In the Classroom 122
Providing Students with Assignment Choice

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast, it certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things. You're still hanging out with me and I really appreciate it. Man, is it a hot day in Rhode Island? Holy smokes. We're still in spring and it was pretty much a scorcher. I just dread what's coming. I am not a fan of the heat. I love cold, not a fan of the heat, but it is what it is and it's opportunities to get out and hopefully catch a nice breeze. This week, we are going to explore a concept that I believe is at the heart of universal design for learning. This concept is about providing choice.

Specifically, we're going to look at providing choice regarding assignment. This strategy not only increases engagement and motivation for students, but I honestly believe it makes it more interesting when you're grading the assignment as an instructor. What I want to do is talk about just-- One, I'm just a fan of this, so I just want to go in and just talk about some things that you should think about, and then some steps in how to put this into action. It's pretty quick, but there's a few things that as I was looking through a variety of articles, folks have highlighted that you should consider, so let's talk about that first.

One of the reasons that you're providing choice is you're tapping into this idea of learning, that you want students to have self-determination in their learning. When you give them choice, you allow them to pick or choose which assignment that they will take, and they have motivations for doing that. One of the motivations that has shown up in the research, is students can then better align the learning decisions they're making with their lifetime interests and goals. That if you allow them to make some choices in how they will carry out this assignment, then, they're going to be a little bit more motivated in completing that assignment.

This goes all the way back to what I've talked about on different episodes is, folks like to do things that they want to do rather than what they have to do. If they have to do an assignment and you give them an opportunity to choose, then you're tapping into, "Well, I get a choice, so I want to do this." They're more likely to do it with some enthusiasm and follow through, and ideally complete the assignments. Whenever possible, try to craft your assignments so students can choose the topic within your assignment parameters. You don't want to give free range. You don't want them to just do it however they want on any topic they want.

You're also teaching within a course, so you want to control those parameters somewhat, but because students get some choice, they may tap into something that's personal. They may have something that's happened in their family that strikes a chord with them, and they want to follow that path to learn more to further

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investigate which then adds more explanation to what happened in terms of their family. They could have had a grandfather who served in World War II or Korean War or something like that, or a great-grandfather probably at this time. They may have a parent who had cancer, and they want to explore that more.

If you give that type of choice, it becomes personal and the odds are that they will explore it to a deeper depth. When creating assignments, another thing to think about is the different resources that you provide. If, for example that you're teaching them how to create a video, you may teach them a couple of different ways of doing that. You're allowing them choice in how they create that video, or different strategies for creating that video. Give them a little bit of latitude in doing that.

If you are in a certain discipline that maybe has research databases, and you have a number of different databases by allowing them to have choice in what they can explore. They probably will explore it to a greater depth than maybe a case study that you are providing. You certainly always want to challenge them to explore it at a deeper level, than the initial information that you provided. I saw in a number of different articles, and I included a lot of articles in the show notes, so I encourage you to go read the show notes for this episode. This is Episode, Number ITC 122. You'll find a variety of articles that I linked to.

One of the things that folks were encouraging to do, is also have a reflective piece attached to the assignment to better understand the motivations of what students, why they chose that assignment, why they picked the topic they did, what strategies they chose and why they chose them to help better understand? This talks too about having students better understand their thought process for learning.

Because they're making all these choices, it's really important to go back and provide thorough feedback and attending to the choices they made, and recognizing those choices in terms of topic and format. That is a way to keep encouraging students to invest in their personal learning, and to continue to make learning choices. In terms of feedback, you may also want to provide choice for that.

For example, some students may want just audio feedback, so rather than doing any writing, if a student says, "Just give me audio feedback," instead of writing, you can just talk through their paper and provide feedback that way. Or maybe they want it in video, or maybe they like lots of notes, or maybe they just want a summary at the end of their paper, but that's a choice decision. I never thought of it before, but it may be something that I asked my students for the course that I'll be teaching in the fall, what kind of feedback that they prefer. I never thought of it, I just gave feedback. It's something to think about.

Also when creating these assignments, make sure that your assignments take about the same amount of time to create, the same amount of work is put into the assignments, and that they have a similar type of challenge. Students like most people try to find the path of least resistance. If certain assignments are determined to be very easy, then you'll probably see a lot of students turn in that particular assignment. If the assignments are about the same weight in terms of the difficulty of

the assignment and how long it takes to do the assignment, then you're going to see a better spread.

One of the reasons for creating choice in assignments is actually to allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the topics that you're presenting. They will do this using what they consider their strengths. You should have assignments that play to their strengths, but you should also encourage them to try other assignments that help attend to maybe some weak areas that they have. Maybe they're not skilled writers and you have an opportunity to have them do written pieces, so you can work on that aspect. Maybe they're just not good presenters, and you have an opportunity to encourage them to do an assignment as a presentation to work on that particular skill.

One of the other aspects of providing choice that I think is important is this idea of, "Providing choice is just more inclusive." When you have a classroom that is very diverse, when you provide assignments, you are typically providing assignments from your perspective. You may not necessarily recognize the perspectives from other students in your classroom. It may be in terms of age, gender, race, culture, abilities, and disabilities, all that. When we create assignments just from our perspective always, and do not allow the latitude of choice, then we may be missing out on new connections with content that we otherwise would not tap into.

That's what I find interesting piece in how I could grow as an instructor. We'll talk more about how to add different assignments and such, but one way to do it is just focus on a category and add a lot of different assignments. Ideally, you want to have more assignments than what is required for passing the course. This is something that I definitely do for my class. I have a multimedia class, where I have things in a lot of different topics, from coding to creating videos, creating audio, simulations, just a variety of different things. I have these little assignments in each one to help them better understand that particular objective.

