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Crafting Effective Choices to Motivate Students

by Kevin Perks

One of the biggest frustrations that many teachers wrestle with in the classroom is a lack of motivation among students. As teachers, we worry about how to motivate students who appear unmotivated and apathetic. We worry because as decades of research have revealed, motivation is integrally connected to achievement. We know that students who are motivated tend to learn more. Therefore, most teachers I work with often request strategies to foster motivation in the classroom.

One strategy that many teachers use to foster higher levels of interest and engagement is choice. However, research in the past decade has revealed that choice is not necessarily a cure-all for lackluster motivation. While choice can be a powerful motivator, on some occasions it can also have an adverse effect. In other words, not all choices have a positive effect on motivation and achievement. Therefore, it is helpful to consider a few factors that can help teachers design choices that have the potential to positively influence motivation and achievement.

- *A sense of control.* Effective choices help individuals feel in control. For years educational psychologists have known that an essential element of motivation is an individual's need to feel autonomous. In other words, people who believe that they have control tend to be more motivated than individuals who feel as if outside forces are compelling them. I was reminded of this recently when I brought my five-year old daughter to the doctor for her annual visit. She did not want to go inside, and she refused to look at the doctor when he entered the exam room. Craftily he took out his stethoscope to listen to her heart and the otoscope to look in her ears and eyes. He told her what they were for and said she could choose which tool he used first. Suddenly her mood reversed and she could not wait for him to examine her.
- *A sense of purpose.* A sense of purpose is another factor to consider when crafting choices. The more meaningful an activity is to the person engaging in it, the more likely he or she will be motivated to continue doing it. A sense of purposefulness or meaningfulness is also heightened if the activity strengthens relation-

ships with others. An excellent example of a choice that fostered a greater sense of purpose comes from a math teacher who was frustrated by the lack of motivation some of her male students were displaying. When she gave the students the choice to use their fantasy football stats during class, their motivation began to soar. This choice allowed the mathematical concepts the teacher was teaching to become a meaningful tool to help the students connect with something they valued doing with each other. In other words, the choice helped the students see that math had a purpose in relation to something they cared about. As a result, achievement increased.

- *A sense of competence.* In addition to fostering a sense of control and purpose, effective choices also encourage students to feel competent, particularly on challenging tasks. In general, people who believe they will succeed during challenging activities tend to be more motivated. However, if tasks are perceived to be too difficult, motivation is likely to suffer. An example of this comes from an English teacher in middle school who was frustrated with the text-based discussions she was trying to have with her students. The students were not motivated to engage in conversations about the books they were reading, even when they were reading self-selected texts. But when the teacher started to use the students' questions rather than her own to frame discussions, motivation began to rise. She realized that her questions were often too difficult or too easy for the students. She came to understand that when the students asked their own questions, they were better able to target their own level of understanding. As a result, the challenge was just right. In addition, because the questions were the students' own, it was clear they felt more competent addressing them with their peers.

In short, choices that promote feelings of control, purpose, and competence are likely to be more motivating than choices that do not. However, while this information is extremely helpful when thinking about what kinds of choices to offer students, additional questions remain.

How much choice is appropriate to give?

When you want to give students choice, it is often optimal to give them a limited number of options, but be as flexible as possible. Since motivation depends upon an individual's *perceptions* of control, purpose, and competence, students may perceive the same set of options differently. For example, when a teacher assigns a research project, some students will prefer to have a broad range of topics, others will prefer a small list of options, and yet others will prefer to be told what to do. Giving students a short list of topics with an option to create their own topic, with the teacher's approval, often works well.

What kinds of choices should I offer students?

There are many kinds of choices that can have a positive effect on classroom motivation. When designing activities and lessons, it is useful to use what I refer to as the *4WH framework* to decide what kinds of choices to provide students during any given unit, lesson, or activity. This framework encourages teachers to ask *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* questions.

- *Whom will students work with?* When activities require students to work in groups, giving them some choice about whom they get to work with may increase motivation. Teachers may be concerned that disruptions will occur when students sit with their "buddies." Some mitigate this by allowing students to pick one or two friends they would like to work with. The teacher then takes these recommendations into consideration when making work groups.
- *What content will students work with?* When activities are designed to provide opportunities to practice specific skills, students appreciate being able to select the topics or content that they can work with. This helps give greater purpose or meaning to a task. For example, if a teacher wants students to practice comprehension skills, he or she may allow them to select from a list of short stories or interesting informational texts in order to find something that will appeal to their interests.
- *When will students need to complete specific tasks?* Many projects do not require students to complete a task or solve a problem in a linear fashion. Giving students flexibility about when they do parts of a task may foster higher levels of engagement because it

gives them a sense of control and may allow them to regulate the difficulty of the task. A good example of this occurs when students are working on writing. Although the writing process has clear stages, writing is not a linear process. For instance, if students are working on a lab report, some students may need to work on revising, while others may need to focus on editing.

- *Where will students work?* Students do not always need to work at their desks. For example, one teacher noticed students were getting restless during independent reading in class. They became more motivated and less fidgety when the teacher allowed them to find a comfortable place to read. Some students chose to remain at their desks, others crawled under the desks, and still others found comfortable places elsewhere. Even simple choices like this can give students a meaningful sense of control.
- *How will students complete a given task?* Many tasks we ask students to complete do not need to be completed in the same manner. A math teacher I recently worked with regularly gives students the option of finding creative ways to solve math problems. She has commented that she continues to be impressed with the innovative ways students attempt to solve equations and other mathematical problems. Choices like this honor divergent ways of thinking and, in doing so, help promote strong feelings of competence in students.

