The Responsibility Breakthrough

ReLeah Cossett Lent

Students make dramatic improvements in motivation and achievement when teachers hand off to them the responsibility for their own learning.

One October day, one of my most delightful and smartest students looked me straight in the eye and without hesitation explained that she couldn't turn in the project that was due that day because she and her father had had to rush her mother to the emergency room the night before. "Oh, Nikki," I said with compassion. "What happened? Is she OK?"

Nikki told me that the doctors had to perform an emergency hysterectomy, but that her mother would be fine. "But I didn't finish my project," she said. I reassured her that she could have more time to complete the project without penalty.

Fast-forward to spring. The same delightful student approached me one morning and explained that she couldn't turn in her project that day because she and her father had had to rush her mother to the emergency room the night before. A bit doubtful, I nevertheless asked once again whether her mother was OK. "Yes," Nikki replied, oblivious that she had used this line on me before. "She had to have an emergency hysterectomy."

"Nikki," I said pointedly, "you told me that your mother had to have an emergency hysterectomy last fall."

"Oh yes," she replied, without missing a beat. "She had to have another one."

Learning Responsibility

No doubt you've had similar comedic moments as students skillfully invented creative narratives to avoid losing points on assignments. After listening to many such woeful tales, I finally got it. Why was I assuming responsibility for deciding whether my students' excuses were legitimate or bogus? More to the point, why was I assuming responsibility for my students' assignments at all? It was then that I came up with a due date extension form (see fig. 1). I had made a liberating decision not to be the judge, jury, and executioner for more than 100 students each day.

Figure 1. Questions for the Due Date Extension Form

- What new due date are you requesting?

- Describe in detail the work you have done on the assignment so far. Attach a copy of what you have completed if appropriate.

- Why are you requesting additional time to complete the project or assignment?

- How many times in the past have you filled out a due date extension form?

- If the due date extension is not approved, how do you propose to address this problem?

A printable version of this form is available at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_201009_lent_planning.pdf

Source: From *Engaging Adolescent Learners: A Guide for Content-Area Teachers* (p. 64), by R. Lent, 2006, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright 2006 by Heinemann. Adapted with permission.

Later, I came to understand more about the role that responsibility plays in learning. Australian educator Brian Cambourne lists eight conditions of literacy development—and responsibility is one of them. Cambourne points out that students become responsible, independent learners when they make their own decisions about "when, how, and what 'bits' to learn in any learning task. Learners who lose the ability to make decisions are disempowered."[1]

I realized that I had been assuming responsibility in other areas of my students' learning as well. For example, in whole-group instruction, I was deciding what students should read, what type of assessment they should have, and what they should write about. I believed I was a good teacher because I was working really, really hard. In fact, I was working too hard—often a lot harder than my students were.

My first attempt at having students assume responsibility for their own learning was enormously fun for me. I purposely overplayed my new laissez-faire attitude and simply said to them, "During these nine weeks, you're to do a reading and writing project." They waited for the directions, pens poised, looking around for handouts containing specific instructions.

"So what do you want us to do?" they asked after a moment, at once perplexed and irritated.

"I want you to read and write—you decide what that will be," I said casually, allowing them talk-time to make sense of what was happening. Then, together, we brainstormed lists of topics, books, and writing ideas, filling both whiteboards on the wall. Each student eventually came up with a plan for what he or she would read, write, and present to the class (see fig. 2, p. 70). It was a true responsibility breakthrough for all of us.

The next few weeks provided all the data I needed to know that this concept was the yellow brick road to authentic learning. Students were not just engaged—they were absolutely devoted to their projects. They stretched their intellects, abilities, and curiosity. To encourage organization and discourage procrastination, I required students to turn in a weekly progress report, telling me how they were faring. They could also schedule conferences as needed before or after school or during lunch.

In addition, we devoted one period each week to this project, and students had to decide how best to use their time—at the library, meeting with me, working with a partner, writing, or reading. Sharing their work with the rest of the class was an added bonus. When their projects were completed, copies of their written pieces were placed in the class library for other students to read.

Sample projects included

- Reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Kieran Scott's *Kiss and Tell* (today students might compare *Pride and Prejudice* with Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*); writing a comparison of the two novels, with an emphasis on how the notion of love has changed in the past 200 years.

- Reading Harold Kushner's *When Good Things Happen to Bad People*; writing an analysis of Kushner's philosophy and an autobiographical piece about a difficult time in one's life.

- Reading the annual *The Best American Short Stories*; writing an analysis of the characteristics of good short stories as well as an original short story.

- Reading Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; writing a summary of the major points and an analysis of how Malcolm X influenced the civil rights movement.

- Reading Robert Cormier's *After the First Death*; writing a response to the novel and an essay about the underlying motivations of terrorists.

