

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 addressed how teachers can create more space and flexibility in the way they structure the class. 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

Learn NC: Student Feedback Survey
www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/2428

Edutopia
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

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

Teaching Tolerance
www.tolerance.org/student-voice

IDEA: Institute for Democratic Education in America
www.democraticeducation.org



30 Minutes with Pernille Ripp

Q: Where do you teach, and what grade do you teach currently?

I used to teach 4th and 5th, but now teach 7th grade in Oregon, Wisconsin. This is my second year in the district and my second year in 7th grade.

Q: What are the primary ways you incorporate student input into the classroom?

In everything we do. We start with environment (choice of how they sit, where they sit). Assignments are loaded with choice. We just finished a short story assignment where all the choices were up to students. They choose what they read, how they want to read, and how they want to talk about it. They give me lots of feedback. We're currently working on getting them to speak up more. They get to pick who they work with. It's just naturally integrated into what we do. They choose their own path, essentially.

Q: Most students aren't accustomed to being asked for input. In your experience, do most students run with it, or do they need encouragement?

A: It's totally different based on the kids. Some kids run with it, and some students need lots of scaffolding. I teach 125 students, so there's lots of community. A lot of it is getting them to trust themselves their decisions. It's teaching them that their voice matters. Some you have to just tell to speak up, and some you have to prove to them that they can.

Q: How do you account for when students leave your classroom, they may move on to very different educational environments?

You teach students to self advocate, and self advocate kindly. Kids are resilient, so teach them how to advocate and how their education could be better. Even if they don't get the same experience, they have tools they can use.

Q: What do you feel are the benefits to giving students a voice in their classroom? What are the drawbacks?

Students get way more engaged. We have “happygrams” at my school right now, which are for showing gratitude to teachers. I just got one from a student that said, “you make me feel like I'm actually smart.” They find out that their voice matters, that they can shape their own education. They then have more power to go out and tackle other things in their lives. The major positive thing is kids want to come to school.

There aren't really drawbacks, honestly. Sometimes they want things we can't give them. You end up beating yourself up a lot trying to figure out how can you do more, how you can give them more.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced in the process?

I have nothing but support in my current district. It's very progressive. It's focused on putting children at the center and providing personalized learning. They're incredibly supportive of the work I do. There was some push back from colleagues in my old district, but mostly because they didn't understand. I've gotten better at sharing and explaining. It's important to say, this isn't necessarily the best way to teach, but it's my way. Kindness and listening more than you speak with colleagues who don't understand goes a long way. Lots of misunderstanding is based off of assumptions. In my old team (5th grade), even though we taught differently, we really listened and respected each other. A lot of problems can be eliminated if you respect and listen to one another.

Q: In your opinion, is incorporating student input realistic for teachers when they're just starting out?

Absolutely. You don't have to do all the things you're taught in school. You don't have to use punitive measurement or emphasize homework. There are so many things we're taught to hold control over that we don't need to hold control over. We forget how much control we have over what we do in our classrooms. We base a lot of decisions on assumptions. A lot of the day-to-day stuff, you have control over.

Q: Do you build students' ideas into the syllabus and curriculum? How does that play out?

Most kids will choose certain paths you set out for them. I'm in a standards-based district, and we have seven standards we have to cover all year. I plan with the kids, tell them which standard we need to cover, and say "this is what I'm thinking." Students can share their ideas and brainstorm. For a project we did recently, I gave them parameters and a list of possible topics, and then let them choose what they would do their project on, what their project would be, and presented that. All of it is building off the same foundational knowledge, but they were able to create something more meaningful to them. Some things won't have as much curricular choice, but you can give them choice in everything else. It's important that they have choice in at least one area.

Q: Do you feel like incorporating student input is widely achievable? Could it be implemented at the district, state or federal level?

It has been and it needs to be. We're losing kids every day, drop out rates are high, we have to find ways to engage kids. Choice and voice are two of the biggest components that allow for that.

Q: What advice would you give to a teacher who wants to give their students more of a say in the classroom?