Low motivation does not need to be a recurring problem in the classroom. Although teachers can draw from myriad strategies to cultivate higher levels of motivation, well-crafted choices have the potential to have a powerful impact on students' attitudes toward classroom work. When promoting student decision making, it is important to remember that some of the most motivating choices are those that promote feelings of control, competence, and purpose. Certainly, giving choice to students often means that teachers need to allow students to make their own decisions, and it can be difficult to give up this control. However, well-designed choices can sometimes mean the difference between a successful lesson and one that ends in frustration.

Kevin Perks is a literacy coordinator in southern Maine. He works with schools around the country and is currently cowriting a book on motivation in the classroom.

Choice at Finland Middle School

by Paul Smathers, Debbie Camp,
David Hampson, Barry Alcock, Julie Ison,
and Lynnette Stephens

At Finland Middle School, in each of the four major academic subjects, students are offered choice as a means to motivate them and to enable them to take charge, even in small ways, of their own education. A member of the staff at *In Perspective* had an opportunity to chat with a team of Finland staff members at the 2010 Ohio Educational Technology Conference. The team members—the principal, four teachers, and their 21st century learning coach—were attending the conference as part of their professional development with the 21st Century Learning in Ohio: Transforming Education project (an ARRA Title II-D Competitive Grant). Since the project focuses on student learning that is engaging and relevant, we asked the teachers to tell us about ways they are using choice to involve students in content learning.

Students in David Hampson's seventh grade social studies class have recently begun a Google Earth project, where they are taking a tour of Ancient Rome. The students are in the process of choosing the particular location in Ancient Rome that they are going to study. The students will work on their project throughout the year. At the end of the project they can choose how they will present their findings. "We have all these different methods of how kids can present the project, for example, through Photo Story, xtra normal (an animation site where kids create their own animations), PowerPoints, vodcasts, podcasts. The kids can choose any one of those methods as long as they follow a rubric that I created about what I am looking for."

Principal Paul Smathers, 21st century learning coach Debbie Camp, and the teachers agree that choice serves as a motivator. They also agree that it makes for a less traditional-looking classroom. It is a messier way to teach, though it takes more organization on the teacher's part, not less. You really have to be on top of things to allow the students choice since now there is more than one "right" way of doing something in the classroom.

And Julie Ison (the team's mathematics teacher) adds, "You have to have a principal who understands that when he walks into a room and it's not silent, it's okay. And luckily we have that—a principal that supports innovative learning."

Underscoring this idea, David Hampson comments, "The classroom is more disorganized, with one student working one way, another a different way—you get the picture. Students are more motivated to do projects than they would have been before. Yes, in the past, I might have said, 'We're doing a poster project, and you have to have six pictures on the poster and have this many facts. But I've come to the conclusion that the kids are much more motivated when I say, 'Okay. Here's a list of choices. Choose one. As long as you follow the steps in my rubric, you're fine.'"

David continues, "One of the things I had to learn recently was to let go and allow the kids to experience the consequences of their choices. And maybe there's a failure. Maybe a kid was trying to do a vodcast and he couldn't get the video to work correctly on the computer. That's a learning opportunity for that child. Because it was his choice, he's going to try to figure out a way to make it work—sometimes with the help of a fellow student."

There are a number of opportunities to work choice into language arts, and in today's classroom, technology is often involved. Eighth grade English language arts teacher Barry Alcock explains that it should not be a surprise to anyone that the students in his classes read a lot. "And what we'd always done in my classroom was a written response to literature. We would have class conversations where students shared their ideas; but at the end of the day, I would gather up the two paragraphs each student wrote and take them home to read, grade, and turn back in, with nobody else getting the chance to read them.

"This year, with Debbie Camp's help, I'm putting together a wiki where my students will have to respond a certain number of times a week to whatever they've read. I am going to give them a series of questions like I always do, but they don't have to respond to those directly. The response will be very open. They can choose instead to respond to someone else's views. Everybody will read each other's responses. They'll have to post a couple of responses—and post a couple of responses to responses—as part of the class. That's going to get them trading ideas about the literature we read in class."

Not every program lends itself to choice, of course, but even then there are opportunities. "One of the projects that we seventh grade science teachers do," says Lynnette Stephens, "involves competing in the National Engineers Week Future-City Competition to develop future cities using the computer software on SimCity, and there really are certain requirements that the kids have to follow. At the end of the project, there is a place for reflection and enrichment. In essence, we tell our students, 'Okay, you've done this project. Show us what you've learned,' and there we offer the kids choices. We might say to them, for instance, if you establish a future city on the moon, how would you prevent all these environmental problems on the moon that we have had on earth? Show us what you've learned by PowerPoint, develop a web page, etc., and talk about this new colony you've established and how you are going to prevent these environmental problems from happening.' That's kind of a little twist. They don't have a whole lot of choice in development of the project, but in the end they have a choice in showing us what they learned."

It is fairly easy to see how choice fits with social studies, language arts, and science. But mathematics? Just how does choice figure into math class? It does fit—in a number of ways. Eighth grade math teacher Julie Ison describes a project her classes worked on that involved graphing. Working with Excel, the students went to a few websites (preselected by the teacher) and picked data about whatever they were interested in—flavors of ice cream, baseball statistics, basketball statistics, whatever they wanted. They sucked in all the information, put it in Excel, manipulated it, made graphs out of it, and figured out what graphs went with that data, what graphs didn't go with that data. I think they did a really nice job. And they liked it because it was what they picked."

Coach Debbie Camp remembers with a chuckle what most of the kids said—they loved doing it because it was a break from math!

Julie Ison also relates how she uses choice when she assigns homework: "I often give my students a choice: They can do the evens or the odds. And there are times when I will say, you can do this one problem or these five others. The kids think that if they do the one problem, they are getting away with less work and effort. Actually, that 'one' problem will be a multipart problem that will require them to apply mathematical reasoning along with a number of mathematical skills."

