



The Education Trust



# Motivation and Engagement in Student Assignments: The Role of Choice and Relevancy

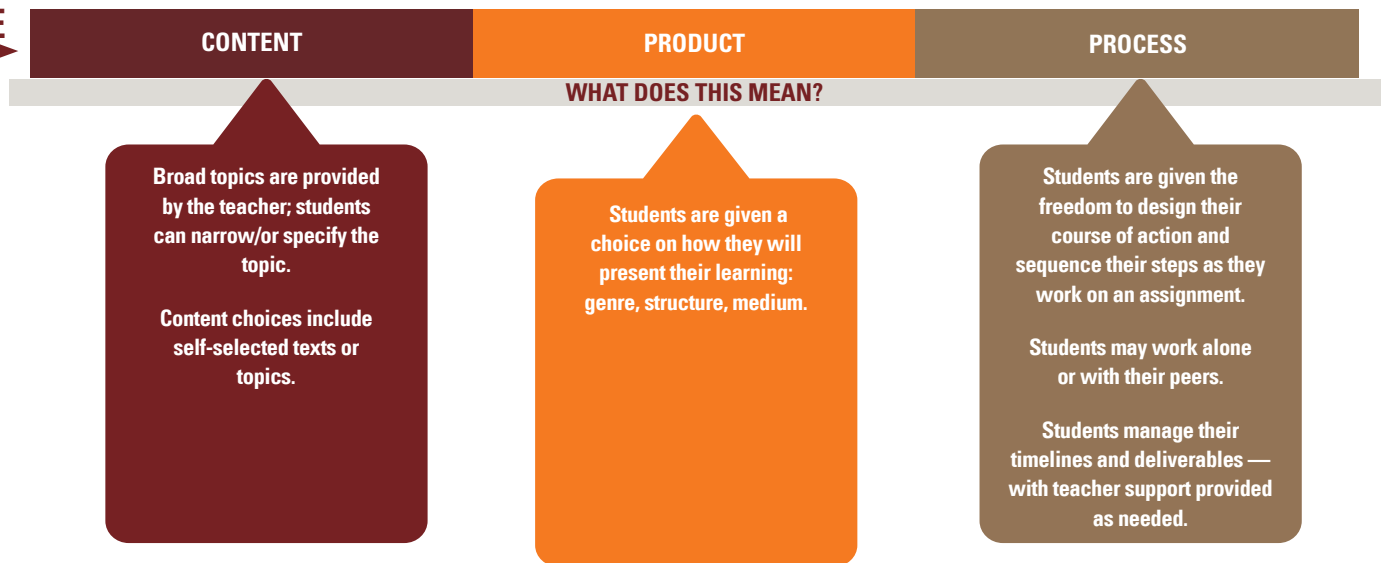
## DEFINING CHOICE

Anchored in the field of psychology, providing choice within an assignment promotes the healthy development of student autonomy. Affording students opportunities in which they are “in charge of their lives” is central to their academic achievement and emotional adjustment. When students make decisions about their work, they are empowered to own it. Moreover, their ownership of a task leads to self-direction and self-discipline because they are personally invested in the outcomes. Offering students choice supports a universally held goal in teaching and learning: Teachers want their students to become more capable independent learners. An opposite approach plays out when teachers control all aspects of the assignment or guide students in lockstep fashion through each step. In these scenarios, students are made to relinquish all power and decision making, and teachers revert to using power to control bodies and minds instead of using their autonomy to invite learning.

## CHOICE IN ASSIGNMENTS

In our framework, we assess choice within an assignment across three areas: content, product, and process. In each area, students must be held to grade-level standards and pushed to think deeply and critically. We do not suggest assignments be filled with so many choices to the point of disarray or unclear boundaries. Rather, assignments should, on a regular basis, offer meaningful choice for students.

## CHOICE



## DEFINING RELEVANCY

Motivation and engagement interact with an individual’s lived experience (e.g., beliefs, values, interests). In our framework, the personal realm is actualized through relevance: the value students perceive in a given assignment. This perception can either spark interest or lead to disengagement. Researchers have shown that noted interest in a task or topic spurs powerful emotions, stimulating areas of the brain that can positively influence cognition. Thus, paying attention to the relevancy of an assignment is a vital step toward ensuring students are authentically motivated and engaged in learning. But what makes a task relevant? For our assignment analysis work, **we focused on three questions:**

1. IS THE CONTENT USEFUL TO US?
2. DOES IT INTEREST US?
3. IS IT PRESENTED BY SOMEONE WE KNOW AND TRUST?

# RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Given the important role motivation and engagement play in the field of education, it is not surprising to find a vast number of studies and papers on the topic both in the United States and abroad. Here's a closer look at what the research says on particular aspects of the topic:

## **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards**

Historically, researchers have noted the complexities about how to best motivate and engage learners — using either intrinsic or extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic refers to doing things for one's own interest, preference, or satisfaction, while extrinsic signals receiving a reward or avoiding a punishment. While extrinsic rewards, such as stickers or extra recess, may provide an initial "burst" of engagement, they rarely improve achievement in the long term. Extrinsic rewards appear to be more helpful when they are optional and emphasize processes or inputs a student can control. For example, reading more books will likely improve comprehension; thus, setting a goal for reading a certain number of books is an external motivator that may positively impact reading comprehension. The ultimate goal, however, is for students to be intrinsically motivated to read, write, think, and speak across disciplines — to find joy in "gaining knowledge and skills."

## **How Race, Culture, and Class Intersect With Motivation and Engagement**

Motivation and engagement intersect with race, culture, and class. Researchers have noted specific patterns of disengagement in reading and in mathematics for particular groups of students. These studies note that educators reduce these negative patterns when they establish responsive classrooms in which all students are (1) held to high expectations, (2) offered choices, (3) supported in their unique learning needs, and (4) culturally and linguistically respected.

## **Motivation and Engagement in the Classroom**

The classroom environment impacts student engagement. Specifically, teacher-student relationships and peer relationships have been widely noted in the literature. The overriding theme is that students are more likely to be positively engaged in their learning when they feel a sense of trust and belonging — when they believe their teacher and peers genuinely care about them as learners.

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## TIPS:

- At your next staff meeting, invite teachers to bring their most recent assignments and use The Education Trust assignment analysis guides to review assignments with an eye toward motivation and engagement.
- Avoid stereotypes (e.g., race, gender, religion, etc.) as a means of addressing cultural relevance.
- Review your school and classroom libraries for opportunities to diversify texts.
- Use assignments that engage students in critical dialogue to build knowledge, confidence, and students' social and emotional development.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS:

1. When, where, and how do students have choice in their assignments?
2. When students had choice how was rigor maintained?
3. Were students given opportunities to bring their ideas, opinions and experiences to the assignment? If not, what adjustments could you make to allow for this?
4. How can assignments in my classroom offer students the opportunity to experience rigorous content — which may be unfamiliar in a way that feels relevant to them?