provide insights into authentic assignment implementation. These strategies include menu assignments, soundtracks, and due date windows, all of which have resulted in positive feedback from students. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of these approaches, demonstrating their impact on student motivation and engagement and preservice teacher preparation.

Introduction

Helping students find intrinsic motivation to complete assignments can be difficult.

Personalized learning can help instructors increase engagement and motivation in the classroom

at all levels. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) defines personalized learning as:

> instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for
>
> the needs of each learner. Learning objectives, instructional approaches, and instructional
>
> content (and its sequencing) all may vary based on learner needs. In addition, learning
>
> activities are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests, and often self-
>
> initiated. (pg. 7)

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) identifies pacing instruction according to

learning needs (or individualization) and changing the method or approach of instruction to tailor

to learning needs (or differentiation) as crucial components of personalized learning. Bray and

McClaskey (2014) offer another commonly used definition of personalized learning as "learners

actively participating in their learning…learners have a choice in how they demonstrate what

they know and provide evidence of their learning." Walkington and Bernacki (2020) highlight

the key characteristics of personalized learning as meaningfulness, interest-driven, relevance, and

self-initiation. Combining personalized learning with the ideas of self-determination, choice,

autonomy, and student-instructor rapport can aid instructors in creating assignments where

students feel they have choice and autonomy, thus increasing their interest and motivation in the

course overall.

Creating and implementing such strategies in the classroom, however, is not always done.

To increase student motivation and engagement at all levels, preservice teachers need the

opportunity to see these strategies modeled in their Educator Preparation Program (EPP) and

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participate in assignments that provide them choice and autonomy. First-hand experience with these strategies allows preservice teachers the opportunity to see the benefit from the student side, as they are hopefully more engaged and motivated in their own work, but also to ask the instructor questions about the pedagogy behind the assignments to better understand how to design their own. In this article, we will briefly describe several strategies designed to provide students choice and autonomy, with which we have had success in the classroom and hope provide clear models for our preservice teachers on how to implement such strategies with their future students.

Rationale

Students unfortunately often report that they do not particularly care for social studies and have reported this general dislike for decades (Schug et al., 1982). Students find social studies content boring and unrelatable (Schug et al., 1982; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Busey and Russell III (2016) found that many students do not see themselves reflected in social studies curricula, contributing to the content being viewed as unrelatable. In addition, students find the pedagogical methods often employed in teaching social studies to be passive, uninteresting, and not challenging (Russell III & Waters, 2010). Incorporating ideas of choice and autonomy within social studies classrooms can assist instructors in avoiding students acting as passive learners and provide students some control over their learning. It is easy to design assignments that allow students to draw on their personal interests or to provide choice in demonstrating their learning, which in turn may increase engagement and motivation within a content area where many express a general disdain.

By designing assignments that provide students choice and autonomy in their completion, students feel a sense of autonomy in the course overall (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Underlying the

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need for choice and autonomy is Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory (SDT), which focuses on "inherent motivational propensities for learning and growing" and supports for these tendencies. Tendencies toward growth, learning, and connecting with others are not automatic, however. Ryan et al. (2019) argue that SDT requires the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs, specifically autonomy, competence, and relatedness to encourage these propensities. Autonomy is defined as "a sense of initiative and ownership in one's actions" that is supported by "experiences of interest and value and undermined by experiences of being externally controlled" (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Competence is "feelings of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow," while relatedness is "a sense of belonging and connection…facilitated by conveyance of respect and care" (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When these basic psychological needs are met, students exhibit more intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which is useful in a classroom setting.

Reeve and Cheon (2021) agree and push for educators to employ autonomy-supportive teaching. When students have some control over their behavior and self-endorsement of their actions, they experience autonomy "satisfaction" which leads to gains in not only student's adaptive classroom functioning but also their well-being (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Autonomy-supportive teaching is most successful when instructors exhibit a "student focused attitude and an understanding interpersonal tone" which allow the instructor to better understand and take on student's perspectives (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). These attitudes allow instructors to better support student's need for autonomy which in turn helps create positive classroom environments and supports intrinsic motivation and internalization, leading to increasing autonomy satisfaction amongst students (Cheon & Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

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Understanding student perspectives and preferences is a means to positively connect with students and build rapport in the classroom (Sybing, 2019). Rapport and connection with students are important for student success (Tormey, 2021). Providing students with opportunities to practice autonomy over their coursework and creating those positive classroom environments could lead to greater student success.