So far the teachers have talked about choice in terms of curriculum, but choice can also, surprisingly, come into play in relation to discipline. In her first years of teaching, Julie, like just about every other teacher, would confront students sitting near each other who either were having too good a time socializing or were fighting. In either case, she would separate them by sending one to another part of the classroom. Not anymore. Now she says, "One of you needs to move. You decide." It is less stressful to her and focuses the students on what they need to do to regain control. And if students require more serious discipline, Julie again usually offers them choices: "They could be two 'bad' choices; for example, one of them might be to go to the principal's office and the other to stay in a specific teacher's room. But if they have a choice, they'll pick one; they take ownership."

Debbie Camp sums up choice nicely: "When you give students choice, it opens up a lot of avenues. When they are given the option to decide what they're going to do, whatever the product is, it's theirs—giving them ownership and responsibility for their own learning." Building on Debbie's statement, Principal Smathers adds, "Giving choice is about empowering students. It makes them feel that they are part of the process, not powerless; that's the kind of feeling that motivates everyone."

Paul Smathers has been an administrator with South-Western City Schools for the last ten years and has been the principal of Finland Middle School for the last four years. He has worked for South-Western City Schools his entire career, beginning as an intervention specialist.

Debbie Camp is the 21st century learning coach at Finland Middle School. She is a retired elementary teacher who taught for thirty years with South-Western City Schools as a teacher of the gifted and talented and as a district-wide educational technology teacher.

David Hampson teaches seventh grade social studies at Finland Middle School. He currently leads the eighth grade trip to Washington, D.C., and has taught for five years.

Barry Alcock is a national board certified teacher in early adolescent English and language arts. He teaches eighth grade language arts at Finland Middle School, where he is in his fifteenth year. He has previously taught high school English in a small town and middle school language arts in an urban district. Periodically he teaches courses in adolescent literature, reading methods, writing methods, and social foundations of education to graduate students at Capital University.

Julie Ison teaches eighth grade mathematics at Finland Middle School. This is her thirtieth year of teaching at Finland and is as entertained by her students today as she was her very first year. She has a master's degree in early middle childhood from OSU.

Lynnette Stephens teaches seventh grade science at Finland Middle School. She has a master's degree in technology integration and has taught for fifteen years.

Finland Middle School was one of the recipients of the eTech Ohio American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Title II-D Competitive Grant that will provide new 21st century technology opportunities for the students at FMS. As grant participants, Debbie, Paul, David, Barry, Julie, and Lynnette have been involved in extensive professional development and coursework, sharing ideas and collaborating while developing a plan that will enhance instruction and improve available technology at FMS.

Providing Choice—A Risk Worth Taking for Teachers and Students

by Amy Bradley and Michael Alcock

Josh, the jester of every class for as long as we could remember, had never been on a plane before his Walkabout trip that he embarked on for six weeks during the last half of his senior year. He had never thought about traveling until befriending many of the Brazilian exchange students we hosted in January of that school year. When they told him that he could visit anytime, he didn't consider it a realistic option for many weeks. With support from his family and our staff, he came to see that he was capable of undertaking such an adventure, which included raising money and making detailed plans.

He eventually booked his flight, got his first passport, learned basic Portuguese, and departed in April of that school year. Watching Josh, who was known in our community for being bold and self-assured, shake nervously as he got in the security line that would lead him to Salvador, Brazil, proves that student choice carries risk. As the staff members held their collective breath until the day he returned home safely, we found that offering options to students also bears risk for the educators.

Choice at the Graham School is best exemplified by Walkabout, a program for our seniors to explore their interests, passions, and possible career options during the two quarters before graduation. Each of the four years has a central theme around which we build curriculums, and "risk" is appropriate for the graduation year, one that culminates in personal achievement and plans for the future. From the students' first year at Graham, we build opportunities for choice, at age-appropriate increments, scaffolding the skills and habits of mind that are necessary to increase the independence and self-direction that students need as they progress. Our experiential approach is rooted in this concept: As freshman, students learn about and become part of a community; as sophomores, they explore what it means to serve within and through that community; as juniors, they use their service experience to provide leadership to younger students; and as seniors, they risk it all, moving beyond their immediate community to explore new ones.

Authentic choices cannot exist without some degree of risk. To make one choice is to give up another—to sacrifice, with the benefit of experiencing new opportunities. Throughout this experiential process at Graham, students have many opportunities to practice making choices and taking risks *in a supportive community*. While students carry much responsibility, teachers and staff seek to engage in participatory action projects with them, much like Brian Schultz’s experience.

As a public school teacher in Chicago’s Cabrini Green, Brian Schultz opened class with a basic prompt: *Generate a list of problems affecting the community*. In a matter of minutes, Schultz’s fifth graders had cited nearly 100 issues, most of which dealt with their heavily rundown school, and even speculated about the political, social, and cultural factors that might have contributed to its dilapidation. Faced with this challenge, one that had direct consequences for his learners—and for him—Schultz had a choice to make. He could change course and embrace this “emergent curriculum,” or he could move on to the next phase of his lesson. Through collaborative inquiry and plenty of trial and error, Schultz and his students took a risk and transformed their classroom into a campaign to revive the school, and, in the process, the community (B. Schultz, 2008).

The Graham School mural project is a similar example of such collaborative efforts. Together, the students researched the history of Columbus murals, visiting the works on site and interviewing community members involved in their creation. Seeking to explore community through art, a class of freshman students and their teachers chose to study murals in various Columbus communities; and the students painted one of their own, culminating in a community unveiling party.

In order to successfully complete this project, students *and* teachers contributed resources to a broader, mutual investment, navigating obstacles on the way. They also reached beyond the immediate Graham community to forge partnerships, potentially risking their original plan to unforeseen compromises and adaptations, leaving themselves open to new opportunities.

