

Tech, Tact, Go: Connecting the Connected

by Dr. Lisa Gonzales and Dr. Kevin Grier

The expansion of technology has changed the way teachers teach and students learn. Successful teachers who have taken control of this shift have done so by passing control to their students. When teachers relinquish control, shared leadership emerges.

Students thrive when they are responsible for creating their own learning. The challenge is coaching and supporting teachers to release control. How can we strengthen the empowerment and connection to our students? Try voice and choice, infusing the real world, and focused technology.

Time for Voice and Choice

The voice and choice approach strengthens leadership skills. With choice comes the responsibility for completing the research and analysis thoroughly. The teacher's role is to create a classroom environment that encourages student inquiry and to act as a guide.

Start with a rubric that is focused on the essential learning you hope to see students demonstrate while allowing the flexibility for students to choose how they want to convey their mastery. This isn't a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants-on-a-Monday-morning approach. It takes careful planning that anticipates students' needs and questions. You can even raise the level of student voice by making students take part in the design of the project, especially in the upper grades.

Some well-known approaches for expanding voice and choice are project/problem-based learning, Genius Hour (geniushour.com), and the 20% Time approach (20time.org) where that percent of class time is devoted to student preferences.

10 quick tips to empowerment

Be relevant. Make the end game relevant to the students.

Provide multiple opportunities to complete a task. Let students demonstrate mastery by allowing for revisions and re-dos.

Make prompts engaging. Be mindful of current trends from skate parks to Bruno Mars to gun rights.

Solve unique problems. Have students come up with their research questions around what they want to work on.

Reward risk. If students take on a huge endeavor, don't penalize them when they trip.

Practice visualization. Students live in a visual world, so tap into that with what they see.

Promote grit. When students begin to struggle, coach them through perseverance.

Demonstrate mastery in multiple ways. Tap into those modalities that appeal to them.

Question why. Probe politely and get students to go from shallow to deep on their topic.

Teach skepticism. Help them strengthen the skill set that considers the validity of sources.

Welcome to the Real World

Let's face it. Students often feel disenfranchised in the educational process. They may feel like their contributions are not valued or wanted in the learning process.

The twist comes in bringing in real-world scenarios. Ask students for their perspective and launch into research and design from there. For example, ask them: What is something we need to do to make the world a better place? Or what is a problem we have in our (fill in the blank)? Making students take ownership is what builds intrinsic rewards. And as adults, we find having a real-world impact to be rewarding too. After all, it's likely why so many of us chose to go into education—to make a difference in the lives of students.

Got Tech?

Enabling students to identify their sources of information, research, and materials for learning is a great start to student empowerment.

A variety of strategically-crafted assignments can place relevancy on daily and long-term learning outcomes. Sites like EBSCO Information Services can easily—and now free of charge—be used to deepen the quality of student research. Other proven approaches include technology-based community service projects, designing public service announcements, developing apps that make a difference in schools and communities, and debates. Students are discovering they can share their voice on hot button issues like gun control or the #metoo movement. Students are beginning to see technology as their way to change their world.

Test out and expand global connections to both empower and address real-world issues. This can mean collaborating with or mentoring students in other schools. Or you could invite scientists to weigh in on science fair projects. Global connections effectively tap into available technology that adds that real-world flair that can draw in even the most reluctant student. Ultimately, a focus on placing the control over learning in students' hands is a great start.

Students will soon become adults. The ability to sit in a group and work through problems and solutions empowers them to have more control over their learning. They have buy-in. From voice and choice to using technology to infusing in real-world examples and challenges, when designing projects and assignments tap into the inquisitive nature of today's young people in as many clever ways you can. After all, these approaches engage students. And at the end of the day, isn't that what we all want?

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