Components of Intrinsic Motivation

Imagine my delight when I discovered Daniel Pink's latest book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (Penguin, 2009). Pink points to a cluster of recent behavioral science studies showing that autonomous motivation promotes greater conceptual understanding, better grades, enhanced persistence at school and in sporting activities, higher productivity, less burnout, and greater levels of psychological well-being.

He then breaks down the components of genuine motivation into autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Without those components, he contends, we are limited in what we can achieve. As an educator, I would say that Pink is also describing the factors that create responsibility.

Autonomy

Too many students have had so little experience making academic choices that they don't know how to decide. When I was in an elementary classroom recently, after modeling a lesson on reading, I offered students a choice of bookmarks. I fanned out five different ones in my hand and walked around the classroom, asking each student to choose one. The teacher came over and whispered to me that such a method would "take all day." "Just hand them one," she advised. "They have such a hard time making decisions."

It was a telling point. In fact, I wanted the students to use the back of the bookmarks to write down vocabulary words that they didn't know in their reading; I felt certain that if they chose the bookmark that appealed to them, they would be far more likely to use it for a vocabulary guide. A small thing, really, but providing autonomy in small things will reap greater responsibility in what counts.

I've found the same to be true for using reading strategies. When students are all given the same vocabulary graphic organizer, for example, and they have not learned how to use that strategy independently in ways that make sense to them, they relinquish their autonomy and simply do what the teacher instructs. They may feel responsible for completing the organizer—especially if they are good students—but are they assuming responsibility for the learning behind the task? And how much transferrable learning occurs when they have not learned to be autonomous?

Mastery

Daniel Pink defines mastery as getting better and better at something that matters. That definition is more compassionate and realistic than current notions of mastery, in which students must "master" a certain score on a standardized test to be recognized as proficient. The popular Accelerated Reading program provides a compelling example. Students will do almost anything to get points— read books they hate, have friends take tests for them, and cheat to pass the tests.

Contrast that type of mastery with the satisfaction students feel when they spend days immersed in the *Twilight* series or howl with laughter reading Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Amulet, 2007). Mastery for them means being able to understand the book; they *want* to comprehend the text so they can talk with friends about *Twilight*'s Edward and Bella or try their hand at creating a cartoon in the style of Kinney.

In an 8th grade classroom I visited in Florida, students were creating book trailers for the books they had chosen to read. When I walked in as a first-time visitor, the students couldn't wait to show me their projects. They were beyond exuberant; they were ecstatic—and they had completed these computer-based projects, for the most part, at home. Several students said they had learned more in this class than they had in any other. When I asked what made this a superior learning experience, their answers reflected Pink's contentions: They were given autonomy; worked tirelessly to improve their projects; and had a solid purpose in showing their teacher, visitors, and classmates their masterpieces.

Purpose

When I work with literacy leadership teams, I often ask members the purpose of their work: What do you want to achieve? Why are you here? Inevitably, some members honestly state that their objective is to raise students' test scores; my sigh lets them know that, although I'm happy to accept all answers, this one brings me angst. As long as test scores are our primary motivation for teaching and students' motivation for learning, I fear that deep, meaningful reading, writing, thinking, and understanding will elude both us and those whom we're committed to teach.

Although teachers are now required to write complex lesson plans, citing state standards and benchmarks, a simple question would suffice: What is the purpose of this lesson? That question returns us, and our students, to a pure focus that has become buried under data, mandates, and outcomes: learning that is relevant and meaningful.

Powerful Learning

Teachers can keep Pink's principles in mind as they create lessons that help students experience the joy of knowing they are responsible for their own learning.

- *Provide as much autonomy as possible* in choice of content, task, texts, partners, delivery, due dates, and assessment. Teach students responsibility by allowing them to experience it.

- *Discuss with students what the word "mastery" means* and ask them how they will become better at the task at hand. Point out that learning is a never-ending process; different people attain mastery at different rates and in different ways. Allow students some wiggle room instead of adhering to ubiquitous one-size-fits-all molds.

- *Redefine purpose* in terms of greater objectives than meeting preset criteria or state standards. Increase motivation by incorporating "greater good" objectives in the form of service learning or relevant projects.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the father of flow, wrote, "One cannot lead a life that is truly excellent without feeling that one belongs to something greater and more permanent than oneself."[2] By the very nature of our vocation, teachers belong to something greater than themselves. What's more, we have the good fortune to be able to pass along that gift to our students— simply by allowing them to experience the power of their own learning.

Endnotes

[1] Cambourne, B. (1995). Toward an educationally relevant theory of literacy learning: Twenty years of inquiry. *The Reading Teacher, 49*(3), 185.

[2] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow.* New York: Basic Books, 131.

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