The unexpected and advantageous result of encouraging students to take measured risks is that we, as a staff, learned that the risk is not just for the students. Offering choices to students opens us, as educators, to risk. Like Brian Schultz, we accept risk each time we ask an



As part of a project where students chose to study murals in Columbus, students work together to create their own mural.

open-ended question and wait for verbal responses, because although we may have a direction in mind for a discussion, we know that the group dynamic could take us into a topic for which we have not fully prepared, and in that moment we are vulnerable; our plans could give way to student inquiries that lead into unproductive territory. Providing choice risks failure because when we, as teachers, make all the decisions for our students, lessons will proceed predictably in productive directions; however, when we remove the possibility of students choosing, and choosing wrongly, we fail to aid the students in becoming competent, thoughtful risk takers.

For example, we recently screened a promotional video in class about a nonprofit group that advocates peace through education. This was meant to introduce our unit novel (*Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin), in which the group’s founder recounts his experience building schools for girls in Central Asia. Our original intention was to offer students a model social action project they could collectively undertake and, eventually, use to guide individual capstone projects. After the video, we asked for reactions; and an outspoken sophomore, Stephanie, raised her hand in exasperation. “I get what they’re going for here, and I even support it,” she said. “But what about improving education *right here, at the Graham School?*”

It was an essential question, and as it turned out, the question preempted our plans for the remaining three months. Several students added support, and suddenly eight new ideas were on the table. The room's energy was palpable. A choice had to be made: Do we encourage these ideas, and let students begin to develop them now, or do we press on and force them to follow *our* schedule and fit *our* vision? (We could've also simply ended the discussion earlier and ignored choice altogether.) Both options were satisfactory, and each carried significant risk. We could risk the students' high level of engagement to stick with our plan, or we could risk our plan to modify it in favor of an approach that is guided by student choice. We went with Stephanie's choice of focus, requiring some adjustments to our schedule but gaining an elevated sense of ownership of the project among the members of the class.

In such moments, teaching becomes a deeply reciprocal process by which we decide to learn not just from but *with* the students, embracing the risks that accompany students developing as independent thinkers and informed risk takers (K. Schultz, 2003). Moreover, when we offer choice, we model risk taking for them and demonstrate problem-solving skills, such as how to thoughtfully navigate uncertainty and address unforeseen obstacles.

Further, it is often in the midst of these vulnerable moments when we allow students to reroute a discussion or introduce a new idea that emergent curriculums begin, and in our experience there is no doubt that the "most desirable curriculums come from students" (B. Schultz, 2008). Our willingness to listen and take risks with students is what leads to authentic choices, because everyone has some stake in the outcome; it's a collaborative partnership. We risk our comfort and emotional indolence *together* to "cross boundaries of difference" and learn from and about one another—"not to erase the boundaries but to understand and use them as a resource" (K. Schultz, 2003).

Josh came back to Graham safely in May of that year and declared himself a seasoned traveler, capable of moving independently through international airports and negotiating different cultures. He has returned to our school to speak to seniors, who are preparing for Walkabout and life after high school, about how his choice to travel to an unfamiliar place opened his eyes to possibilities for his life. On his own, he planned another six-month trip to Brazil a year after graduation, a trip that changed his perspective about world cultures and how he wants to spread the

goodwill that greeted him in Brazil in his own neighborhood in Columbus by becoming a firefighter or emergency medical technician in order to help people.

We watched Josh transform from an aimless adolescent, who would jeopardize graduation to get a laugh, to an adult with vision, one capable of focused planning for his future. His choice to explore another country and its culture, with the guidance of the many educators who supported him, engendered in him the confidence and independence that could only come from an "authentic quest with real components, challenges, and obstacles" (B. Schultz, 2008). An environment without risk fails to prepare students for life outside the classroom, a world of risk taking. Allowing students to experience measured risks, in a supportive community, models the real-world paradigm where choices naturally entail risk.

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Amy Bradley is a language arts teacher and experiential advisor at the Graham School, a local public charter high school. She is in her tenth year of teaching at the secondary level and has a master's degree in education. During the last five years, she has enjoyed serving as a mentor teacher to several student teachers and student observers from The Ohio State University and other local teacher education programs. Amy has also developed and edited the 21st Century Skills Curriculum for the Center for Experiential Learning, Leadership and Technology.

Michael Alcock is a student teacher at the Graham School. He is currently completing his M.Ed. in integrated language arts at The Ohio State University and pursuing his Ohio teaching license; he hopes to eventually earn a Ph.D. in adolescent, post-secondary, and community literacies. He previously worked as an ESL after-school communities tutor for Columbus State Community College's Center for Workforce Development and has volunteered extensively with the Open Shelter of Columbus.

When You Give Me a Choice, You Give Me a Chance

by Joleata Tidwell-Howell

One of the most effective ways to motivate students is to give them knowledge and choice. At the beginning of the school year, I give my students a basic learning-style test, which makes them aware of their learning styles and identifies their academic strengths. This test equips the students with the self-knowledge of individual strengths as well as the self-confidence to be successful in school. This is where choice comes into play.

I do not approach every assignment with a cornucopia of choices, but I do allow choice in assessments of and culminating projects for each unit. When beginning each unit, I show the students a list of topics that I expect them to master when the unit is completed. Then, I show them examples of the various types of assessments or evidences of learning they can choose. One example is the tic-tac-toe board.

I have approached using the tic-tac-toe board in two different ways. One way, shown below, is to display a large board with different types of products that cover the range of learning styles.