Ask the students. We do a lot of professional development (PD) to find out what students want. Start out in a position of humility. Say "I'm trying to be a better teacher" and ask them for ideas for how you can do that.

There are like-minded people in my district, locally, and globally. Reach out to others. I have a blog w/ a huge community who will give feedback. Just because you're opening up to others doesn't mean it will be bad. The more you realize you need to learn, the more you open yourself up to new possibilities.

Q: How do we change the way teachers are taught to manage classrooms in teacher education programs?

The use of public shame is taught widely to preservice teachers. Behavior charts, checkmarks, punishment & reward . . . none of it should be in classrooms. All of that public stuff, that needs to be conversations with kids and parents. Kids can do school most of the time, those that can't are choosing not to. We assume kids can't. We need to find ways to teach preservice teachers how to have these conversations with students. We resort to shaming to keep things in control, but if

you are creating classrooms that operate on community and trust, those problems go away.

The first day, my students set the rules of the classroom. I don't need to do that. They hold themselves and each other responsible and accountable. They've created the community they want, and they will intervene when it's not working.

Q: What about teachers who have been teaching for a while? How can we shift their attitudes on behavioral management?

When I threw everything out and started again, I thought it would be anarchy. Often high poverty contexts mean more rules, more structure, more serious ramifications. But they need to be treated as humans, they need love, they need to be listened to. It's scary to try something new. To change the narrative of our classrooms, it takes time. My angriest students, when they got control over things, they started seeing school as something that might be for them. They weren't immediately "fixed," but it helps. But some people just don't want to be proven wrong.

Q: You mentioned students provide feedback? Do you have a system for them to do that?

There's informal and formal. When students get comfortable they'll start sharing feedback whenever they feel like it. I do check-ins when I feel the need, every couple of weeks or every month. I provide surveys throughout throughout the year. We do a survey at beginning of the year, and they see there's no punishment when they tell the truth. I'm always asking them to reflect, and they'll roll their eyes a little, but they give information that allows for change. They give me feedback that benefits them.

Q: Are there any resources you would share with teachers trying to adopt this approach?

Well, my own book. Follow bloggers that are doing this work and walking the walk. Get connected with people through facebook and twitter. Build relationships with people. And find your kindred spirits who will hold you up when everything falls apart, which it will, even if you aren't trying these things.

Pernille Ripp is a 7th grade teacher in Oregon, Wisconsin. She is the creator of the Global Read Aloud project, as well as the author of several books including *Passionate Learners: Giving Our Classrooms Back to Our Students*. You can read more of Ripp's work on her blog at www.pernillesripp.com.



STUDENTS GRADE TEACHERS

The purpose of this survey is to allow students to provide anonymous feedback to their teacher on the content, structure, assignments, and teaching methods of the class. Students, please fill out this form as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Your responses are incredibly valuable, and your input will be used to make the class better. *(Adapted from Learn NC)*

Class:

	Strongly Agree	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Strongly Disagree	Unsure
This class is interesting.	4	3	2	1	N/A
This class is challenging.	4	3	2	1	N/A
There is too much work.	4	3	2	1	N/A
The assignments are easy to understand.	4	3	3	1	N/A
The assignments are useful and help me learn.	4	3	2	1	N/A

Teacher:

	Strongly Agree	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Strongly Disagree	Unsure
The teacher presents the material clearly and is easy to understand.	4	3	2	1	N/A
The teacher is able to answer questions about the material.	4	3	2	1	N/A
The teacher is aware of the students' level of understanding.	4	3	3	1	N/A
The teacher is willing to take extra time to ensure understanding.	4	3	2	1	N/A
The teacher is approachable inside and outside of class.	4	3	2	1	N/A
The teacher is fair.	4	3	2	1	N/A
The teacher cares about the students and their ideas/concerns.	4	3	2	1	N/A

Overall Grade: _____

1) What do you like most about this class and why?

2) What do you like least about this class and why?

3) Is the course material covered in class relevant to you? Is it interesting?

4) What have you learned in this class? What would you like to learn?

5) What material would you like to see covered in class that hasn't been? (i.e. topics, books, authors, etc.)

Other Comments/Suggestions:
