Podcast Episode 31: When Choosing the "Easy" Option Is Responsible

Welcome back to the Education Table, where we unpack your biggest questions

about inclusive and innovative teaching in 10 minutes or less.

I am Katie Novak, and today I'm tackling the question, what do I do if I provide

options and students just pick the easiest one? I totally get it.

We want students to stretch themselves, to engage deeply and work at really high levels

to challenge themselves. And when we offer choices, we are very hopeful that students

will make really responsible decisions that help them grow. But when options are designed

intentionally and aligned to grade level goals, there really shouldn't be any

truly easy options. And at the same time, we don't want our students avoiding

challenge or productive struggle when we do have maybe more efficient or

more scaffolded options. So what on earth do we do? Let's break this down

with a story, some research, and then a set of, concrete strategies that

you can use tomorrow. When I first learned about udl, I was teaching

seventh grade English. As a first step, I wanted to be more flexible with an

upcoming reading comprehension project, because my tried and true

strategy was having students write responses to literally almost every prompt, even

when writing wasn't the actual standard that I was assessing.

So, in inspired by UDL and the idea of firm goals and flexible means,

I redesigned a summative assessment. Students could show their

understanding of that grade level text by writing a response, creating

a presentation, or they could record a podcast. And I was thinking, oh,

they're going to love this. They're going to pick what excites them.

This is going to be amazing. I'm going to get set to high quality work.

And guess what everyone picked? The presentation.

Literally every single student - not a podcast, not one essay - presentations only.

But it hit me that I never actually taught them how to make a podcast.

They did not know how to storyboard, to record, to edit, how they'd be assessed.

And they had seen presentations, and so they figured, okay,

maybe I'll do that. I don't have to write. But what I realized is I

didn't actually teach them how to create a high quality presentation.

And that was a design mistake. Because if students are just always choosing what

feels "easiest" or the most familiar, that is a design problem.

Because UDL isn't just about providing flexibility. It's about preparing

students to navigate that flexibility so they can make really informed,

strategic, responsible decisions about how they show their learning as they

challenge themselves. And the research, as always, actually backs this up in

some really interesting ways. So teachers often fear that

offering options means that students will just take shortcuts - they're just going

to look for the easy way out. But when a rubric is aligned to grade level standards, there

really are no easy shortcuts. There are only more scaffolded options and less

scaffolded options. And both can be really rigorous when the goal is clear.

And so the goal of UDL is really about learner agency. And learners who have agency

make choices by balancing what feels efficient, what feels manageable,

what is predictable. So it's not that students are avoiding challenge, but they

often avoid uncertainty. And here's where this gets really interesting.

There's a concept in instructional design called the expertise reversal effect,

and it was highlighted in a 2025 meta analysis by Tetlaff and colleagues.

And they found that less experienced learners perform much better when they have

examples and scaffolds, but more experienced learners actually perform worse if

they use those same scaffolds because the extra guidance creates some redundancy and

slows down thinking. So, in other words, a scaffold that's one size fits all,

that helps one student learn more deeply can make another student less effective

because, of course, as all of us know, different learners require different levels

of support based on context. Now, stay with me here because this is important.

How on earth does this connect to students choosing the easiest option?

Both of these situations come from the same root cause. Students often choose what

feels predictable, not what leads to the deepest levels of learning.

So a student might avoid a podcast because they don't know how to make one.

Another student might choose the most scaffolded options, even if they don't need those

supports, because it feels like they can do it really quickly and it's safe.

And it's not necessarily laziness. It's almost like a lack of

metacognition in the process. And that's why UDL is essential.

It's not give choices and hope that students pick the best thing.

It's teach the options, be really clear about the goal and teach the options,

model the workflows, and then provide scaffolds that are available,

but they're not required. And before we ask students to make decisions, we

really need to unpack the goal, share the success criteria, and then help

students reflect on which options will challenge them in the right ways.