In my class, students have to earn 1,500 points, and they do that by completing assignments that range from 25 points to 100 points. In my class overall, I have 2,300 points worth of assignments. Every time I teach this class, I just keep adding new assignments. That amount grows and it gives students more choice in the things that they want to complete. One of the things that I always encourage them, I encourage them to explore areas that they have not ever explored. What's also important about this is, they need opportunities to fail. They need opportunities to resubmit assignments, so they can improve upon a weak area. Students are typically afraid of this, because they believe it will affect their grades. I use what's called specs grading. It's a go-no-go. Either, they completed it to my satisfaction or they did not, and if they did not, they can resubmit. Just the way the course work, students very quickly realize that there is no penalty for not being successful, and they get an opportunity to practice until they fully understand the concept. That's one of the strategies that I use, and it's worked out quite successfully. I've talked about it throughout other podcast episodes.

Choice also means that throughout your course, you are also varying the different types of assignments that you have. You're not requiring essays throughout the

course. You're not requiring just quizzes throughout your course. Students have a lot of choice with their assignments. You can spread that choice out across your course, or for each assignment that you give them options on the topics that they're going to be working on, the format they're going to be working on, and so forth. Those are definitely some things to keep in mind as you're thinking about choice and why you should be thinking about choice, but let's talk about how you can put this into practice.

Over and over again, from an instructional technologist's point of view, you should not change your whole course at one time. It's exhausting, it's frustrating, it'll wipe you out. It takes the motivation out of it, but what you can do is over-- As you're looking at your course every single year, you can look at places where you can improve it. You can take a single learning objective and maybe work on that particular learning objective, and provide choice. You can do this incrementally.

As you look at your learning objectives, and that's definitely the place to start, what are different ways students can demonstrate their understanding of proficiency? Ideally, you would want to have multiple assignments from which students could choose, but as I mentioned, this could be a big hurdle, this could be a big leap for some instructors. You can start small by allowing students to choose their topic or choose a format in which they can submit, but it all begins with the learning objective.

These learning objectives will guide you in crafting your assignments and how you can vary the requirements. I'll give you a hint. You can provide choice for assignments a lot easier, if your learning objective is more broadly written. For example, if you asked them to write a persuasive argument, that is narrowly written because you're specifically telling them to write. If you tell them to create a persuasive argument that is more broadly written, they could demonstrate that in a written piece, in an audio piece, in a presentation, in a video. There's lots of different ways that they could present that information.

Starting at the objective, if you can write it broader, then you can provide more opportunities for how they can demonstrate that. You're looking to provide choice in terms of content, format, or assignment. There are many ways to do this. First of all, is allowing your students some choice in the topic that they want to do the presentation around. If you control exactly the topic that-- Case studies are an example, that they have to specifically do that case study, then everybody's going to be doing the exact same thing.

You may have a number of students that are really not interested in that case study. Case study may be important, but if you could change your assignment in order for students to tap into things that they are interested in, then you may have more success with that assignment. In terms of format, allowing them to turn in various types of formats. For example, written paper, a video, a podcast, a presentation. I talked about what are called raft assignments.

In Episode ITC 49, so go check that out. What it does is the raft is talking about the role that you are in, the audience you're talking to, the format, and the topics. I could

take on the role of journalist, and I am talking to perhaps, the college president and the format is an audio interview and the topic, whatever the topic happened to be. My assignment, I could craft assignment right there.

Raft assignments are a great way to weave in the variety for all these assignments. You can use a raft assignment or a number of your assignments throughout the course, and get something different every time. You would have to require that the students at least maybe even change all four elements for every assignment they turn in. In the classes, like I said my multimedia class, I allow students to choose the assignments that they wanted to do. I have just multiple assignments for each objective and they get to pick and choose.

I use gamification strategies in terms of points and other motivating tools in there, but I also use additive grading. Everything they do helps towards the highest score they can possibly get. That's one of the ways that I do that. Then I also have real-world assignments. For my program planning and evaluation course, I have students develop program plans for programs that they are considering for their work, for their volunteer world, or for their personal life. I want them to work on something that has meaning to them, and we are going to use a very specific format to pull this all together, but they have choice in something that is meaningful to them to get started on this.

Rubrics are another tool that you definitely want to have part of your course. When you're dealing with the rubrics, you try to develop a rubric that is generic enough to be able to grade multiple formats. Could you develop a rubric that you can grade an essay, a presentation, a video, an audio file? Could you design a rubric? I'm confident that you can. The things that you don't want to get into are something that would be just very specific to a specific format. You can create that latitude.

Now, I just have lists of assignments, but another way that you can present your assignments to students, this choice, is using what are called choice boards. Choice boards are a matrix of assignments from which students can choose. Typical arrangement is 3 by 3. You have nine grid squares that have different assignments in each one. Students may have to pick three of those assignments out of the nine, and they get to pick and choose which one they do.

Overall, those nine assignments fall under one learning objective, a theme, or learning concept that you want them to work on, but they get to, for example, have to do three of them. You could even make it more challenging that they have to do three in a row, like, tic-tac-toe where you can do three across three down or diagonal. The one article I was reading, which I put in the show notes to talk about making that center square so enticing that everybody wants to do it.

Choice is not hard in a classroom. I've looked over many, many different syllabi and I noticed that it's lacking in choice. I think this is something that is easy to handle in a classroom. It adds variety. It taps into getting students to-- Any time you have a choice, you tend to feel better about something. Even if it's a hard choice, you still had a choice, you had buy-in to what you were doing, so difference between have to and want to. I encourage go explore choice items, check those articles I put in the show

notes, because I think it provides a lot of wonderful ideas. Before I go, here's a quick plug for my book.