

Using Student Choice for Engaged Learning in Sport, Tourism, Recreation, and Live Entertainment Education

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Fostering engaged learning in higher education contributes to students' lifelong learning. Additionally, engaged learning prepares graduates to transfer their learning to the workplace, which is particularly important in pre-professional sport, tourism, recreation, and live entertainment (STRLE) programs. Engaged learning entails students actively and intentionally participating in their own learning, and learning autonomy is fundamental to their ownership of the learning enterprise. Student choice can be implemented as an engaged learning pedagogy by supporting student autonomy. Offering students choices in the classroom can increase engagement, enjoyment, and motivation; build competence and higher order thinking skills; and improve student success. Faculty engaged in this praxis in a sport management program at a small, private college. To further enhance student success, STRLE faculty can implement student choice following the recommended best practices. Offering choices that align with student interests and values, and provide connection and competence, best support autonomy. Faculty should also demonstrate warmth, flexibility, and consistency to increase the effectiveness of providing student choices. This commentary explores the literature on student choice as an engaged learning practice, illustrates a practice example, and makes recommendations for effectively applying student choice in the STRLE classroom.

Keywords: student choice, learning autonomy, engaged learning, higher education, college teaching, sport management education

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Problem Statement

Fostering engaged learning in higher education and offering college students opportunities to practice active and intentional participation in their learning is critical to lifelong learning goals (Moore, 2023). Engaged learning is believed to be an important factor in student success in higher education (Boulton et al., 2019). Engaged learning prepares graduates to transfer their learning to the workplace (Moore, 2021), which is particularly important in pre-professional sport, tourism, recreation, and live entertainment (STRLE) programs.

Faculty are also facing stunning levels of student disengagement (McMurtie, 2022), due to or exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Wester et al. (2021) found a significant negative transformation in student engagement from the shift in educational setting due to COVID-19. National Survey of Student Engagement (2022) data shows that some engagement dimensions continue to lag behind pre-pandemic levels. Disengagement can result in the student dropping out of an academic program, accumulating debt, or earning lower grades resulting in poorer employment prospects (Bennett, 2007; Chipchase et al., 2017).

To engage students through innovative educational experiences, faculty must be willing to adapt (Manning et al., 2017). When making pedagogical changes, STRLE faculty must become learners themselves, seeking to understand student needs (Zimmer & Keiper, 2021). Ritalahti (2015) concluded the current knowledge-based society requires new thinking about teaching and learning in tourism education because the typical model of classroom education has become ineffective. Wang (2010) identified old-fashioned and didactic teaching methods were a problem in tourism education. Further, Crossley et al. (2007) suggested that some personal attributes and skills needed by professionals in the recreation industry are difficult to teach via traditional academic methods such as lecture. These challenges are relevant across the STRLE disciplines. Therefore, through a literature review and a practice example, this commentary explains student choice as an engaged learning pedagogy. The paper articulates how STRLE education can apply student choice as an innovation to improve classroom delivery and better prepare STRLE graduates.

Literature Review

Autonomy as Engaged Learning

Gikandi (2019) defines engaged learning as sustained interactions involving the exchange of ideas and information among learners. Through these interactions, students progressively become intrinsically motivated, deepen their thinking, and critically analyze to construct meaning (Gikandi, 2019). “Engaged learning

entails students actively and intentionally participating in their own learning, not only at discrete moments but rather as an ongoing, lifelong activity” (Moore, 2023, p.3). Engaged learning adds an element of conscious, intentional, and active participation by learners (Moore, 2023). This self-sufficiency can also be characterized as autonomy. Learning autonomy is fundamental to ownership of the learning enterprise (Willison, 2020).

The concept of autonomy refers to the need to feel a sense of volition over an individual’s experiences (Katz & Assor, 2006). The need for autonomy refers to the need to feel a sense of full volition and “choicefulness” regarding one’s activities and goals, a feeling that emerges when one’s actions and goals are experienced as emanating from one’s authentic self (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1993). Many recent literature reviews collectively established a positive correlation between autonomy-supportive teaching and educationally important student outcomes (Gustavsson et al., 2016; Lochbaum & Jean-Noel, 2016; Patall, 2019; Reeve & Hyeon Cheon, 2021; Teixeira et al., 2020; Van den Berghe et al., 2014; Vasconcellos et al., 2020). Academic autonomy encourages student creativity and innovation (Hirve & Neelam, 2022). Due to its benefits and malleability, autonomy-supportive teaching offers meaningful potential to improve current and future educational practice (Reeve & Hyeon Cheon, 2021).

