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# The Starting Point for Empowering Your Students (Chapter 12 of Empower: What Happens When Students Own Their Learning)

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# CHAPTER 12

## THE STARTING POINT FOR EMPOWERING YOUR STUDENTS

# #1: START WITH ONE PROJECT.

Student ownership is a big idea. It takes time to develop the systems and structures for things like student-selected intervention, enrichment, and student self-assessments. Besides, you probably have great lessons that aren't necessarily choice driven (like that amazing read-aloud with that Socratic Seminar built into it).

This is the start of a journey. It will take years to figure out what works for you. But that's okay. Every small act of student ownership is another step in the journey.

Sometimes it helps to start out with one choice-driven project. This allows you to spend some time planning and reflecting while also continuing to teach in a way that feels comfortable. It might be a two-week unit that you try out. Or it might be a day-long project that you can try on a "wasted day" like the day before Spring Break or the last day of state mandated testing.

In the next few pages, we'll be exploring some of the projects you can use as a starting point to student choice.

# WONDER WEEK

The Wonder Week Project is an inquiry-based, week-long project where students ask questions about anything they find interesting. These are those nagging questions they have that they've never had a chance to answer in school.

# NEVER FORGET TO EMBRACE WONDER.

# GENIUS HOUR

If you want to go fully independent and long term, you can try a Genius Hour Project. Here students spend an allotted time each week working independently on a  project that they design from the ground up.

Genius Hour is an innovative approach to choice, inspired by Google's 20% Time that they offer employees. The idea is that one day a week, employees at Google get to work on passion projects. These independent projects have led to some of the best innovations that Google has seen.

This might be hard to pull off in a classroom, but it's possible.

Students can plan and manage their own independent projects. Some students will work alone, while others work collaboratively. Some of the projects begin with questions and research, while others start with students learning how to do something creative for the first time. It's meant to be flexible.

# GEEK OUT BLOGS

The idea is simple. Students write topical or thematic blogs on the topics that they geek out about. We go over examples of blogs (which exposes students to high-interest non-fiction reading) and they look at trends. They see foodie blogs, skateboarding blogs, sports blogs, fashion blogs, gaming blogs, car blogs, history blogs, science blogs, etc.

Next they create a specifically themed blog. They define the driving interest as well as the audience. From there they begin writing blog posts in various formats:

1. They choose the format, including video, audio, and text.
2. They choose the topics of the posts.
3. They engage in research and share their findings with the classmates.
4. They create posts that range from listicles to Q&A to interviews to human interest stories to persuasive pieces to instructions on how to do something.

With Geek Out Blogs, students get to own the entire writing process from finding a topic and an audience all the way into research, writing, editing, and publishing. They get to choose the format and the genre of each post. And ultimately, they get to be the experts.

# #2: COLLABORATE WITH A TRUSTED COLLEAGUE.

When I first started shifting toward a choice-driven classroom, I felt alone. I became risk-averse because I didn't want to look like the "odd one out." I made huge mistakes, and I had no one with whom to share my frustrations because I knew I would hear things like,

- You were too idealistic.
- Maybe kids shouldn't have so much choice in their learning.
- Too much choice will make kids selfish.

However, in my second year in this shift, I met a new teacher named Javier. He and I became close friends and trusted colleagues. We regularly shared what worked and what failed. We were able to be vulnerable. And slowly we started collaborating on projects. It was easier to take creative risks when I wasn't alone.

# #3: DO A CHOICE AUDIT OF YOUR CLASSROOM.

It can help to do an audit of every classroom procedure with the driving question, "What am I doing for students that they could do on their own?" This not only empowers students but also frees up the teacher to spend less time working as a mid-level manager and more time as an instructional leader.

It can help to close your eyes and imagine yourself as a student. Go through the entire class period or school day in your classroom and imagine what you, as a student, would want to do on your own.

This sense of empathy can be eye-opening. When I did this, I realized that most of the class procedures had been designed to make things easier for me as the teacher. They weren't oriented around students; however, when students owned more of the process, things actually became more organized and less chaotic because students weren't having to figure out how to comply with an external system.

Ask yourself what systems you currently have that could be redesigned as flexible systems.

# #4: RETHINK THE STANDARDS.

Chances are you have a set of standards and a curriculum map that corresponds to it. You might even have a specific curriculum you have to follow.

It can help to view standards as the structure for choice. It's more like a blueprint; however, you get to build it, decorate it, and make it yours.
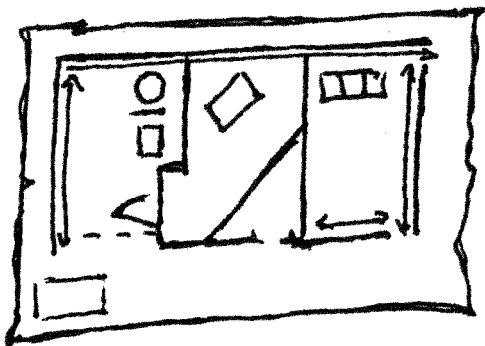


Look at the standards and ask the following:

1. What part of this standard is content-neutral? Is it possible for students to select themes or topics?

2. What part of this could be tied to other standards? Can we chunk them and layer them?

3. What choices can students make when using this standard?

4. How can students self-select strategies connected to this standard?

# #5: COMMUNICATE WITH STAKEHOLDERS.
### (Not to be confused with steak holders, which is totally different.)

Sometimes student choice can seem like negligence to parents or principals. You can appear as the "fun teacher" who is "letting kids get away with everything."

It can be helpful to share your vision with your administrators, colleagues, and students' parents. Share data with parents about how student choice could increase motivation and engagement. Help people to understand that this isn't simply an issue of letting kids do whatever they feel like doing.