Providing opportunities for choice and demonstrating relevance of coursework may also help create positive classroom environments. In their study of middle schoolers, Birdsell et al. (2009) found that when students were given curriculum choices, 38% felt that they were able to focus on their strengths, which increased their interest and motivation. In addition, researchers found that in class students were more attentive and spent less time off task than when they were not given curriculum choices. Students also felt that when they had more ownership of their learning, the work they completed was more important to them, again increasing interest and motivation (Birdsell et al., 2009). Patall et al. (2010) found similar results in their study of high school students and homework assignments. When students were given choices in their homework, they reported increased motivation and competence and performed better on unit tests (Patall et al., 2010).

When students felt coursework was relevant, they were also more motivated in college classes. Pisarik and Whelchel (2018) determined that college students view relevance in much more complicated ways than assumed, with students viewing coursework as directly or indirectly relevant to their lives and future careers. Participants reported that direct academic relevancy "was coupled with three specific feelings: lack of autonomy, disinterest, and displeasure resulting from engagement in coursework" (Pisarik & Whelchel, 2018). These feelings were reported particularly in classes that were required for degree completion. However, if the ideas of

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self-determination, choice, preference, and autonomy are taken into consideration, it is possible to use personalized learning to increase student interest, pleasure, and feelings of control in college classrooms, thus increasing motivation and student participation and contributing to more welcoming and positive classroom environments at all education levels.

The strategies described below have been used in college courses, specifically a Culturally Responsive Educator course and a U.S. History Reconstruction to Present course. Preservice teachers are enrolled in the Culturally Responsive Educator course as a requirement of their Educator Preparation Program, and it is a one credit hour course that meets for five weeks. This course is organized around a Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading state standard which focuses on oppression and advocacy. The course therefore has students identify their own positionalities, learn about the lived experiences of others, study oppression in society in general and education in particular, and examines how teachers can advocate for their students. The U.S. History course is one that some preservice teachers elect to take as part of their general education requirements; however, this is not required of preservice teachers as there are several history courses that fulfill this requirement. The U.S. History course is a lower-level survey course that students in any major may take to fulfill general education requirements and runs for an entire semester. As a survey course, a broad time frame is covered, beginning with Reconstruction and continuing through the present day. Information must be covered quickly throughout the semester, and each week focuses on a different historic era. The class makeup of the history course then varies widely and includes students who are interested in history and therefore motivated, and students who are simply completing a requirement. Since education majors do enroll in this course, the instructor will explain pedagogical decisions behind the structure of the course and assignments, to support those students who will work with the same

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instructor in future courses in the Educator Preparation Program. These preservice teachers

enrolled in these courses have the opportunity to participate in these classroom strategies as a

student and consider the influence having choice and autonomy in their assignments has on their

motivation. The instructors hope this firsthand experience will encourage these preservice

teachers to implement similar strategies in their future classrooms.

Strategies

There are several strategies instructors can implement in their courses to provide students

choice and autonomy in completing assignments. These strategies may also be designed to

connect to student interests, which increases student motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Menus

The first strategy is to design assignments in the form of menus and provide students

choice in how they demonstrate their understanding of a concept (Birdsell et al., 2009; Reeve &

Cheon, 2021). Menus can be designed in a variety of ways and incorporate many different

learning modalities (Westphal, 2020). A menu simply offers students multiple and varied

assessment options for demonstrating their understanding. Menus are very easy to differentiate,

as each option can focus on a different method or approach to instruction, as highlighted by the

U.S. Department of Education (2016) as crucial for personalized learning. Instructors can create

menus based around specific themes, topics, texts, etc., and determine how many options students

need to complete to demonstrate competency. Since menus provide students with choice, to

ensure all students address key concepts, reflection questions may be a mandatory part of the

assignment and require students to draw on their menu selections as examples and make

connections back to course content.

