

5 Ways to Put Students in the Driver's Seat



Many schools are now advocating for student-centered learning to promote student inquiry, independence, agency, rigor, grit, or any other trendy words that come to mind. Yet, often times these proposed instructional shifts – as well as many others – stumble as a result of teacher professional development that is overly ambiguous and lacking explicit details.

For example, telling a teacher, “Your students need to engage in more problem solving,” is comparable to letting a comedian know he/she needs to be funnier or asking a pizzaiolo to make a better dough. *Vague directives in the absence of explicit instruction typically generate anxiety.*

To avoid these anxieties, and for progress to actually take place, professional development needs to drill down to the nitty gritty and be as explicit as possible. In other words, we need to be explicit about being explicit...and provide teachers with *specific* strategies they can use to comfortably move forward for their benefit of our students.

With these thoughts in mind, here are five ways we can promote student-centered learning by handing the reins over to students.

1. **Students unwrapping standards**

Before [deconstructing standards into learning targets](#), let's first give students a crack at them to determine motivation and interest level. First, pose an unaltered standard for students. Then, allow students to potentially object, react, and share that what they find is just plain boring and uninteresting. Next, break them into smaller groups (so students don't fall into the trap of groupthink), and ask each group to record ideas on how to transform the standard into a statement that is interesting and relevant to them. This process allows students to work towards making standards meaningful and in the process they already own the learning targets (more on this below) before explicit instruction has begun.

A strategy to help students convert standards into interesting learning intentions is to challenge them to transform a standard into an Instagram post. *What would it say and what image would you associate with the post?*

2. Learning targets

For students, learning targets assist in making clear what they are learning, and possibly why they are learning it and what success criteria looks like. A three-part learning target that satisfies these requirements could be, "I can draw inferences from a story...so I can better understand its plot, and...I am successful when I can tell others about the plot using inferences." (A typical, one-part learning target might stop after drawing inferences.) Here, the benefit is students knowing specifically what they are supposed to accomplish, and as a result they are more likely to understand the material. As [Rick Stiggins](#) has written, "Students can hit any target that they know about and that stands still for them."

Under ideal circumstances, students are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their learning by making assessment-based choices to reach their targets. [James Popham](#) refers to this approach as Level 2 formative assessment, which "consists of *student-determined* adjustments in learning tactics, not *teacher-dictated* adjustments the students are then supposed to make." One of the more common ways this type of self-assessment is carried out is during Writing Workshop when students use of the back of their writer's notebooks to keep track of their goals and progress. As a result, they are capable of pinpointing and satisfying their needs, as opposed to always having to rely on the teacher for direction.

3. Collaborative protocols

Collaboration has moved from a 21st century concept and buzzword to essentially a non-negotiable in every workplace. Collaboration has truly shifted functionally from a "what" to a "how" in our everyday work. This shift is making its way into learning environments,

and like all skills it must be explicitly integrated into student activity. With increased collaboration comes an increased focus on behaviors such as equally distributed workload and responsibilities, conflict resolution, time consumption, etc.

[Collaborative protocols](#) integrate group norms and co-created guiding principles as opposed to rules that feel restrictive and dare to be challenged. When a group norm is violated, an opportunity is created for the teacher to have a conversation with the disruptive student. *“How do you think your group members feel when you don’t come prepared?”* When we address a student’s choice in the context of how it created an obstacle (or an advantage) for others it allows students to shift the focus from behaving to positive partnerships and collective contributions.

4. **Genius Hour and 20% Time**

Autonomy can be defined as “The desire to be self directed,” and [Daniel Pink](#) cites it as one of three elements of true motivation (mastery and purpose being the others). Despite the fact that educators (and adults) crave this autonomy, we are often hesitant to allow for our students to govern themselves.

Enter [Genius Hour and 20% Time](#). These instructional approaches are based on *letting go* and having students define their own learning. While some educators (especially those who are more “old school”) may be intimidated by the idea of students being given so much control, keep in mind that variations of these methods do exist. For example, when Ross taught fourth grade he implemented 20% Time by providing students with a topic, such as compound sentences, and then students were able to demonstrate their understanding of said topic however they chose. Meanwhile, a more [open-ended approach](#) might involve students working on *any* type of learning, as long as they document and present on the process and product(s).

5. **Student-to-student feedback**

Teacher-to-student (T2S) feedback leverages teacher expertise and it will continue to be important as we move away from traditional grading and towards learning-centered feedback. Student-to-student (S2S) feedback must also be given the same, if not more merit as T2S if we are going to continue to support students in building collaborative skills. Creating S2S feedback opportunities provides a different perspective on formative assessment. This approach shifts from correction perceived as “incorrect” to “try this.” The lateral feedback is inherently disarming because it is exchanged between peers whose experiences and interests are closely aligned. With STS, students receive practice in [effectively providing feedback](#), which can be applied to many life situations and

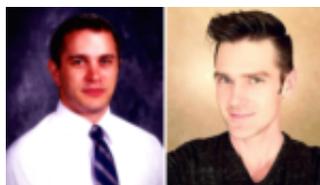
contexts. As adults we struggle with actively seeking feedback, making sense of it, and choosing to act on it. We can work toward changing this trend by starting in the classroom and building the capacity for empowering feedback loops.

In the End

Impactful professional development starts with empathy.

Being vague and assuming “They’ll figure it out!” will most likely produce more harm than good. In the end, we must put ourselves in the shoes of teachers (who are in the trenches with students, each and every day), remove obstacles, and provide explicit strategies and professional learning that paint a clear picture of *how* to move forward.

[Ross Cooper and Nathan Lang](#)



Ross is the Supervisor of Instructional Practice K-12 in the Salisbury Township School District (1:1 MacBook/iPad) in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He is an Apple Distinguished Educator and a Google Certified Teacher. His passions are inquiry-based learning and quality professional development. He blogs about these topics at rosscoops31.com. Also, he regularly engages in speaking, consulting, and presenting. He has conducted keynotes, speaking engagements, and workshops ranging from 15 minutes to all-day. A list of what he has previously offered, and testimonials, can be found on his blog. Connect with him on Twitter at [@RossCoops31](https://twitter.com/RossCoops31).

Nathan is a speaker, writer, presenter, professional learning facilitator, and Google Certified Educator. He is the co-founder of Bammy nominated [#LeadUpChat](https://twitter.com/LeadUpChat), an educational leadership professional learning network (PLN) via Twitter. He is also the co-founder of [#divergED](https://twitter.com/divergED), a Twitter chat focused on divergent thinking and innovations in education. He has been a speaker and presenter at both local and national professional conferences.

He is currently a National Consultant at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMHCO). Before joining HMHCO, he was the Director of Elementary Curriculum and Instruction for Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. Additionally, he has been a high school science teacher, elementary assistant principal, high school assistant principal, university adjunct

professor, and was an Education Supervisor at the NASA-Johnson Space Center. Connect with him on Twitter at @nalang1.

Tags: [professional development](#), [professional learning](#), [standards](#), [student-centered learning](#)