Let your administrator know that you will still have structures, rules, and expectations. Use the word "pilot" to describe things like design thinking and/or inquiry-based learning.

Seriously.

Go try it out.

Leaders love it.

Say something like, "I'm going to pilot Genius Hour Projects." Or say, "We will be piloting the use of design thinking, a framework used in the arts, business, and engineering." Share that with your administrators and with your parents. Chances are they'll see choice as more than just letting go and having fun.

# #6: MODEL IT.

Students aren't always used to the sheer amount of choice you're providing. You may need to teach students how to select the right intervention and enrichment, how to access the scaffolding, how to manage their own projects, and how to make decisions when they feel stuck.

It helps to take a gradual-release approach. When you're learning a skill for the first time, chances are you watch tons of videos. You copy other people. You listen to experts. You are risk averse. You wonder if you're doing it right.

The same is true of students who are owning their learning for the first time. They need a vision for how it can look, and you, as the teacher, can provide that to them by modeling. Sometimes you will have to give permission when you assume they already know it. Sometimes you will have to model the metacognition needed in self-assessment. Sometimes you need to model the decision-making process. It's okay if there's some direct instruction in these early stages of student choice. Students need to see what it looks like in action.
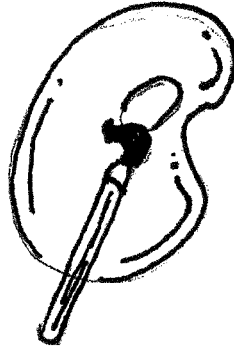
# #7: TAKE THE LEAP!

It won't be easy. It won't be perfect. You'll make mistakes. But it's an epic adventure.

EMPOWER

# WHY STUDENT OWNERSHIP MATTERS

# THE MURAL PROJECT

It was a simple idea. Three girls noticed that every time we painted over graffiti at our school, the tagging reappeared within twenty-four hours. They said it made them feel unsafe and nervous and they wanted to fix this problem in their community. At first, they looked into raising money for a camera system or maybe organizing a neighborhood watch organization.

But as they researched it, a trend emerged. Many of the taggers viewed themselves as graffiti artists canvassing boring industrial spaces with their names. These weren't gang-related threats. **These were people wanting to be known.** This didn't excuse the vandalism, but it changed the girls' perceptions of it.

This led to a **bold** idea.

One of the girls approached me (John) with a two-page plan. I didn't get a chance to read it before she blurted out the idea: "We'll cover it with art. We think that the taggers will leave the art alone."

"Like an art gallery?"

"No, murals. We'll have murals everywhere."

She then launched into a five-minute explanation of what our campus would look like when they were finished. We pitched the idea to our principal, who gave us the green light immediately.

This was the start of a massive project. Small groups met in teams to plan out everything from materials to processes to the overall design concept. We landed on the idea of immigration and the reminder that we are a patchwork of cultures. This one boy, Michael, sketched out the entire concept, and we used the grid system to scale it onto the wall.

# THEY OWNED THE PROCESS.

We spent a week sketching out the design. Five students before school. Seven students after school. On that first Saturday, twelve groggy-eyed students met me at sun up on a cool desert morning to paint it. Suddenly the vision of a mural became a reality as students busted out the paint brushes and transformed the white wall into a work of art.

It wasn't perfect. We made so many mistakes. We had moments where students stormed off in frustration. But we continued on with the project with our two rules:

# 1. MISTAKES ARE ALLOWED. IT'S HOW WE LEARN.

# 2. EVERYONE IS AN ARTIST, SO EVERYONE GETS A VOICE.

After four hours, we had a solid start. But after cleaning up the painting mess, I drove away wondering if this would be covered up with graffiti by Monday morning. This was risky.

Nobody touched the mural. They continued to tag up the rest of the school, but the mural had a sort-of force field of creativity and student voice around it. We spent two months painting the mural and accidentally painting part of the sidewalk (we didn't think to use a drop cloth).

Nobody touched it.

For an entire summer, the mural remained as a bold statement of unity for the entire neighborhood to see. The next year, we painted two more murals.

What began as a project grew into a movement.

In three years, we painted five murals. It was a source of pride. I would watch little kids walking to the nearby elementary school stop in their tracks and point and stare.

Moms would say to their kids, "Someday you'll get to paint one."

But at the close of our third year, we had a change in leadership and suddenly everything changed. We showed up after Spring Break and the walls were white. The official reason was that these murals looked "unprofessional" and we needed a "fresh start" as the school shifted from a middle school into a K–8.

"Why did we even bother?" a boy asked me as he fought back tears.

"Maybe we could …"

"No, Mr. Spencer. I'm not painting anything else. I'm moving my blog to private. You never know when the haters are going to show up. I'm done sharing my work."

I looked him in the eyes and said,

# "WHEN YOU HIDE YOUR VOICE FROM THE WORLD, YOU ROB THE WORLD OF YOUR CREATIVITY. I'M NOT GOING TO LET YOU GET AWAY WITH THAT."

That afternoon as I drove home, it struck me that I had echoed the same words Mrs. Smoot had said to me back when I was in the eighth grade.

And I realized that the real power in the mural project was the power of empowering students. They were different because they had owned the learning.

Projects come and go. Technology changes. Ideas go in and out of style. And, yes, people paint over murals. All art is, on some level, temporary. But there's something you can't take away, and it's the mindset that students develop when they define themselves as makers. When that happens, lives are changed. The world is different, and their world is better.

Visit EmpowerBook.co to get practical resources for empowering our learners. Join the discussion online using the hashtag #empowerbook.

# YOUR INVITATION TO INNOVATION

## THIS IS YOUR INVITATION TO ...

☐ REWRITE THE RULES

☐ CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO

☐ LET YOUR STUDENTS OWN THEIR LEARNING

☐ CHANGE THE WORLD