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In the Culturally Responsive Educator course, each week students complete a menu assignment. They are given a variety of options (with an average of six options) and a requirement for how many options to complete. Since this course only runs for five weeks, students complete a menu for the first four weeks, and submit a final portfolio two weeks after the course ends which includes all their menus, a positionality statement, and a final reflection. The first week's assignment requires students to consider perspectives and experiences of groups with which they do not identify, and students have six options for completing their assignment and must choose three (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Culturally Responsive Education Course Menu Assignment Example

Menu #1: Exploring New Perspectives

Menu options: Must complete at least 3. Please see the lists of suggestions in the assignments folder in Blackboard for Menu #1. You MUST select options that represent perspectives of people who are different than you and have different lived experiences than you. Use this template to take notes and complete the reflection at the end.

TV show. You should watch at least three episodes. (shows that represent groups you do not identify with and share lived experiences outside your own).	Listen to music. You should listen to an entire album. (Music by artists you do not normally listen to who discuss lived experiences outside your own).	New restaurant. You should try one restaurant. (The restaurant must serve a type of food you have not tried before and is not part of your own culture/heritage).
Podcast. You should listen to at least three episodes. (Podcasts by and about groups you do not identify with and share lived experiences outside your own).	Social media. You should follow at least ten accounts by people you do not identify with. (Your job is to listen and learn, not to engage).	Read a book (fiction or non). You should read one book. (This book must be by a person of color, LGBTQ author, disability author, etc. This should NOT be a children's picture book).

Within their course management system, a list of suggested activities is included to help students who may be struggling to find appropriate activities. Students may also of course reach out to the instructor for further suggestions. Within this menu, students are given options for high

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interest activities, such as watching tv, listening to music, visiting restaurants, or perusing social media.

To ensure that students make connections between their menu options and course content, the required reflection questions are as follows: Discuss: what biases or stereotypes you may have had going into this assignment; why you think you had those biases/stereotypes; where do you think they came from? What experiences did you learn about that you had not considered before? Did you notice any systems of oppression or examples of our foundational terms (e.g., racism, prejudice, discrimination), and how they might have contributed to these lived experiences? Since the course moves quickly and only meets for five weeks, students are not required to have fully completed each menu option prior to the next class. To demonstrate progress on each week's menu however, students submit a weekly progress report, which indicates the options they have selected, the progress they have made, and their initial thoughts on the reflection questions. The weekly progress report allows the instructor to provide feedback for students to implement as they complete their final portfolio for the course.

Other menus in this course focus more heavily on course content and provide options such as reading a variety of texts, curating lists of culturally relevant classroom materials, watching documentaries, or speaking with school administrators about school policies and procedures. Throughout the course, all menu options are designed to relate directly to students' experiences as future teachers, though menus may be designed for any content area.

Some studies have indicated that providing students with choice for assignments actually creates more work for the instructor in terms of designing and grading assessments (Arendt et al., 2016; Hanewicz et. al., 2017). Menus, however, offer instructors great flexibility in designing assessments and are easy to design around different topics or concepts and are applicable for

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many content areas beyond social studies. In addition to offering students options on how to complete an assignment, menus may be tied together with a reflection to ensure students directly address key concepts. In terms of revision, menus can be changed frequently in their entirety or piecemeal depending on instructor goals and student interests, thus reducing the amount of time instructors spend on creating the assignment.

Soundtracks

A second strategy that typically connects strongly to student interest is a soundtrack assignment. Creating soundtracks for a topic allows students to bring in their personal music interests and make connections to content. Soundtracks also help create rapport between students and instructors as students are sharing their specific musical tastes and may introduce the instructor to new music. Several scholars have noted the benefits of creating a positive rapport with students (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Sybing, 2021; Tormey, 2021), which can lead to more positive classroom environments.

A successful soundtrack requires students to make clear connections to course content and identify within the music where they are making connections (Goering & Bburenheide, 2010). In the U.S. history course for example, students must explain why the song represents a specific era, identify lyrics within the song that make a connection, and cite primary and secondary sources from the course to demonstrate their grasp of content. Students therefore must critically consider each song selection and provide multiple sources of evidence to justify their song selection. This assignment also offers students the opportunity to be creative in their soundtrack design. Students may focus on specific genres of music, artists, or time periods for example, based on their preferences. In the U.S. history course, students have focused their soundtrack on specific artists such as Led Zeppelin, or specific genres, such as heavy metal and rap (Figure 2).

