

# A BRIEF GUIDE TO INCORPORATING STUDENT VOICE

*Amidst a push to make learning in schools more relevant to students' lives, it only makes sense to give students more of a say in what is learned in schools and how it is taught. The purpose of this guide is to provide teachers with ideas and suggestions for incorporating student voice in three key areas: "the classroom," "the syllabus," and "the curriculum." The first addresses how to cultivate student ownership of the spaces within which they learn and spend their time. The second addresses how teachers can create more space and flexibility in the way they structure the class (Is there flexibility in assignments? Grades?). The third addresses the need to give students more choice in the material covered. This guide is by no means exhaustive, but it is my sincere hope that you find something useful within its pages.*



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# "THE CLASSROOM"

This is the space in which students are expected to come every day and *learn*. It is just as much their classroom as it is yours. Instead of referring to it as “my classroom” with your students (and with yourself), refer to it as “our classroom.” This may seem obvious or overly simplistic, but something as small as changing your language can help give students a sense of ownership that can be built upon throughout the year.

## **Where can student input be incorporated?**

### *Classroom Set Up*

Try getting suggestions from students on how to set up your classroom. Would they learn best in a circle? Small clusters? In rows? Try out different configurations and ask students what they think. Or allow students to rearrange the classroom and try out configurations for themselves. You can also explore what spaces students would like to see added to the classroom. Would a work area be helpful? What about a reading nook?

### *The Walls*

As a teacher, it's tempting to carefully arrange the posters and work displayed on your walls. Instead, though, consider leaving some space blank or unfilled. Have a bulletin board? Great. Let students create the displays. Maintain a space that is yours, but what gets put up on the walls is a relatively easy area to give up control, but will help students feel like this is their classroom, too.

### *Rules & Expectations*

If it's really their classroom, students should be able to help set the rules, too. At the beginning of the year, brainstorm with your students a list of expectations for behavior in the classroom. Make sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute an idea. If it's more comfortable, have students write their ideas on an index card or piece of paper and then display them for the class to discuss. Try coming up with a final list that everyone agrees on. If students feel like they're a part of that process, chances are they'll take the rules more seriously.

### *Furniture*

Building off of set up, try and figure out what kind of learning spaces the students need and want. Would they work better with a big desk that they can circle around? Do they need bean bags or swivel chairs? Would they prefer lots of lamp to overhead lights? Not all of this will be achievable, clearly, but once you know what students are looking for, you can start collecting things throughout the year. Have a friend who's getting rid of their couch, and your students want a couch in their classroom? Done.

### *Classroom Responsibilities*

Teachers have a lot of work to do, and they take responsibility for pretty much everything that goes on in the classroom. Why not let students take on some of the smaller responsibilities in the classroom? Need journals passed out at the beginning of class? Let a student volunteer for that role. In her book, Pernille Ripp suggests designating a student as classroom greeter. Whenever a guest comes in the room, it is their responsibility to greet them. These may seem small, but they can go a long way towards increasing ownership.

# "THE SYLLABUS"

Giving up some control in the syllabus will probably be a bigger challenge for many teachers. Traditionally, teachers create a syllabus for the course that outlines the assignments and grading. Determining the assignments, and which ones will be weighted more heavily, though, should probably wait until you know the learners in your classroom. One of the roles of a teacher is to help students identify their strengths, but also work with them to build new skills. Attaching heavy grades to skills where students need to improve won't help learning. Instead, give students a say in the syllabus so they can hold themselves accountable.

## **Where can student input be incorporated?**

### *Assignments*

Now I'm not saying let students decide all of their own assignments and completely take over the syllabus, or to create an individualized syllabus for each student. But ask for their feedback. Let them look over the syllabus and provide suggestions for adjustments, or ideas for alternative assignments. In the age of standards linked to high-stakes testing and teacher pay, this can seem daunting, or perhaps even reckless. Keep in mind, though, that you can take student suggestions and tweak them to fit your needs and the class as a whole. Students can be incredibly creative. They are capable of coming up with complex assignments that hit standards without even knowing it. Why not utilize that in the classroom? It's just an added bonus that if students feel like they have more of a say on how they learn in the classroom, they might just take it more seriously.

### *Grading*

Again, this may seem like a risky place to allow students to have a say, but it's worth getting their input. If you have a room full of struggling writers, having a heavily weighted writing assignment may not be in yours or your students' best interest. Instead of figuring this out after they turn in the assignment, give students a chance to tell you. Even if you keep the assignment, you can build in more class time to work on it, and add opportunities for students to get feedback and assistance. You might include in the grade a rough draft. In addition, some students don't test well. If the most important grades in your class are from tests, and the majority of your class doesn't perform well, not only are you not able to truly assess their learning, you're setting the class up for failure. There are lots of other ways to see what students know and understand. Students may even have ideas.

### *Timeline*

It's easy to forget that many students lead busy, hectic lives, particularly in low-income districts. When setting the timeline, it's easy for teachers to stick to what works best for them, but consider letting students provide input. Students could compare big assignment deadlines with other courses. You may not make any grand changes, but you could build in deadlines leading up to the assignment to help keep students on track.

