

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

Graham Gibbs

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Student choice often lacks substance

Item 37 by John Biggs argued that teachers should specify educational goals with great care so that they are then able to design educational processes that are properly aligned with those goals. The emphasis on alignment may have hidden the issue of who sets the goals.

Most teachers would agree with the general claim that it helps if students have at least some choice about what they study, so that they are more likely to be interested in the subject matter. However once a student has chosen a degree programme, or chosen a module, the limits of choice may have been exhausted and students may then follow a rigid pre-specified programme involving goals that are not their own. Attempts to give students choice hide some complex issues and sometimes lead to an education that is dead on its feet.

One of Carl Rogers' 10 Principles of Human Learning states:

Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes.

Unpacking this a little reveals several components of what is being claimed to go on here. First, Carl Rogers distinguishes 'significant learning' from other, more superficial learning. This is more than the

difference between being somewhat interested or not terribly interested. Nor is it the same as the difference between a deep approach (trying to make sense) and a surface approach (trying to reproduce). A student might take a deep approach to learn some subject matter that they did not care about, or that led to no change themselves or to their approach to the world. Carl Rogers was interested in learning that changed people, not just what they knew. Most of the choices available to students, even in very modular courses, have nothing to do with what Carl Rogers would categorise as 'significant learning' – he would have said that most such choices were between one kind of insignificant learning and another. Given that it is becoming ever clearer that many graduates leave university almost completely unchanged in terms of significant learning, even if they had lots of choice between modules, Rogers was probably on to something.

Second, the subject matter has to be perceived by the student as having relevance to their own purposes. It is no use, in Rogers' eyes, for the teacher to think the subject matter is interesting or useful if the student does not share their perceptions. It is rare (though Lincoln University is possibly an exception) to ask students what they are interested in and then arrange a course around their interests. Usually teachers decide

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what is interesting and then students choose between fixed offerings, none of which may be relevant to their own purposes.

And third, Rogers is talking about purposeful learning – learning that people engage in when they are trying to do something or get somewhere. It requires that students actually have purposes, rather than simply drifting along or only trying to pass or get a qualification. If a school leaver were to say “I think I might like to study the Social Sciences” this does not seem to me to add up to much of a purpose. If you were to ask this student “What kind of a life do you want? What kind of a person do you want to become? What career are you envisaging? What do you need to learn to achieve that? What kind of educational process would be best suited to that?” – they might well be flummoxed. The choices this school-leaver might make between courses or modules would be unlikely to be driven by clear purposes or even intended to achieve what Rogers called significant learning. I believe that most ‘choice’ on modular courses has so little substance that it cannot achieve enough to outweigh the many downsides of modular programmes. Coherence, progression and social cohesion are sacrificed on the altar of ‘choice’.

All this is very idealistic, you might respond. It is surely impractical to offer students significant choices. Not so. Thirty years ago there were a variety of experiments in designing higher education around these idealistic principles. One of the most impressive was at the School for Independent

Study at the Polytechnic of East London, which used learning contracts throughout a degree programme to structure the way students learnt to be independent and self directed towards their own goals. The learning contracts got longer and more sophisticated as students developed, the final year contract involving a very substantial piece of work negotiated and agreed by the end of the second year. There are many similar examples round the world of taking the Carl Rogers principle seriously, and the educational processes involved look nothing like a conventional modular course. So it is possible. However these experiments seldom fitted with standard academic work contracts specifying class contact times, with timetabling systems, with room allocation systems, with assessment regulations, with what external examiners usually did, and so on. It is often administratively messy and complex. The scope for failure is higher. Most such student-driven innovations have, even if spectacularly successful in terms of what students achieved and the difference it made to their lives, eventually collapsed under pressure to conform to management conventions and predictably high pass rates. But they seldom failed educationally.

If a teacher were to accept the structural limitations of existing course regulations and conventions, what might they do to take Carl Rogers’ principle more seriously? Well first they could help students articulate what they were really interested in and why, to make them more purposeful and discriminating in their choices and decisions. As so often, the

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most effective strategies involve, first, making students more sophisticated as learners.

Then teachers could listen to what students are interested in and try and build that into their existing modules to a greater extent. There is usually more scope for this than is generally recognised. Simply listing existing content and asking if students would have rather had more or less of each topic can help. Students can be allowed to specify their own assignment titles, provided they are cleared with the teacher in advance. Courses can also start highly structured and quickly open up the scope for choice, via a wide range of optional assignments the teacher specifies, leading on to a self generated project. Even Carl Rogers talked about a 'facilitative degree of structure' - and for unsophisticated rudderless students that is often quite a lot of structure. The difference is that Carl Rogers would have been working towards reducing the amount of structure so that students could participate more responsibly in the learning process.

If it is argued that students cannot really know what they are interested in until they have had

some encounters with a variety of subject matter, then you could ask students completing this year's module to help you to redesign it so that it would be more aligned with what next year's module cohort are likely to be engaged with. This can be especially effective when redesigning an entire degree programme: involving the last cohort of graduates to help change the profile, emphasis and balance of the modules on offer so that they align better with what the next cohort of students are likely to find meaningful and useful.

Reading

Principles of Learning: Freedom to Learn. Carl Rogers, 1969

<https://principlesoflearning.wordpress.com/dissertation/chapter-3-literature-review-2/the-human-perspective/freedom-to-learn-rogers-1969/>

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