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Figure 2

History Soundtrack Assignment Student Work Example

Wild West <u>Seek and Destroy</u> also by heavy metal band Metallica. 1982. "Seek and Destroy" retains no realistic meaning other than simply being a violent song to attribute to Metallica's album "Kill Them All". This is why I picked this song for the Wild West as Americans tried to Kill all the Indians. Not literally kill the Indians, but kill the culture of the Indians. During westward expansion, Indians were forced into poor reservations and forced to American culture. Native Americans were forced into Americanized educational platforms led by educators such as Richard Pratt who believed, "All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him and save the man" (Pratt 36). Natives as a result were victims of white supremacy and American supremacy. Pratt shows us an attempt at genocide of a culture and Natives are still entrapped in poor reservation conditions in today's time. Natives of course rejected this assimilation and violence was often conducted. "Seek and Destroy" is an indirect correlation but lyrics like "Say goodbye to the world you live in" was a reality for many Native Americans. The Natives were robbed of land and Americans made it impossible for the culture to survive to a high degree. The song's lyrics also involve thousands of deaths and the idea of driving out people. This was again a horrific reality for Native Americans as resistance led to thousands of deaths and being ultimately driven out of the West. Indians were forced into reservations for dominantly white civilization to take place.

Since the course is a survey course and covers a broad time frame, students are asked to include ten songs on their soundtrack. In the history course for example, students complete this assignment twice-once at the mid-term point of the semester, focusing on Reconstruction through World War I, and again at the end of the semester focusing on The Great Depression through Modern Day. For each soundtrack, there are six required eras students must cover-the first covers Reconstruction, the "Wild West," The Gilded Age, American Empire and Xenophobic Nationalism, Progressivism, and World War I and the Roaring Twenties. The second soundtrack covers The Great Depression and New Deal, World War II, The Cold War and Age of Affluence, Postwar America, The End of History, and Perpetual Crisis. These eras align with the course textbook and topics covered each week. The remaining four songs on the soundtrack are open to student interpretation. Students may include an additional song(s) for an era in which they are particularly interested or focus on a particular person or event within one of the eras. Allowing students some choice within the four remaining songs builds even more autonomy within this

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assignment and gives students the opportunity to explore specific areas of interest within course content.

Soundtracks are an easy assessment to design on the part of the instructor. Explicit directions on what students should include within their explanations are necessary, as well as any restrictions the instructor may wish to place on the type of music that may be included (e.g., if the instructor prefers that no songs with explicit lyrics are used). However, once designed this assignment may be repeated or added to throughout the semester. Instructors may also choose to create class playlists based on student submissions, which may be shared.

Due Date Windows

Though not a separate strategy for designing assignments, a due date window rather than one set deadline may also help with student choice and autonomy regarding deadlines. For the soundtrack assignment for example, students have a one-week window in which to submit their soundtrack. They are given a "due date" which is the first date in the window, and a built-in weeklong extension. Providing students with a window of time for assignment submission allows them to have an extension, if necessary, without providing an excuse to the instructor. They may use the window to plan around assignments due for other courses, work, or general life responsibilities. In the interest of providing students with autonomy and choice, a due date window provides that opportunity for assignment submission. The instructors implement this strategy within multiple other courses not described here (such as a social studies methods course) for assignments, and students frequently mention the helpfulness of the due date window within course evaluations at the end of each semester.

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Feedback

The menu, soundtracks, and due date window strategies have been implemented in education and history classes for eight semesters. Feedback on these strategies has been collected predominately through course Student Evaluations of Instruction (SEIs), which students are asked to complete by the university at the end of each semester. Informal critiques have been gathered through conversations between the instructor and students prior to, during, or after class. For the Culturally Responsive Education course, the instructor asked students for informal written comments at the end of the course, since it is only one credit hour meets the first five weeks of the semester. Therefore, it is completed weeks before students fill out their formal SEIs. The Culturally Responsive Educator course has only been taught for four semesters since it was redesigned to cover newly written state Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading standards. The instructor felt immediate student feedback, even informally, would be beneficial in revising the course each semester and was concerned student comments would not be as robust in SEIs completed over half a semester after the course ended. Student feedback on all three strategies has been predominantly positive.