Willison (2020) explains models of engaged learning and teaching as a continuum of learning autonomy and not unidirectional toward high autonomy, but instead travels back and forth, according to the student’s learning needs. Autonomy is the extent to which students drive the sophisticated thinking processes of engaged learning, which is related to the environment parameters set by educators. Autonomy in engaged learning depends on the relationship between learners and what is learned, where it is learned, and with whom it is learned. Educators may alter the learning environment parameters by offering students choices of varying degrees.

Student Choice for Autonomy

Autonomy-supportive actions include behaviors such as providing choice and minimizing the use of controls (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Providing choice may be the most obvious way to support a person’s experience of autonomy (Patall et al., 2008) and choice in the classroom has usually been found to promote autonomy among students (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Though it is difficult to determine how many higher education faculty utilize student choice or how often, the few studies investigating the scope of the practice found opportunities for student choice were infrequent (Bozack et al., 2008). Commentators characterized providing student choice and personalizing learning tracks as creating a “seismic shift” (Larmand, 2022), indicating it is an innovative practice.

Stefanou et al. (2004) identified and classified three types of instructional choices to support student autonomy: organizational, procedural, and cognitive. These forms of autonomy support may be seen as increasing in personal and instructional relevance, with organizational autonomy support providing the least opportunity for making meaningful choices and cognitive autonomy support providing the greatest opportunity for meaningful decision making. Organizational instructional choices address students having input into the daily managerial procedures (e.g., letting students choose partners, the classroom seating arrangement, or developing classroom rules). Procedural instructional choices provide opportunities for making decisions about the selection and use of classroom materials and equipment. Cognitive instructional choices afford opportunities for students to evaluate learning activities from a self-referent norm (Patall et al., 2010). To encourage cognitive choices, teachers might ask students to generate their own solutions to a problem or evaluate various solutions (Furtak & Kunter, 2012).

Positive Outcomes

Providing students with a degree of choice can support student learning and academic success (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Involving students by including some degree of choice develops learner autonomy and enhances student learning experience. When learners are given choice, it positively influences learning and the learning environment as learners become vested in the experience and take ownership of the learning (Thibodeaux et al., 2019). The use of student choice caters to different student learning styles, thus improving student success (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Garside et al., 2009; Race et al., 2005) and task performance (Han, 2021). Students offered choice feel more interested (Dobrow et al., 2011) and engaged (Edwards, 2023; Hwang & Jin, 2016), and enjoy the classroom experience more than traditional teacher-centered methods (Edwards, 2023; Kleitsch & Hodges Kulinna, 2022). It may even decrease academic dishonesty (Patall & Leach, 2015).

Students' motivation improves when they have choices (Edwards, 2023; Han, 2021). Motivation is important for STRLE students since "taking initiative" has been found to be a critical competency in recreation management (Hurd et al., 2008) and sport management (Keiper et al., 2019). Industry professionals identified the need for sport management students to be "self-starters" (Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015), indicating a desire for students to demonstrate autonomy and motivation. Offering students choices allows students to take a proactive role in their learning, which can be effective in developing higher-order thinking skills (Pretorious et al., 2017). These higher-order thinking skills help develop better problem solving, which industry experts identify as an important characteristic in STRLE graduates (Alexakis & Jiang, 2019; Hurd et al., 2008,

Keiper et al., 2019). Another reason for educators to provide choice is that it can enhance students' perception of their own competence, allowing them to feel more empowered and confident (Aitken et al., 2022). This is particularly crucial for STRLE students, since having self-confidence is one of the most important personal skills industry employers desire in sport management (Keiper et al., 2019) and tourism (Alexakis & Jiang, 2019) graduates.

Challenges

However, autonomy-supportive teaching and offering student choice is not without challenges. Innovation is difficult in higher education because it disrupts the established routine and pushes implementers out of their comfort zone (Serdyukov, 2017). Higher education has moved to a market-based approach that prioritizes meeting student demands and increasing students' satisfaction (Afshar, 2016; Langan & Harris, 2019; Serdyukov, 2017) and students are increasingly positioned as consumers (Langan & Harris, 2019). This heightens the risk for faculty who want to experiment in the classroom with pedagogies that can be very effective for learning outcomes but may not be popular with students.