General Tic-Tac-Toe

Scrapbook	Film	Work Package
Newspaper	Essay	Advertisement
Diorama	Bulletin Board	Collage

The other way is to have individual tic-tac-toe boards for each of the learning styles. For instance, I may give the auditory and visual learners tic-tac-toe boards with only auditory and visual products, respectively. The spatial learner tic-tac-toe board below is a good example:

Spatial Learner Tic-Tac-Toe

Travel Brochure	Graph	Cartoon
Film	Photo Essay	Diorama
Art Gallery	Bulletin Board	Web Page

Since I teach English language arts, there are always writing components for each unit and the culminating projects. Students are excited about having the chance to choose an alternative assessment for each unit. Subsequently, I often overhear conversations in which students, who appear to have little or no motivation concerning school work, brag about what they are going to do and how great it is going to look. There is competition among the students to present the best song, play, poetry book, or scrapbook. This excitement is only found when students are confident in understanding that it is not how smart they are, but how are they smart. For my more technically advanced students, I am giving them the choice to create a website, blog, or movie. Students are much more creative and involved when they are given choices along with expectations.

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A Look at the OGT

Teaching to the Test and Beyond

by Carol Brown Dodson

Walk into any tenth grade language arts classroom a few weeks before the Ohio Graduation Test and you'll see evidence that the test will be given soon. Administrators may have mandated that teachers stop all activities other than preparing students for the test. Teachers follow the mandate and work to prepare their students for the test, often by providing short reading passages, followed by questions about the passages. Some teachers rely on state practice tests, while others use questions from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or released items from past OGT administrations. Still others use packaged programs that promise success on the OGT.

Other instruction has stopped. Lesson plans are put aside. Reading strategies are ignored. No novels or other literary works are assigned. Textbooks are left in lockers or backpacks. The classroom focus is on the big test.

As the teacher, you might question the practice, but you're also afraid not to do what you've been told to do. What if you ignore the test prep and continue teaching as you normally would? If your students perform poorly, you are likely to be blamed because you didn't follow the instructions.

Yet we hear from various researchers and experts in the field that this is not the way to prepare students. In their book *Test Talk*, Amy H. Greene and Glennon Doyle Melton (2007) tell us, "In order to be effective test takers, students must first be effective readers. Many test-prep programs ask teachers to stop authentic, meaningful instruction to teach gimmicks and mnemonic devices related only to test-taking strategies. . . . In order to simplify test taking for students, we need to relate it to their other reading throughout the year by teaching them that a test is simply a genre to which general and specific reading strategies must be applied."

Greene and Melton analyze test items and passages by determining the reading strategies needed to answer the question correctly. They give an example of a short poem followed by a multiple-choice question which asks students what the poem is mainly about. It's not a simple

main-idea question because students have to infer the main idea. The authors also determine that the question evaluates students' knowledge of several general reading strategies, including inferring, visualizing, activating schema, rereading, and using authors' clues.

Greene and Melton work in a school where students are generally successful in the school's program, but their test performance on high-stakes tests is poor. The two writers carefully studied the tests and questioned the difficulties for their students. They discovered that the reading test was hard, "not because of the content being tested, but because of the language and format the test writers used." Test questions relied on different structures for asking about things such as finding the main idea. The authors concluded that they didn't have to change the way they taught main idea. They had to ask students to recognize and answer main-idea questions on the test.

The writers decided that tests need to be taught as another genre, suggesting that some "genre-specific" strategies must be taught. Depending on the passage, these strategies might include understanding poetry conventions, navigating test format, following and understanding written directions, eliminating wrong answers, and translating "test talk."

As I continued to read *Test Talk*, I was reminded of a school that I worked with several years ago. The school was a wonderful place to visit. Students were engaged and excited about learning, teachers worked well beyond the normal school day, and the culture of the school was vibrant with questioning and seeking answers. Yet the school was in danger of losing the program and some of the teachers because their students performed poorly on district and state tests. Parents fought to keep the school's program and teachers, and teachers were not willing to do what they believed would compromise the reading workshop approach and quell the students' enthusiasm. The school ultimately was forced to make the change to a traditional program and curriculum. The successful program might have been continued if test talk had been taught as another genre.

In *Naked Reading*, Teri Lesesne (2006) underscores the need to teach students to read different types of text differently by using one of ten myths about reading to make her point. After presenting myth 8: "Reading is the same no matter what we are reading or why," Lesesne goes on to say that the myth is "So WRONG it is almost laughable. Content-area reading requires specialized content skills. Reading a poem demands a different set of skills from reading directions on programming your cell phone."

And based on the information in *Test Talk* (Greene & Melton, 2007), taking a test requires a still different set of skills. It's important to remember, though, that test-taking talk is only one type of reading, and it is one that will rarely if ever be used after completing school. Kelly Gallagher in *Readicide* (2009) stresses that challenging novels and valuable texts should not be replaced by test-preparation strategies and skills. Gallagher reminds us that students' brains need to be stretched by longer, challenging works.

Judith Langer directed a five-year study at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA). A part of the study focused on test preparation. One finding of the study was that "In effective schools, test preparation does not mean mere practice of test-related items. Rather, the focus is on the underlying knowledge and skills needed to do well in coursework and in life, as well as on the tests, and these become part of the ongoing English language arts learning goals and the students' ongoing received curriculum. In contrast, in the typical schools, test prep means test practice. It is allocated its own space in class time, often before testing begins apart from the rest of the year's work and goals" (Langer, 2002).

Teachers and administrators will find this column and the research included here to be useful as a basis for discussion of test-preparation practices. The ORC resources described below will help in both teaching beyond the test and having discussions about best practices.

ORC Resources

AdLIT Reading Strategies (ORC #11634)

<http://ohiorc.org/record/11634.aspx>

These strategies were prepared by Ohio educators for the ORC AdLIT website. The strategies are invaluable when working with struggling readers to help them reach the

reading academic content standards and to show their growth in reading when they take the Ohio Graduation Test for Reading. Experienced Ohio educators highlight key reading strategies used by proficient readers and offer suggestions for teaching these strategies throughout the reading process and across the curriculum. This professional resource includes the specifics for teaching ten key reading strategies: (1) setting a purpose, (2) synthesizing, (3) questioning, (4) making inferences, (5) determining importance, (6) visualizing, (7) connecting to prior knowledge, (8) comparing/contrasting, (9) predicting, and (10) self-monitoring.

