

Increasing Engagement in a Virtual Environment: Instructional Choice

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CHOICE AS A TIER 1 STRATEGY

Low student engagement continuously poses challenging obstacles for teachers, particularly as current learning environments shift between face to face, virtual, or a combination of both. Although teaching in virtual environments may be new to many teachers, class-wide universal preventative strategies are still highly applicable and beneficial for teachers, students, and caregivers. One versatile evidence-based universal strategy includes instructional choice (Kern & Clemons, 2007). Instructional choice is a strategy where teachers provide students with one or more options from which to choose to complete an activity (Lane et al., 2018). When used effectively, encouraging students to make independent choices enhances autonomy, motivation, self-determination, and engagement, and can reduce problem behaviors, and are essential for student success both in and out of the classroom (Lane et al., 2015; Royer et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2015). In this brief, we present five methods for incorporating instructional choice within virtual learning environments: a) within task, b) between tasks, c) task order, d) choices related to external factors, and e) other options.

TYPES OF CHOICE

Within Task Choice

Provide students with one or more options to complete a single assignment. All students must complete the same assignment but given options on how to complete. Options can relate to format, technology, strategy, and context.

- *Format*: select the media or format to complete the assignment. For example, students could create a voice over slide show, blog, video, podcast, drawing for a writing assignment.
- *Technology*: choose an app to complete the learning objective. For example, students could use [Epic](#), [Libby](#), or [iReady](#), for reading and [Zearn](#) or [Prodigy](#) for math.
- *Strategy*: determine how to solve or complete a problem. For example, students could choose a method for solving multi-step math problems, a brainstorming method for essay writing (e.g., word map, free writing, chatting with a peer), or strategy to preview a new text (e.g., looking at pictures, research online, read reviews).

- *Context*: choose an option they find most interesting. For example, students could choose from a series of story problems with a particular setting or topic (e.g., hot air balloons, video games), a writing topic (e.g., favorite holiday, their personal hero, pre-pandemic experiences), or a historical poem to examine.

Between Task Choice

Present students with two or more assignments, one of which must be completed. Choices should be of similar difficulty and accomplish the same learning objective. Consider having students share their finished work or experiences with the rest of the class, since not every student will complete the same task.

- Allow students to view a lesson or participate in a discussion via synchronous or asynchronous platforms.
- Choose which content area to work on during independent work time.
- Choose between [Bitmoji classroom](#), photos, or drawings for personalizing virtual interactions or projects.

Choice of Task Order

Provide students with a set number of assignments, all of which must be completed within a given time frame, but students choose the order of completion.

- Use the Premack Principle: Suggesting students choose a less preferred activity (e.g., homework) before working on a preferred activity (e.g., games). Set limits on how much time students should spend on less preferred activities and preferred activities.
- Suggest students rank the tasks from easiest to most difficult, or vice versa. Some students might prefer to focus harder tasks right from the start, while others might prefer to get warmed up first.

Choices Related to External Factors

Provide students with two or more options related to factors for completing the assignment, but unrelated to the assignment itself.

- Allow students to select their learning environment (e.g., outside, a park, kitchen table, grandma's house, etc.). Consider involve siblings and/or caregivers.

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- Encourage students to use resources that might be available at home, like cooking, building supplies, sporting equipment, gaming consoles, parents/ siblings/ neighbors with unique expertise. You never know what students will come up with!

Other Options

- Develop a [Choice Board](#) that students and/or at-home caregivers can utilize.
- Solicit feedback from students and/or at-home caregivers.
- Create a random activity generator full of different options (apps for [Apple](#) users or [Android](#) users).

CONSIDERATIONS

Combining Choice with Other Universal Strategies

Instructional choice is most effective when other essential Tier 1 practices are in place. As you begin integrating instructional choice into your lessons, remember to utilize other preventative strategies such as those listed below.

- Utilize *school-wide expectations* to establish *clear rules and expectations* associated with provided choices, especially as they relate to new environments, technologies, and working with others. Explicitly teach these expectations before setting your students off to work and provide consistent *behavior-specific praise* for following expectations.
- Present choices appropriately matched to *student instructional level*, as work that is above or below students' skill level often leads to problem behavior (Warmbold-Brann et al., 2017). Thorough consideration of choice difficulty can promote engagement and enhance participation for students with diverse learning abilities (Lane et al., 2015).
- Incorporate student *interests and preferences* across choice options. Consider previewing an upcoming assignment with your class and poll the students on which choice options they find most appealing.

Working with At-Home Caregivers

Many at-home caregivers are now faced with managing their student's schooling in addition to other responsibilities. As you think through various choice strategies, remember that your instructional decisions will likely impact your student's family and supports. Further, providing caregivers choices regarding their student's learning can also improve engagement. For example:

- Provide a variety of options for contact, including email, phone, and text, and schedules for responding.
- To the greatest extent possible, solicit caregiver feedback before implementing any major changes in scheduling, curriculum, or technology, and, if possible, offer choices regarding these changes (e.g., establishing a start date for changes, hosting a Q&A session).

Offer suggestions for incorporating choice at home, such as before/after school routines, completing household chores, or helping siblings with schoolwork.

GENERAL IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

1. Identify an upcoming lesson well suited to instructional choice.
2. Determine the method of choice to incorporate.
3. Identify a range of choices best suited for your students and write them into your lesson.
4. Implement.
5. Reflect and/or seek feedback on the impact of choice on engagement.
6. Share with your staff and/or team.

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RESOURCES

[Webinar on Increasing Engagement in a Virtual Environment: Instructional Choice](#)

[MO SW-PBS Covid-19 Resources](#)

[National Center for PBIS publications](#)

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