### *Learning Goals*

It's easy to ask yourself what you want your students to get out of the class, but it could be far more profound to ask your students what they hope to get out of it. What do they want to accomplish over the course of the semester or year. What skills would they like to build on and show proficiency in? Come up with a list together that includes your goals for them, and their own goals for themselves.

# "THE CURRICULUM"

Giving students a say in the curriculum may seem impossible during an era of common core standards and high stakes testing, but it doesn't have to be. We've already discussed "the syllabus," or how students learn, but "the curriculum" addresses *what* students learn. What topics and concepts do they get to explore? Which books will they read? As long as public education has existed in the United States, these things have been prescribed to students. Many will pursue their interests outside the classroom, but to motivate deeper learning, why not pull those interests into the classroom?

## **Where can student input be incorporated?**

### *English & Language Arts (ELA)*

I'll start with ELA, since that's what I will be teaching. If you've ever sat down and read the ELA standards for middle and high school all the way through (\*raises hand\*), you'll quickly realize that there is a ton of freedom and flexibility. They're not the best standards, but for the most part they don't pigeonhole teachers. The obvious place to incorporate student choice is in the texts they read. You can have whole class texts, but to accommodate the diverse interests in your classroom, consider independent reading projects or book groups. Ask students what they like to read and go from there. Consider how frustrating it is to be told you have to teach a certain book, even if you think said book is a waste of time. For students, that's most of their school year. So give them choice. Are they dying to do some creative writing? Theater? Go for it. You can no doubt hit standards along the way.

### *Science*

Science standards may be somewhat stricter when it comes to content, but there's still space to incorporate students' ideas. Science is one of those subjects that can be wildly fascinating, but also incredibly boring. At the beginning of the year, have each student come up with a list of questions. Take that list and see if there's any overlap between the standards and their questions, or if it would be possible to teach required concepts through exploring their questions. Try to address one question or topic from each student throughout the year. Chances are they'll be more attentive if they can see how science can answer the questions they've always been curious about. If you have time, you can also make their questions into independent inquiry projects.

### *Social Studies*

Again, a lot of the standards are pretty specific, but some of them allow some wiggle room. Like science, student-led inquiry projects are a great way to allow students to explore something that interests them. Also, just because you have to teach certain historical events doesn't mean you can't go further and address topics not listed in the standards. Find out what your students are interested in. Could you pair those topics with the ones you have to teach? You can give students choice in what they want to explore deeper, and how they do it. Get creative.

### *Math*

Okay, I'll admit, this is a bit of a challenge for me, so ideas are welcome. Like science, you could ask students for questions they have that could be answered by math and explore those throughout the year. You could let each student pick a concept (or group of students) that interests them, and let them teach it to the rest of the class during one period. They get to explore something that interests them more in depth, and they may surprise you with how they teach it to the rest of the students.

# RESOURCES

A lot of my research on how to incorporate student voice led to dead ends. I found tons of information on the student-centered syllabus for college students, but shockingly little information on how to incorporate student voice in K-12 education. A lot of teachers these days feel like freedom and creativity has been sucked out the profession, and often they put all the responsibility on themselves to come up with new ideas amidst standards-based education. Students, if given the opportunity, could create lots of creatives to make their own educations more responsive to their interests. Here are a few resources I found helpful in the process of my own self-inquiry.

## Books & Articles

*Passionate Learners: Giving our Classrooms Back to Our Students* by Pernille Ripp

*Incorporating Student Voice into Teaching Practice* by John Kordalewski

*Give Students a Say in Curriculum Decisions* by Andrew Simmers

*Student Voice: The Instrument of Change* by Russell Quaglia and Michael Corso

*Including Students and Teachers in the Co-Design of the Enacted Curriculum* by Kristin Gunckel and Felicia Moore

*Curriculum Development Should Include Student Input* by Michael Zhang

*The Guide to Student Voice* by Adam Fletcher

*Creating a Syllabus for the Learner-Centered Classroom (Workshop)*

*A Classroom Leaves the Syllabus up to Students* by Richard Pérez-Peña

## Websites & Blogs

*Blogging Through the Fourth Dimension*  
[www.pernillesripp.com](http://www.pernillesripp.com)

*Learn NC: Student Feedback Survey*  
[www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/2428](http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/2428)

*Edutopia*  
[www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org) (Tag: Student Voice)

*My Year of Teaching Dangerously*  
<https://myyearofteachingdangerously.wordpress.com/>

*Minneapolis Public Schools: Student Survey*  
[www.mpls.k12.mn.us/student\\_survey\\_3](http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/student_survey_3)

*Embarking on the Personalized Learning Journey*  
<http://personal masteryandtechnology.weebly.com/>

*Teaching Tolerance*  
[www.tolerance.org/student-voice](http://www.tolerance.org/student-voice)

*IDEA: Institute for Democratic Education in America*  
[www.democraticeducation.org](http://www.democraticeducation.org)

All links can be found in the "Resources" section of my blog: [mollyreadsalot.wordpress.com](http://mollyreadsalot.wordpress.com).