Moreover, students are comfortable having instructors control what they need to know and do, since that is what many of them have experienced in elementary and secondary schools (Hanewicz et al., 2017). Iyengar and Lepper (2000) found that too much student choice can lead to negative consequences. Iyengar et al. (2004) term this situation "choice overload." They suggest that choosers may experience frustration and decide not to choose or may ask someone with more expertise to choose for them (Iyengar et al., 2004). Some scholars have noted that giving students options on assignments can confuse them and may even be viewed as a teacher misbehavior (Brooks & Young, 2011; Kearney et al., 1991; Waldeck, 2006). The inconsistent findings concerning the benefits and drawbacks of providing choice suggest that choice is a multifaceted phenomenon (Katz & Assor, 2006). Therefore, the authors initiated an investigation into implementing student choice in the sport management classroom.

Illustration of Practice

In the preceding years, the college's engagement indicators revealed lower scores as compared to peer institutions, particularly in learning strategies (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2015). Anecdotally, faculty observed less student autonomy and independence than in previous cohorts. Therefore, in the Fall 2016 semester, two upper-level sport management courses at one small, private Southeastern college implemented student choice ($n = 33$).

Course X, a 300-level course, and Course Y, a 400-level course, were both required for the sport management major. The courses align with the program

level learning outcomes that students will be able to identify key concepts in administration and governance as applied in the sport industry. Both courses' student populations were overwhelmingly white¹ and neither course enrolled more than 26% female students. The courses were selected for their composition of upper-level students and course instructors who were willing to experiment with the pedagogy.

In each course, students were required to give input and make decisions surrounding class assignments, grading, and rubrics. After reviewing the literature for the most commonly measured outcomes of student choice, the faculty designed the survey instrument. At the end of the semester, faculty administered an online survey during class time to students via the Qualtrics platform. The survey asked students if engaging in class decisions increased their feeling of engagement in the course, satisfaction with the course, and effort in the course. Additionally, students were asked if they would want the option to make course-related choices again and if they would make different decisions after the semester was completed.

In Course X, the instructor provided course learning outcomes and a description of the assignment's purpose and desired learning outcomes. Students as a group ($n = 19$) determined assignment guidelines and created the assignment grading rubric. Students spent one class period during the first week of the semester discussing the project in class and completed the assignment through working collaboratively outside of class via a shared Google doc. The instructor answered questions and provided examples of template grading rubrics.

In Course Y, students were not given a syllabus to begin the semester and instead spent the first 1.5 class periods discussing different elements that should be included in the course. The learning outcomes and textbook were preselected, and the course had required elements including a midterm exam, final exam, homework, and research paper. The students as a group ($n = 15$) discussed the pros and cons of including additional elements into the course and determined the final weighting of all assignments. The instructor gave suggestions, feedback, and answered questions about previous semesters of this course. Students were then asked to reflect on the process, give suggestions for future semesters, and discuss challenges or benefits of this assignment.

¹ The American Psychological Association (2022) suggests that authors capitalize the racial descriptors "Black" and "White," as they signify racial/ethnic groups and are proper nouns. Hextrum (2020) argues this stylistic suggestion wrongly places Black and White as equally positioned racial groups deserving equal treatment in writing. Similar to Hextrum (2020), we are intentionally not capitalizing white throughout the manuscript in an attempt to differently position racial groups and, in doing so, remove some of the implicit legitimacy our society places on whiteness.

In the initial reflections, students gave positive feedback on the option to make course grading decisions. Students mentioned feeling empowered and motivated because they were able to make course decisions that would be best for them. Students did identify they were making course-related decisions to best suit their individual needs and strengths as a student.

In Course X, after experiencing the consequences of initial decision making, students then resisted the idea of student choice. Students experienced “buyer’s remorse” on their initial decisions and later determined that the choices they initially thought would help their grades did not. Students in Course X commented at midterm that they recognized that their choices did not assist them in learning the material or performing well on the midterm exam. The instructor agreed that assignment was not meeting course learning objectives and, with student feedback, proposed a change to the second half of the course, eliminating the student-created assignment. Students voted on whether to accept the proposal or retain the original structure and assignment. Class consensus approved the change.