Each strategy is thoroughly explained, including a detailed definition of the reading strategy, where the strategy is discussed in the Ohio Academic Content Standards, how the strategy supports reading comprehension, what before, during, and after activities support students in using this strategy, how the strategy can be used to teach vocabulary, and where readers can go for additional resources pertaining to the strategy. This is a remarkable resource, in both its breadth and scope, for Ohio middle and high school teachers.

Reading Strategies: Scaffolding Students' Interactions with Texts (ORC #9478)

<http://ohiorc.org/record/9478.aspx>

This resource provides an extensive list of specific reading strategies which can be used by students to promote their comprehension and understanding. The reading strategies themselves—RAFT, reciprocal teaching, QAR, think-aloud, and writer's craft seminar, to name but a few—are set up in columns that show their relationship to before, during, and after reading. A description and examples for each strategy contribute to the ease with which teachers can skim through the list and find perfect ways to implement the strategies with a class.

Model Reading Strategies to Improve Comprehension for All Students (ORC Resource #10171)

<http://ohiorc.org/record/10171.aspx>

Laura Robb's "Model Reading Strategies to Improve Comprehension for All Students" is the featured article in the April 2007 issue of *In Perspective*. Robb, a literacy coach for teachers, echoes the concern of many of the teachers with whom she works: "But I'm not a reading teacher. I teach literature." From here, Robb discusses several teaching and reading strategies that she finds work well

across all content areas. She includes a brief discussion about and specific ideas for classroom lessons under two categories: "The Read-Aloud: A Multipurpose Teaching Strategy" and "Paint Mental Images Using Your Senses—Before-, During-, and After-Reading Strategies." Robb's closing thoughts sum up what research and best practice both point to—that "when you show with think-alouds how a strategy works, students can step inside your head and better understand how visualizing (or another strategy) supports reading."

Using Email to Engage Students in the Reading Process—It Works! (ORC #10276)

<http://ohiorc.org/record/10276.aspx>

Ohio teacher Carolyn Suttles (Bristol High School) shares her positive experience with teaching an easy-to-use reading strategy that works. Teachers will identify with Suttles's vignette and will find useful the ideas she stumbled upon while having her students use email to share their thoughts and reflections about their reading. The author points out the success of the reading strategy as twofold: (1) students "can't simply summarize what they read because the assignment generates points of discussion" and (2) "writing to a single student is much less threatening than voicing an opinion in front of 25."

Name That Chapter! Discussing Summary and Interpretation Using Chapter Titles (ORC #3371)

<http://ohiorc.org/record/3371.aspx>

In this lesson, students name chapters in novels that they are reading, creating a cumulative list for the novel as they work through the text. Sample titles are discussed and debated before the class settles on a choice. In this process, students apply many reading comprehension strategies, including summarization, interpretation, making inferences, and drawing conclusions. This lesson provides opportunities for students to engage in meaningful classroom discourse and to reinforce their use of comprehension strategies.

Using Student-Centered Comprehension Strategies with Elie Wiesel's *Night* (ORC #5934)

<http://ohiorc.org/record/5934.aspx>

Working in small groups, students use reciprocal teaching strategies as they read and discuss Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*. Everyone in the classroom takes a turn assuming the "teacher" role, as the class

works with four comprehension strategies: predicting, question generating, summarizing, and clarifying. When the memoir reading is completed, each group composes questions and leads the class in a discussion that focuses on themes, events, and symbols for an assigned section of the book. Excellent web resources are included to enhance this lesson.

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Gallagher, Kelly. (2009). *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Greene, Amy H., & Melton, Glennon Doyle. (2007). *Test talk: Integrating test preparation into reading workshop*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Langer, Judith. (2002). *Effective literacy instruction: Building successful reading and writing programs*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

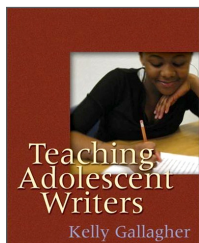
Lesesne, Teri S. (2006). *Naked reading: Uncovering what tweens need to become lifelong readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Carol Brown Dodson is the outreach specialist for the Ohio Resource Center. Dodson was an English language arts consultant for the Ohio Department of Education and is past president of OCTELA (Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts). Dodson, formerly a high school English teacher, department chair, and supervisor of English language arts in Columbus Public Schools, serves on the Ohio Graduation Test Reading Content Committee.

For Your Bookshelf

Books by Gallagher, Bigelow and Voukon, Harvey and Daniels, and Quate and McDermott

by Sheila Cantebery



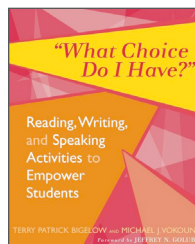
Teaching Adolescent Writers, by Kelly Gallagher (Stenhouse, Portland, ME, 2006)

In *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, Kelly Gallagher proposes and explores six student needs that he considers essential “pillars” for building strong writers. One of these key needs is having choice in writing topics. In Chapter 5, “Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice,” Gallagher argues that students write much better when they care about what they are writing. After acknowledging that it is challenging to provide student choice while teaching to academic content standards that specify required modes of writing, Gallagher proceeds to share two guiding principles of a writing classroom that will help with the balancing act.

Following principle #1, “Sometimes We Have to Take a Step Backward Before We Can Move Forward,” requires that teachers must break down the negativity many students have developed for writing. Gallagher shares ten engaging writing assignments that he uses early in the year to ease even the most reluctant students into writing. Students have plenty of choices as they “establish writing territories,” “find the fib,” and conduct “topic blasts.”