So instead of worrying that choice is going to lead to shortcuts, we need to ensure

first that all choices meet the same grade level expectations, that students

are taught and provided with opportunities to reflect on what they really need to do to

do their best work and why. And to do this, we can ask students to

reflect on a prompt like. "the best option for me to find the right balance of

support and challenge is..." So when students understand both the firm goal and their

own readiness, which requires some significant self awareness, they are

more likely to make more responsible and therefore rigorous decisions.

So how do we design instruction to help them move in this direction?

Let's dive into some strategies. The first strategy, which

I talk about all the time, is the no thank you bite. Just as I ask my own kids

to try a bite of a new food or a new dish before they say "no, I don't like that,"

I learned that I had to have students experience different options before I would add

them to a choice board. So I began requiring them to do these no thank you bites.

So if podcasting is going to be an option, I might really think about what

we're studying in alignment with standards and provide them with a couple of

different podcasts where they can listen to or read the transcripts.

I want to talk about what makes podcasts effective. Of course, we'd need

to make sure that students had opportunities, no threat ways to practice

recording their voices and short segments. So it's really about low stakes

exploration, not in any way a summative assessment. It can be really formative.

And then when the podcast becomes an option, students already have the experience.

They know that there are maybe scaffolds available if they need them, but at

that point many of them may not need that level of scaffolding and they'll

have models. So some students might want step-by-step directions

because maybe they forget how to make one based on working memory, but many

will be ready to run with it. And yes, I understand

this takes time, but you can absolutely divide and conquer this.

So maybe your digital media specialist teaches podcasting school wide, for example,

or maybe teams across grade levels split the work. So I was a seventh grade

teacher and there were four core teachers: science, social

studies, math, ELA. Maybe one person says, you know what, by the end of

the next six weeks, I'll make sure that our students know how to make

a really solid screen recording video. And another is really focused

on not only creating slides, but presentation skills. And another is

doing this podcast. And the goal is really sharing responsibility for

building students' toolkits so after they have all these different experiences,

they're going to be much better situated to make responsible decisions

for their own learning. The next tip is something I did an entire podcast

about, which was about rubrics which is that every single

option needs to align to a clear rubric. If the goal, for example, is

understanding characterization, as in how complex characters interact

over the course of a text, then the rubric should measure whether students know

how to analyze characters and how they interact and how it really drives the plot

forward. And if the rubric is really clear about those reading

comprehension skills, those high level thinking skills, then students may be able to

work towards mastery on that rubric by using an essay or a podcast or a video or a

presentation. It is the same exact standard. It is the same exact

expectations and success criteria, but there are different flexible

methods to get there. This really ensures that no pathway is easier.

It's just different. And yes, of course AI can help you generate those

rubrics, but always please apply your brilliance, your professional judgment, to

ensure that the criteria really reflect the standard without introducing

any unnecessary construct irrelevant barriers. Now, the last thing we always

need to do is ask students what they're choosing and why they're choosing it, because

this is how we can make metacognition or agency more transparent.

After students understand the goal, after they look at the success criteria, we might

say, which of these things are you going to choose and why? And then as they begin

to engage in learning, we can circulate, we can check in and say, okay, so talk to me.

What led you to pick this option? Or how does this

help you learn? Or how is this challenging you today?

These questions really help students reflect on their decision making.

And it also helps you to understand where you need to intervene or redirect

or provide feedback. If an option truly does not allow students to work

toward the same firm goal, take it off the table. So this is not about

students just choosing whatever they feel like. It's about them really

understanding what is it that they really have to know and do.

And of course, you as an educator are ultimately responsible

for learning outcomes. And so as you check in and build relationships, you

can help to redirect students and say, you know what, I'm not seeing that

you're really doing your best work. Let's try something else.

So here's the big takeaway of this episode, everyone. When we worry about students

picking the easiest option, what we're really saying is I am not sure that they're

ready to self direct yet, or I'm not sure that every option here is really

aligned to grade level standards. And both of those are

absolutely okay and very, very alterable. So thank you for joining me

at the Education Table. If you have ever tried this no thank you bite

or have some strategies that will work well, please let me know

all about it. I can't wait to hear what you're trying.

Until the next episode, onward.