In Course Y, students chose to add several elements to the course that were not required or offered in previous semesters (an additional exam, discussion board posts, and participation points). While many students initially felt empowered by the ability to make decisions, in some cases, it seemed the enthusiasm for doing well in the course waned. By the mid-semester mark, eight of the 15 students in the class had less than a C on discussion board posts even though as a class they decided this would be a simple way to boost grades. Students added additional assignments to reduce the weight of any one assignment; however, the additional work ultimately did not end up improving student grades.

Several factors may have influenced the differences in course results. Older students prefer freedom in the classroom, while younger students prefer more structure (Edwards, 2023). Course Y only enrolled senior students, while Course X enrolled students from a variety of class years. Students’ autonomy is better satisfied when students perceive faculty as flexible (Patall et al., 2013). Students in Course X perceived the instructor as inflexible. This may have affected the utility of offering choice on one assignment, when other choices were constrained. Additionally, Course X utilized several other experiential learning components, including field trips and required volunteering, whereas Course Y was a more traditional lecture-based class environment. Student choice may have been perceived as an additional burden in a class that already forced students out of their comfort zone.

After completing the first semester of this experiment, students’ feedback was mixed. From the end-of-semester survey, 41% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the ability to make course decisions, while

50% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they were more engaged in the course because they were able to make decisions. However, fewer than 25% of students strongly agreed or agreed that they put in additional effort in the class as a result of their input in course decisions. Since best practices indicate that students must feel competent in their ability to choose in order to produce positive outcomes, students were asked about their perceived ability to make good instructional choices and the ability of their classmates. Only a third of students strongly agreed or agreed that they had enough knowledge to make good choices about course content. Students were even less confident in their classmates' knowledge.

Overall, this student population did not appear to want choice, as only 28% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they had the desire to make course decisions. Students in Course Y commented that they would prefer to be given a syllabus instead of being asked to come up with the course structure. Students in Course X echoed that they would rather the instructor do it. "Pedagogy's iterative nature demands that innovations be tested in the classroom and altered as necessary" (O'Hallarn & Strode, 2020, p. 30). Therefore, in future implementations, instructors could revise the strategy to be a more successful example of engaged learning by following the implications for practice in the following section.

Implications for Practice

Student choice can be implemented as an engaged learning pedagogy by supporting student autonomy. Providing choices and supporting autonomy develops skills that industry professionals want STRLE students to demonstrate as they enter the industries. The literature suggests that students' sense of autonomy increases when teachers minimize coercion and interference, show understanding for students' perspective and feelings, provide a relevant rationale for the task, allow students to participate in task and goal selection, and allow students to choose their work methods and the mode of evaluation of their work (Katz & Assor, 2006). Since older students prefer freedom in the classroom, while younger students prefer more structure (Edwards, 2023), STRLE faculty should offer student choice in upper-level courses for seniors.

Psychosocial theories suggest cultural differences in the preference for independence or interdependence that may affect their perception of choice (Katz & Assor, 2006). In contexts with strong collectivist and hierarchical orientations, choice can threaten students' sense of belonging. Therefore, the authors acknowledge these recommendations are made from a Western perspective and faculty should take particular care in multicultural contexts.

Best Practices in Student Choice

Value

Several recent studies suggest that what students perceive as being highly valuable is probably not the mere act of choosing, but the value of the options to the participants' self and personal goals. Choices support autonomy when the choice provides an opportunity for self-realization (Katz & Assor, 2006; Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Students feel autonomous when they understand the value in the task that they are completing. Educators should ensure the task is viewed as being connected to the values and goals of each student (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Instructors should offer options that seem valuable to the students because they enable students to work on subjects and tasks that allow them to achieve their goals (Katz & Assor, 2006).

For example, STRLE instructors could design an assignment where students identify personal goals for learning (Agbuga et al., 2016) at the beginning of the semester. Then, the instructor presents a list of readings relevant to the course content and students each sign up for one. They read, summarize, and critique the reading, identifying if it aligns with their goals. Then, they make a pitch to the class regarding its inclusion on or exclusion from the syllabus (Kaplan & O'Neill, 2018).

