

# Tech Snacks: Bringing Student Choice into Assignments

Tests and papers are common ways to evaluate learning, but they don't always capture what students know and they don't usually motivate students to show you what they have learned, through their own eyes. However, the practice of building opportunity for student choice into assignments can address some of these problems.

## Why incorporate student choice?<sup>1</sup>

### Incorporating opportunities for student choice into assessments can:

- increase student motivation and ownership of the work
- change students' perceptions of the assessment task and whether they are capable of achieving it
- lead to increases in student satisfaction
- serve as an example of inclusive teaching and student-centered learning

### Benefits articulated by MSU-Northern faculty include:

- Students often produce much better final products than they otherwise would have (given no options).
- Allowing students to pick and choose projects or labs (or even just the order of completion) can give them a feeling of personal choice and freedom while also holding them responsible for their own motivation and deadline management.
- For labs specifically: providing options can help address component shortages, lab group sizes, time bottlenecks, social distancing guidelines, capacity restrictions, etc.

## Different "kinds" of choice

**Format Choice** – Assessment prompts that allow students to choose from a selection of project options can encourage students to engage in work that they *want* to complete. For instance, students might be given a choice between a presentation, a paper, or an artistic/visual representation of a given topic. Often, students will choose a format that allows them to articulate their understanding of the content in a manner that makes sense to them or aligns with the norms in their own discipline or career aspirations.

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading, see: Ryan Jopp et al, [Choose your own assessment – assessment choice for students in online higher education](#), *Teaching in Higher Education*, 2020: Ahead-of-print. Joanne Garside et al, [Repositioning assessment: Giving students the 'choice' of assessment methods](#), *Nurse Education in Practice*, 2009 (9.2): 141-48. Geraldine O'Neill, [It's not fair! Students and staff views on the equity of the procedures and outcomes of students' choice of assessment methods](#), *Irish Educational Studies*, 2017 (36.2): 221-36.

**Example** – Dr. Valerie Guyant teaches primarily Literature and Writing courses, and over the years, she has developed an inventive way of assigning projects in her courses. She allows students a choice between writing a research paper or producing creative work that demonstrates their knowledge. The opportunity for choice benefits students who grasp the content well but who are not motivated by large expository writing tasks or who are overwhelmed with simultaneous writing projects in multiple courses. Students can choose to produce a creative project while writing a brief synopsis that explains their creative choices while applying them to the concepts they learned in class.

**Topic Choice** – Another way to build choice into assessments is to build opportunities for student choice into topic selection. For instance, you might allow students to choose a specific topic that they follow throughout your course, and then develop assignments and assessments that help students explore that specific topic and understand general course concepts through the lens of that topic.

**Example** – Within a course in the Education Program, students were prompted to choose a theme for a unit plan and create multiple assignments for that semester into the unit plan. When Brittany took this course, she chose the topic “Socioeconomic Class & Society” for an eleventh-grade English class in high school. The short stories and novels the class read throughout the year could all be tied back to the theme of “Class & Society,” and she developed an entire Unit Plan spanning the course of the year with different projects and assignments that connect to the readings and the overall theme.

**Choice in Timing, Sequence, or Pace** – In some learning environments or disciplines, it may be difficult to allow student choice for the topic or format of an assessment. For courses that require specific lab procedures or skills demonstrations, for example, there may not appear to be room for choice. However, the timing, sequence, or pace of these activities may be somewhat flexible as long as students attain the required objectives.

**Example** – Charlie Mack teaches in the Diesel Technology program and uses a model in his labs that allows students to choose their own pacing to complete their lab assignments. The first group of labs that they can choose are at a fundamentals level. Once students have completed this unit, he releases a set of more advanced labs for students to complete at their own pace and choosing. Students are responsible for their own progress and are more accountable because they can't lean on the rest of the class working on the same lab objective at the same time. Their grade builds up from a zero and they accumulate points as they go, so there is a bit of a “challenge” to keep on pace.

## Potential pitfalls or challenges

**Students may be overwhelmed if there are too many choices in format.** All of the above-cited journal articles on this topic included in their “lessons learned” sections that it was critical to include a “preregistration” or questionnaire assignment that requires students to indicate their choice and their reasoning for that choice, well in advance of the project due date.

**Grading criteria can get complex and overwhelming for both faculty and students when lots of options exist.** Instructors might consider providing students with a prompt that lists the different options and basic minimum expectations for each one. A holistic (vs. analytic) rubric may work best for grading if the goal of giving students choice is to encourage more creativity.