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Voice and Choice Helps Move Students to the Center of the Classroom

by Cynthia Merse | Jun 5, 2018



When you hear the phrase “student-centered classroom,” what immediately comes to mind? Do you envision a classroom erupting into chaos, students doing what they want without a clear curricular goal to guide them? A true student-centered classroom is anything but a nightmare image where the teacher has lost control of his or her students. It’s quite the opposite.

According to the [Nellie Mae Foundation](#), student-centered learning “engages students in their own success – and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process.” It’s personalized learning that is competency-based and student-driven, where students play an essential role in classroom decision-making AND take ownership of their educational journey.

For teachers who are not familiar with this increasingly popular approach, the shift to a student-centered classroom can be scary, if not down-right intimidating. You are, in a sense, handing over a great deal of responsibility to your students and assuming more of a facilitator role, quite a departure from the traditional “sage on a stage” model we are all familiar with.

But consider this: according to a [2015 study](#), more than one-third of the American workforce (approximately 54 million people!) are working as freelancers, and Millennials are freelancing at a higher rate than any other age group. The 21st century economy is shifting away from the traditional nine-to-five, office-based job to work that is project-based, collaborative, and requires a certain amount of flexibility to meet short-term deadlines and perform tasks that require a diverse skill set. The predominant education model has yet to catch up with this reality and this is doing a disservice to our students.

[According to Scott McLeod](#), Associate Professor of Education Leadership at the University of Colorado Denver, we are “running students through a ‘one size fits all’ model, assessing students in standardized ways, discounting students’ unique strengths and talents, and completely ignoring the economic and workforce realities into which they’re sending their supposedly-qualified graduates.” Student-centered classrooms aim to change this mindset.

Primary drivers of a student-centered classroom include student voice and choice. These are also great entry-points for teachers who are new to the approach. Here are some ways that you can use student voice and choice to get started in your classroom.



Ask More Questions

In a typical classroom, learning is a one-sided affair – students are told what they will learn and how they will demonstrate mastery. What if this idea was flipped upside-down? What if students were driving their own learning? This happens every day in a student-centered classroom and it starts with the teacher **asking his or her students** on a regular basis “what do you want to learn about?” and “what do you want to do?” Infusing your students’ interests into daily lessons and allowing them some freedom in how they learn and demonstrate knowledge will not only increase student engagement but will help them build trust and a stronger relationship with you.

Make Decisions Together

In student-centered classrooms, **students drive the majority of decisions** that are made, from planning and implementation to assessment. This requires a fair bit of collaboration with you (and trust – see above) and may be a bit uncomfortable in the beginning. Start with baby steps. At the beginning of the school year, challenge your students to come up with a set of classroom rules to guide behaviors AND a **set of norms** that create a positive learning environment. Both of these activities will make students feel more accountable for their actions in the classroom as well as how they work together and support each other throughout the learning process.



Get Feedback

Knowing what's working and what's not is important as you transition to a student-centered classroom. Who better to ask than your students? Openly asking for feedback on curriculum, culture, and the ins and outs of the classroom shows your students that their voice is valued and that you care that their needs are being met. How you collect that feedback is up to you, or better yet, your students! It can be as simple as having a box where students can leave written comments or something more structured likely a daily or weekly meeting where everyone gathers as a group and shares thoughts, concerns, and suggestions.

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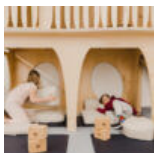
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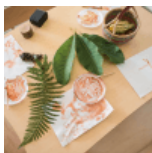
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