Relevance

Students want tasks connected to their interests and strengths. Educators should explain the relevance of the task before offering choices where students will see no connection (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Educators should build an initial curiosity and some background knowledge on a topic before offering a choice, and offer choices in tasks students find interesting (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Educators should allow students to make choices according to their perceptions of their own strengths (Dobrow et al., 2011). For example, STRLE instructors could allow students to determine the weighting of course assignments. The instructor would determine the required assessment components in a course (homework, attendance, exams, papers, projects, presentations, etc.) and the students select the percentage weight each type of assessment component counts toward their final grade (Dobrow et al., 2011).

Connection

Students also desire to feel connections with other individuals, including a connection with and support from their instructor and classmates. When presenting choices, instructors should promote peer acceptance and minimize

competition among classmates (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). When offering choices, instructors should be aware that students often want to stand out and/or fit in among peer groups and this can alter behavior. Faculty should offer options that do not conflict with important values of the students' in-group and culture of origin (Katz & Assor, 2006). For example, an STRLE instructor could offer students options for completing in-class learning activities and case studies. Students could select from writing answers on paper, for those who do not want to speak out in class, or working out the problem on a white board or document camera in front of class, for those who do. Students could also be offered the choice to complete the task alone or in a small group.

Competence

Students desire a feeling of efficacy and mastery (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Educators should ensure the choices they offer support students' feeling of competence. Faculty should offer choices that include options of intermediate difficulty. Choice options that are too easy or too difficult undermine motivation (Katz & Assor, 2006). Faculty should match the level of the assignments to the cognitive abilities of their students (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Instructors should provide small choice sets for assignments to avoid choice overload, which will decrease feelings of regret and dissatisfaction after making a choice (Thompson & Beymer, 2015). Choice had the greatest positive effect when participants were provided with three to five options (Patall et al., 2008). For example, an STRLE instructor could offer three to five methods for students to demonstrate their learning with which students are already familiar (e.g., writing a paper, completing an oral presentation, or producing a creative work like a video or podcast; Katz & Assor, 2006). Then, the instructor could allow students to choose between them.

Instructor Characteristics

Students' perceptions of instructors also influence students' autonomy. Students' autonomy was better satisfied when students perceive faculty as flexible, willing to offer choices, and offered opportunities for self-evaluation (Patall et al., 2013). Faculty should minimize coercion and interference, show understanding for students' perspective and feelings, and allow criticism and some expression of negative feelings (Katz & Assor, 2006). Instructors should create a classroom context that is accepting, warm, and empathic. For example, STRLE instructors can establish a welcoming atmosphere from the start by creating a warm course syllabus. A warm syllabus includes friendly language, rationale for assignments, instructor self-disclosure, humor, compassion, and enthusiasm (Harnish et al., 2011).

Consistency

Educators should ensure that they are consistent in the choice-making opportunities that they offer students. If students are permitted to select or choose particular assignments, then they also should have the same freedom to elect to attend class meetings or not. In contrast, if students are expected to complete particular assignments, without the option of choosing their course activities, then students also should have equally structured expectations regarding their class attendance (Brooks & Young, 2011). Educators should integrate multiple choice opportunities. Intrinsic motivation was highest when two to four successive choices were given (Patall et al., 2008). For example, an STRLE instructor could utilize student choice in creating course policies on attendance, technology use, and class discussion guidelines at the beginning of the semester, and then allow students to select their topics and group members for a final project toward the end of the semester.

Conclusion

Engaged learning entails students actively and intentionally participating in their own learning (Moore, 2023), and learning autonomy is fundamental to student ownership of the learning enterprise (Willison, 2020). Though the practice example presented here displayed mixed results, reviews of the literature establish a positive correlation between autonomy-supportive teaching and educationally important student outcomes (Reeve & Hyeon Cheon, 2021). The literature illustrates positive outcomes when allowing student choice such as increased student success, task performance, interest, engagement, enjoyment, motivation, and confidence. Students are not very good at recognizing what helps them learn (Bjork et al., 2013), and what students want should not be the only criterion for judging teaching (Blackmore, 2009). Therefore, the potential benefits of the strategy for STRLE students make it a worthy enterprise.

Student choice can be implemented as an engaged learning pedagogy by supporting student autonomy in a variety of ways. STRLE faculty should implement the strategy following the recommended best practices for enhanced success. Choices that align with student interests and values, and provide connection and competence best support autonomy. Faculty should also demonstrate warmth, flexibility, and consistency to increase the effectiveness of providing student choices.

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