



Question

What are the effects of providing activity choices on the quality of student performance and engagement?

Introduction

We love to have a choice, and to offer one. Many of our teachers have long taken for granted that opening projects and assignments to a range of student choices readily engages a level of action and personal ownership in their students. It seems that once a boy begins to consider his options, he is immediately taking the first productive steps into the activity at hand. The choosing itself is an action that puts the student at once in a visionary and constructive mindset. This project seeks to test that hypothesis.

Literature Review

- In teaching young students to read and write, offering choice has emerged as a meaningful instructional tool for teachers to use.

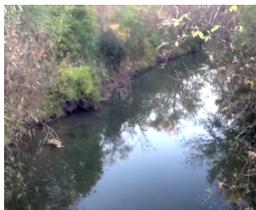
"Evidence from ... studies also led the author to find ... interest level and topic choice to be significant factors affecting a boy's motivation to read and/or write." (Senn, 2012)

- Choice *has not* been unquestionably accepted as a reliable predictor of student motivation, as this research recommends that a compulsory task can be equally engaging.

"...Choice mattered less if children were socio-emotionally close to the adults who made choices for them. However [a related study] showed that autonomy mattered at every level ... These results suggested that ... children who did not have choice might still feel autonomous." (Bao & Lam, 2008)

- It has also been acknowledged that there is a threshold to the number and type of choices that are most effective in motivating productive behaviour.

"Core theories in economics, psychology, and marketing suggest that decision makers benefit from having more choice. In contrast, according to the too-much-choice effect, having too many options to choose from may ultimately decrease the motivation to choose and the satisfaction with the chosen option." (Holden, 2013)



Method

- Our Grade 8 Earth Science classes conducted a weekly study of a local "wild place."
- We alternated our intended activities from week to week; assignments required boys to respond to compulsory items or offered a choice of themes and responses.
- Boys read the intended chapters from "The Forest Unseen" (Haskell, 2012), visited their "wild place" to make specific observations, and posted responses on their e-portfolio.
- Posted materials were assessed weekly according to an established rubric.
- After eight weeks, the boys rated and compared their interest and efforts on the alternating assignments.
- Finally, the boys were posed a hypothetical situation, and asked for their opinions regarding the meaning of choices provided in their school work.



Conclusions

It appears, as indicated both by teacher assessment data and the boys' ratings of their personal interest and engagement, that the provision of choice within the "Wild Place" assignments had no significant effect.

The boys' opinions strongly support the positive effect of choices within an academic challenge – hypothetically.

This apparent contradiction between measured performance and perception brings up interesting questions for further study:

- Is it possible that the "Wild Place" project is already sufficiently flexible as to provide a meaningful degree of decision-making and autonomy, whether or not the specific week's assignment offered options?

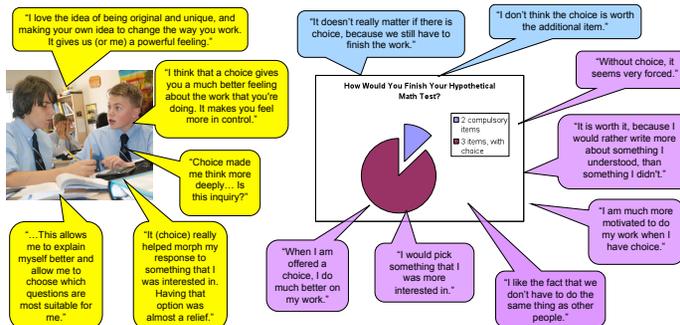
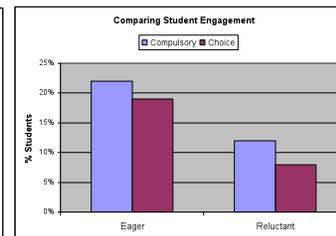
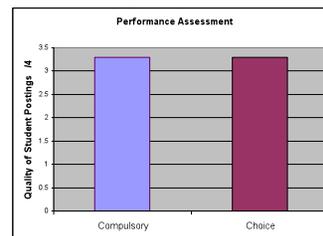
- Would choice within an exercise constrained by time and place show a greater motivating effect?

- Is there an optimal range of flexibility and choice to work within, outside of which boys find either rigidity or paralysis?



Results

- The teacher assessment comparing the weeks showed no measured effect.
- Boys' ratings of their interest and efforts in alternating weeks showed little measurable difference, although overall the boys were more eager than reluctant to conduct the study.
- Given the opportunity to express an opinion, and indicate their preference for choice over constraint, the boys were overwhelmingly in support of the theoretical and practical value of making academic choices. Quotes below are taken from boys' extended written responses.



Implications and Recommendations

- It seems that teachers should continue to build some degree of choice into their exercises and assignments. The opportunity to choose is at least as motivating as are more constrained directions. The perception of control is appreciated at face value.
- We should continue to refine our assessment methods in order to recognize and more accurately measure the best of student efforts and understanding. Perhaps we are missing the best work.
- Teachers should know that completely open-ended decision-making situations can possibly lead to diminished returns of student productivity and motivation, or "paralysis by analysis."

Bibliography

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