Know Your Choices:
Exploring How Instructors Support Student Autonomy Through Assessment Design

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autonomy

One of Many

Create multiple assignment opportunities that students can select from. Students should *not* be expected to do all of them. The assignments themselves are relatively well specified, with clear components and expectations.

+ • Identity-exploration
  • Competence-support
− • Choice overload
  • Grading workload

Pick the Target

The mode of assessment is defined, but students are able to select topics of their choice within the relevant content space of the course.

+ • Risk-taking
  • Content mastery
− • Grade ≠ Effort ≠ Learning
  • Risk-avoidance

Audience Control

The assignments are defined, but students can select whether they'll be shared in a public forum (blog, class discussion forum), or privately with the instructional staff (journal).

+ • Belongingness
  • Competence-support
− • Community-management
  • Grading workload

Design Your Own

Students are empowered to create their own assignment(s), including defining scope and scale.

+ • Identity-exploration
  • Creativity
− • Grade ≠ Effort ≠ Learning
  • Non-standardized evaluation scheme

Difficulty

Students must select from pre-defined assignment pathways that address the same learning objectives, but require different types of effort, and therefore, different levels of risk in order to show competency.

+ • Competence-support
  • Risk-taking
− • Risk-avoidance

Say When

The assignments are pre-defined, but students are able to decide when, and often in what order, they will complete them.

+ • Time management
− • Procrastination
  • Grading workload

Many, Not All

Students must do a certain number, but not all, of the assignments within a defined category.

+ • Time management
  • Competence-support
− • Procrastination
  • Grading workload

Specialize

Assignments build around a core set of learning objectives, and then allow student specialization and interest to direct advanced learning.

+ • Identity-formation
  • Content mastery
  • Skill-building
− • Varied learning outcomes
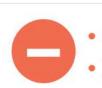
Extra Lives

Students are allowed multiple tries to achieve particular types of assignments. They receive feedback on their efforts each time, and are able to build mastery through repeated attempts.

+ • Competence-support
  • Mastery-orientation
− • Grading workload
  • Low initial effort

Team Up!

Students are able to decide to take on some assignments in a collaborative mode. This may take the form of choosing to do a pre-defined group project, or being able to decide to do an individual project as a group.

+ • Belongingness
  • Collaboration
− • Attribution
  • Varied learning outcomes

Gameful pedagogy promotes student engagement and intrinsic motivation through the thoughtful use of instructional design mechanics to support autonomy, belongingness, and competence (Aguilar, Holman, & Fishman, 2015; Fishman et al., 2013; Reeve, 2009; Black & Deci, 2000). Here we focus on mechanisms to support autonomy.

We analyzed syllabi from 19 unique gameful courses at the University of Michigan experimenting broadly with gameful learning. Each instructor created assessment designs intended to support student autonomy, but did so in different manners, and to differing degrees. Looking across all courses, we identified nine different ways instructors supported student choice in these courses, and highlight observed strengths and weaknesses of each approach. The characteristics are not mutually exclusive.

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