To demonstrate principle #2, “Teachers Can Work Students into the Required Discourses Slowly by Designing Writing Assignments That Allow for Partial Student Choice,” Gallagher shares a sampling of detailed partial-choice assignments. One of these, “Capture Your Community,” involves students in photographing their community on a particular day and then using the photos to drive a piece of writing.

The book’s appendices include some of the prompts and tools Gallagher uses with his students, as well as offering a list of twenty books every teacher of writing should own. This text, filled with anecdotes and student writing from Gallagher’s own classroom, could certainly be added to that list.

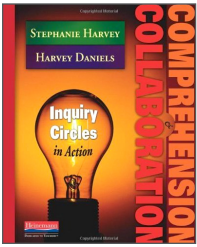


“What Choice Do I Have?” Reading, Writing, and Speaking Activities to Empower Students, by Terry Patrick Bigelow and Michael J. Vokoun (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2005)

A passionate belief that “Choice is at the root of student engagement, interest, and creation of the self as viable member of society” has propelled the authors to share why and how they infuse choice into their own English language arts classrooms. To build a compelling case for giving students some control over their learning, the book’s first chapter is devoted to sharing supportive research from key educators. Bigelow and Vokoun acknowledge that it can be challenging to manage choice in the classroom without being overwhelmed. Subsequent chapters on providing choice in reading, vocabulary, writing, and speaking lead the reader through a variety of classroom-tested activities, projects, and assignments.

With a friendly tone, the authors first provide a classroom vignette that puts the recommended activity into a context. For instance, Bigelow describes how he succeeded in engaging an unmotivated student named Danny when he had students design a mandala (a symbolic circle) to create a representation that depicts themselves and a connection with a literary character. There are step-by-step instructions for “how to make it happen” while maximizing student ownership. Next, suggestions for adaptations that include differentiated instruction and interdisciplinary instruction are offered. Finally, there is a Q and A section that answers frequently asked questions about the activity.

Bigelow and Vokoun say their array of activities were designed to “put students into the driver’s seat.” Most are “low tech” and can be easily integrated into existing curriculums.

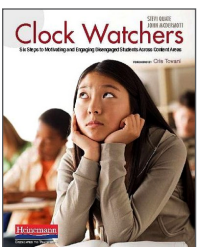


Comprehension & Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action, by Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniels (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2009)

Teaching with inquiry invites student voice and choice. Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniels draw on their previous extensive work in the areas

of comprehension and collaboration as they show how to use small-group inquiry circles to fuel learning. Accounts of twenty-nine successful inquiry projects in a variety of curricular areas ranging from preK through 12 are used to show how authentic, student-driven work can replace passive activities and still meet content standards. These include stories from a Massachusetts middle school class that took action by helping start a program called Cell Phones for Soldiers and from an Ohio high school that motivates seniors with self-chosen inquiry projects for their capstone learning experience. Harvey and Daniels provide a compelling case for why small-group inquiry that gives students choice is so crucial by citing research for "Eight Ways That Small Groups Matter." Most important is evidence that well-structured small-group work enhances student achievement.

Specific "how-to" instructions detail procedures for four types of small-group inquiries (mini-inquiries, curricular inquiries, literature circle inquiries, and open inquiries) that give students opportunities for choice and responsibility. Along with practical ideas for creating an engaging environment and essential management tips, key mini-lessons are supplied to teach students the strategies and skills they'll need for comprehension, collaboration, and inquiry. A related website offers a study guide for the book, various useful forms, annotated lists of student resources, and additional support.



Clock Watchers: Six Steps to Motivating and Engaging Disengaged Students Across Content Areas, by Stevi Quate and John McDermott (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2009)

At one time or another, most educators have complained about students' lack of motivation and engagement.

Authors Stevi Quate and John McDermott suggest that the pressure today's teachers face for ensuring student

performance on high-stakes tests may result in teaching practices such as "skill and drill" that actually contribute to student apathy. Instead of merely offering tips and tricks to spark motivation, Quate and McDermott propose a framework for instruction based on what they call the six C's [a caring classroom community; checking in, checking out (assessment); choice; collaboration; challenge; and celebration] for "creating a context that motivates students and nurtures engagement."

One of these recommended C's is choice. They stress that giving students more control of their learning requires intentional planning and scaffolding. Vignettes from several classrooms show teachers successfully weaving choice into their instruction by giving students a say in the content, process, and product. One interdisciplinary team developed a problem-solving unit where all students had some required assignments as well as a choice of projects designed to match their learning styles. Finally, students had a rich selection of experiential learning opportunities for extending their learning outside the classroom. Teachers found that some students who typically struggled succeeded when given choices.

The book includes a particularly well-designed study guide for groups that wish to explore together how the six C's can impact motivation and engagement.

Sheila Cantlebury is a reading content specialist at the Ohio Resource Center. As a former teacher in Columbus Public Schools, she taught English, language arts, and reading (7–12), served as a K–12 English language arts coordinator, and was a teacher in the Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow program. Her teaching experience also includes facilitating State Institute for Reading Instruction and English Language Arts Academy sessions. She is currently co-facilitator of the High School Language Arts Network sponsored by the Central Ohio Regional School Improvement Team.

From the ORC Collection

More Resources for “Student Choice and Engagement”

Besides the numerous direct links to rich resources found in the articles in this issue, here are some additional excellent resources from the ORC collection. If you find a favorite or two (or three or four or . . .), be sure to save them in your “My ORC Collection” for easy access.

Boys Read: Considering Courage in Novels

ORC #9178

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/9178.aspx>

In this lesson designed to motivate adolescent boys to read, they are given a selection of five young adult novels with distinct male protagonists. A suggested booklist is provided. Books are divided into four sections and read outside of class. Students discuss each section with partners or in small groups, make connections with their own daily acts of courage, and use an interactive tool to map the main events. After completing the novel, individuals write persuasive essays taking a stand on whether the protagonist showed courage or a lack of courage. An interactive Persuasion Map is available to help with planning essays. Finally, students share their reactions to the books with a wider audience through an online site that promotes teen reading.

