Know Your Choices: Exploring How Instructors Support Student Autonomy Through Assessment Design

Caitlin Holman, Benjamin Plummer, Rachel Niemer, and Barry Fishman
chalma@umich.edu, bdplum@umich.edu, rkeimer@umich.edu, fishman@umich.edu

One of Many
Create multiple assignment opportunities that students can select from. Students should not be expected to do all of them. The assignments themselves are relatively well specified, with clear components and expectations.

- Identity-formation
- Choice overload
- Grading workload

Pick the Target
The mode of assessment is defined, but students are able to select topics of their choice within the relevant content space of the course.

- Risk-taking
- Content mastery
- Grade # Effort # Learning

Audience Control
The assignments are defined, but students can select whether they’ll be shared in a public forum (blog, class discussion forum), or privately with the instructional staff (journal).

- Belongingness
- Competence-support
- Grading workload

Design Your Own
Students are empowered to create their own assignment(s), including defining scope and scale.

- Identity-exploration
- Creativity
- Grade # Effort # Learning
- Risk-taking

Gameful pedagogy promotes student engagement and intrinsic motivation through the thoughtful use of instructional design mechanisms to support autonomy, belongingness, and competence (Aguilar, Holman, & Fishman, 2015; Fishman et al., 2013; Reeve, 2008; Black & Deci, 2000). Here we focus on mechanisms to support autonomy.

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We analyzed syllabi from 19 unique gameful courses at the University of Michigan experimenting broadly with gameful learning. Each instructor created assessment designs intended to support student autonomy, but did so in different manners, and to differing degrees. Looking across all courses, we identified nine different ways instructors supported student choice in those courses, and highlights observed strengths and weaknesses of each approach. The characteristics are not mutually exclusive.

Difficulty
Students must select from pre-defined assignment pathways that address the same learning objectives, but require different types of effort, and therefore, different levels of risk in order to show competency.

- Competence-support
- Risk-taking
- Risk-avoidance

Extra Lives
Students are allowed multiple tries to achieve particular types of assignments. They receive feedback on their efforts each time, and are able to build mastery through repeated attempts.

- Competence-support
- Mastery-orientation
- Grading workload
- Low initial effort

Many, Not All
Students must do a certain number, but not all, of the assignments within a defined category.

- Time management
- Competence-support
- Procrastination
- Grading workload

REFERENCES


Best Practices:

• There is such a thing as too much choice for students. Think about the knowledge, level and background of your learners. Build choice where students might need or want more freedom to explore? Limit choice where you may need to intervene more?

• There is also such a thing as to much choice for instructors! There needs to be a balance between options for your students and what you can manage.
  o Think about your schedule, make sure options for students are distributed in a manageable way (not too many due at the front or end of the class) so you are not over burdened with grading
  o Consider grading strategies as well – there are tools like rubrics that can help increase the efficiency the grading process, but still give students valuable feedback

• When considering choice, don't just think about number of assignments. Also think about the difficulty and frequency of assignments (as well as the instructor/GSI grading involvement) for that assignment. It might be helpful to start out giving more choices at lower levels of assignments, and fewer choices at more difficult or challenging assignments.

• Be thoughtful about your late, resubmittal and extra credit policies. One of the benefits of building out a gameful course is that students often have opportunities for recovery. Some instructors in an gameful course choose to eliminate the option for late assignments because of these opportunities. Extra credit should be used sparingly (if at all) because gameful advocates for all points being opportunities to achieve points.

• Adjust grading scheme to reflect that students have more options. A general rule of thumb in gameful courses is that an “A” will be somewhere between 50% - 75% of total points available (based on difficulty, type of choice, schedule, number of assignments)

• It’s sometimes helpful to include sample paths for students in the syllabus to explain the multiple ways to achieve an “A.” For example:

  There are multiple ways to earn an A in this class. While 200 points are required assignments, the majority of the points to an A (300) can be earned in many different ways.

  For a student who prefers to connect what we talk about in class to current events, focus on the In the News Assignments [100 pts] and Presentation [50 pts], plus two case studies [50 pts] would earn an A.

  For a student who prefers to factual and theoretical implications of our topic, focus on the weekly quizzes [80 pts], Case Students [100] and 2 In the News Assignments [20].

  Or a student could choose a variety of the above mentioned assignments – 500 points is an A, no matter how many which assignments you do!