In the Culturally Responsive Education course, students have stated in informal course feedback and formal student evaluations that they appreciate the menu options and having choice in how they complete an assignment. In course evaluations, one student stated, "I enjoyed the structure of the assignments because they provided choices and not everyone was relegated to the same topic." Students also felt as though the assignments are interesting and allow them to pursue things they would normally do, such as listen to podcasts, watch TV/documentaries, or search for classroom resources. Some students stated that they do not have time for more enjoyable tasks such as watching TV or reading books, so they appreciate having an assignment

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which provides those activities as an option. The menu activity also contributes to robust classroom discussion, as students tend to draw on their experiences and what they learned when discussing course content and readings.

Multiple students in the U.S. history course have stated they enjoyed the soundtracks assignment because it allows them to be creative and draw on their own personal preferences to demonstrate their learning. One student stated, "My favorite part of history was the history soundtrack project." Though several students also stated it does require time and a lot of thought, they appreciated being able to incorporate their own interests into their assignment and the freedom they are allowed in designing their soundtrack. Students also enjoyed speaking with the instructor about their soundtrack and sharing songs they considered but ultimately did not include on the final assignment.

Since the U.S. History course is a lower level survey course with students enrolled from a variety of majors, engagement and motivation within the course can be a challenge since many students are simply fulfilling a history course requirement and freely profess their general dislike of history for many of the reasons described by Busey and Russell III (2016), Russell III and Waters (2010), Schug et al. (1982), and Zhao and Hoge (2005). SEI results tend to indicate that students overall enjoy the course, with students making comments such as "I usually don't enjoy history classes but I really liked this course…the content wasn't always interesting but having to do different activities made it much more tolerable;" "I had very little interest in history at the beginning of this course but that changed by the end…I thoroughly enjoyed this class and the way it was set up made it easy and fun to learn;" and "I really enjoyed this class…normally a class like this can be very boring and consists of listing facts and timeframes in chronological order…I personally loved the soundtracks assignment, it allowed for creativity to flow which is

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very seldom in a history class." Comments such as these support not only student interest in the soundtrack assignment but indicate higher engagement and motivation for a content area which research shows is generally disliked by students with comments suggesting students enjoyed the creativity, choice, and autonomy the course provided.

Most importantly, a secondary social science student enrolled in the history course mentioned their intent to use a similar assignment in their own classroom after graduation. While we hope that preservice teachers will remember the strategies modeled in class in the future, it is helpful to hear that they do intend to implement similar strategies into their own classrooms. This also provides the opportunity for the instructor to provide further examples and information about a particular strategy or offer to address any pedagogical questions students may have.

The due date window has been the most helpful throughout all classes. The number of excuses, requests for assignment extensions, and late submissions dropped significantly when students were provided a window and given some autonomy over their assignment submissions. Much like the assignments themselves, students appreciate a sense of control over their coursework.

Implications

We feel as if we have been successful in implementing these strategies in our courses for multiple semesters and have received positive feedback from students. We will continue to use these strategies to provide students with choice and autonomy in our courses, and to help establish positive relationships. We recommend that instructors consider implementing these or similar strategies into their own courses. Menus and soundtracks for example, can work with a variety of topics or content areas. Instructors need only to design the menu or set soundtrack guidelines around their course topic(s) and provide reflection questions (in the case of menus)

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and clear criteria for student demonstration of learning. Once general guidelines and assignment instructors are in place, these activities are easily modified to incorporate new ideas, information, and readings. An added bonus for the instructor is that grading is much more varied when students are able to choose how they demonstrate their learning, rather than all students completing the exact same assignment.

Though some deadlines cannot be moved, such as those at the end of a semester, providing due date windows is an easy to implement strategy. For the history and education courses for example, a due date is set and the instructor simply provides an additional built in week for submission. This due date window is explained at the beginning of the semester, and students are reminded with each assignment.

Conclusion

It can be difficult to engage students today, particularly when assignments are not necessarily flashy or technology related. However, by allowing students choice and giving them autonomy in how they demonstrate their learning, students may be interested and more motivated to complete assignments. When students are incorporating their interests into their work, stronger relationships with instructors may also be developed, leading to welcoming and positive classroom environments. For middle or secondary students, assignments such as those described here have shown an increase in motivation in several research studies. For preservice teachers, completing assignments such as these in their degree programs gives them hands-on experiences as students with assignment choice, allowing them practical experience if they choose to implement such strategies in their future classrooms. Providing such opportunities does not take much additional work or planning but can provide helpful benefits for instructors and students.

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