Girls Read: Online Literature Circles

ORC #9183

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/9183.aspx>

In this lesson, girls are given a selection of five multicultural young adult novels with strong female protagonists. A suggested booklist is provided. Books are divided into four sections and read outside of class. After reading each section, students use e-mail and discussion boards to share written responses with a partner or group. Specific prompts are supplied to get the exchanges going. Participating in literature study circles, the students continue their conversations in class. Possible questions are supplied to encourage discussion that focuses on perspectives gained. Finally, students share their reactions to the books with a wider audience through an online site that promotes teen reading.

Examining Transcendentalism Through Popular Culture

ORC #3736

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/3736.aspx>

Using excerpts from the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, comics, and songs from different musical genres, students examine the characteristics of transcendentalism. In the course of their exploration, students use multiple genres to interpret social commentaries, to make connections among works they’ve studied in class, and to develop their own views on the subjects of individualism, nature, and passive resistance. This lesson features traditional literary texts and examples drawn from popular culture. Colleen Ruggieri’s article, “Multi-genre, Multiple Intelligences, and Transcendentalism,” inspired the lesson, and is available at the website. In this article, teachers will find examples of comic strips, lists of songs with related themes and ideas, and suggestions for integrating student projects.

Persuasive Essay: Environmental Issues

ORC #3812

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/3812.aspx>

Critical stance and development of a strong argument are key strategies when writing to convince someone to agree with your position. In this lesson, students explore environmental issues that are relevant to their own lives, select topics, and gather information to write persuasive essays. Students are guided through the writing process and are supported in generating ideas, writing thesis statements, and revising their writing. Although this lesson focuses on the environment as a broad topic, other topics can easily be substituted for reinforcement of persuasive writing.

Reader Response in Hypertext: Making Personal Connections to Literature

ORC #4415

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/4415.aspx>

In this lesson, students choose four quotations to inspire their personal responses to a novel that they have read. Students write a narrative of place, complete a character sketch, create an extended metaphor poem, and write a persuasive essay. Each piece of writing is linked to the quotations. Students may also incorporate photos into their presentation and then publish the collected texts on their website. This lesson may be used with novels that contain a strong sense of place, that focus on closeness of characters, and that are metaphorical in character, such as *A River Runs Through It, Montana 1948*, and \

Choosing, Chatting, and Collecting: Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy

ORC #3804

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/3804.aspx>

In the vocabulary self-collection strategy, students choose the words they want to learn, offer a rationale for their selection, and agree upon words to include in a classroom collection. This strategy helps students to understand the meanings of new words, integrate new words in their conversations and writing, and make personal connections with words while reading. In this lesson, an online Shakespeare text is used as an example. The self-collection strategy is versatile and may be applied to any content-area reading. This lesson can easily be modified and used with other content-area topics as well. Although self-selection of vocabulary enhances students' motivation and achievement in learning new words, overuse of the strategy will diminish active engagement.

Telling Your Story

ORC #97

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/97.aspx>

Created and reviewed by teams of educators, this writing activity describes a lesson in which students use historical information from a museum exhibit to write a fictional story from the point of view of someone who lived in the past. Drawn from the curriculum guide *Collecting Their Thoughts: Using Museums as Resources for Student Writing*, which was developed by the Smithsonian Institution, this resource encourages the use of museum artwork, exhibits, and artifacts as a basis for student writing. Information for obtaining a copy of this publication is offered at the website. Links to online exhibits, such as online versions of the National Museum of American Art exhibitions, allow this activity to be completed as part of a virtual field trip.

Choose Your Own Adventure: A Hypertext Writing Experience

ORC #2774

<http://www.ohiorc.org/record/2774.aspx>

After reading and discussing various stories, students work in small groups to plan and write their own adventure story. Divided into literature circles or book groups, students begin by analyzing the literary elements of adventure stories. To demonstrate their understanding of narrative structure, students work cooperatively to write their own stories. This lesson successfully combines technology tools with the writing process. Each group uses an online webbing tool to plan its story and then uses web-authoring software to create a website linking various parts within each story. Detailed lesson procedures, online resources, and ideas for modification are provided at the website.

Adolescent Literacy In Perspective

Each issue of *Adolescent Literacy In Perspective* highlights a topic in adolescent literacy. Here you can read teacher-written articles, see what experts in the field are saying, gain insight from students, and find resources for classroom use.



About the Ohio Resource Center for Mathematics, Science, and Reading

The Ohio Resource Center works to improve teaching and learning among Ohio teachers by promoting standards-based, best practices in mathematics, science, and reading for Ohio schools and universities. The Center's resources are available primarily via the web and are coordinated with other state and regional efforts to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness in K-12 mathematics, science, and reading. To learn more about ORC, visit the website at www.ohiorc.org.

The Ohio Resource Center is a project of the State University Education Deans, funded by the Ohio General Assembly, and established by the Ohio Board of Regents. ORC is located on the campus of the Ohio State University and is affiliated with OSU's College of Education and Human Ecology.



The Office of Literacy is part of the Ohio Department of Education. The ultimate goal of the Office of Literacy is to help all students become proficient readers. The initiatives from this office communicate research-based practices and attempt to build an awareness and understanding for a richer, broader view of adolescent literacy in schools and communities. The office engages in statewide collaborations with other institutions and agencies. AdLIT is one of many collaborations that bring together a variety of constituents and stakeholders in promoting adolescent literacy. For more information, see <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopiRelationID=890&Content=10467>.

What Is AdLIT?

Advancing Adolescent Literacy Instruction Together (AdLIT) is designed to address the unique literacy needs of adolescent learners by promoting and supporting effective, evidence-based practices for classroom instruction and professional development activities in Ohio's middle and secondary schools.

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