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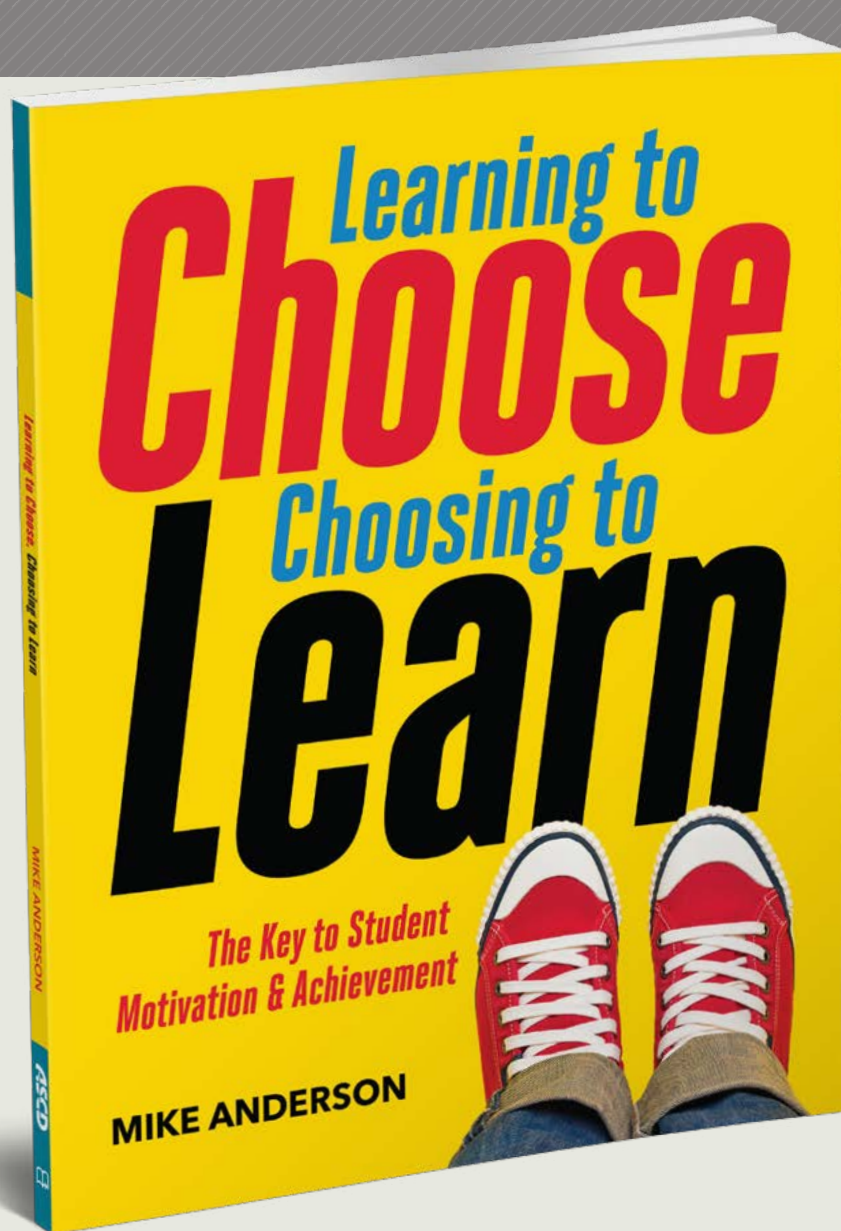
FROM *Learning to Choose, Choosing to Learn*

BY **Mike Anderson**

The Key to Student Motivation & Achievement

Learning to
Choose
Choosing to
Learn

The Key to Student
Motivation & Achievement

MIKE ANDERSON

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Learning to Choose, Choosing to Learn: The Key to Student Motivation and Achievement

by Mike Anderson

OFFERING STUDENTS CHOICES ABOUT THEIR LEARNING, SAYS AUTHOR MIKE ANDERSON, is one of the most powerful ways teachers can boost student learning, motivation, and achievement. In his latest book, Anderson offers numerous examples of choice in action, ideas to try with different students, and a step-by-step process to help you plan and incorporate choice into your classroom. You'll explore

- What effective student choice looks like in the classroom.

- Why it's important to offer students choices.

- How to create learning environments, set the right tone for learning, and teach specific skills that enable choice to work well.

When students have more choices about their learning, they can find ways of learning that match their personal needs and be more engaged in their work, building skills and work habits that will serve them well in school and beyond. This teacher-friendly guide offers everything you need to help students who are bored, frustrated, or underperforming come alive to learning through the fundamental power of choice.
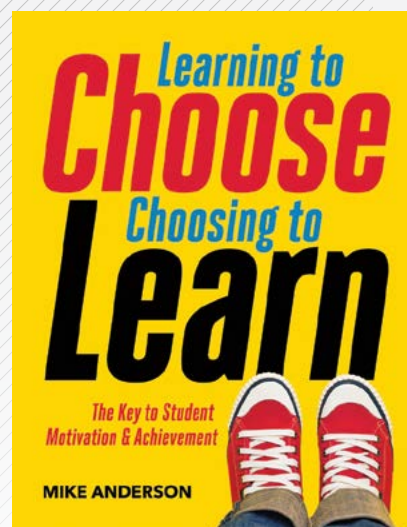
Author

MIKE ANDERSON has been an educator for more than 20 years. An elementary school teacher for 15 years, he has also taught preschool and university graduate level classes. He spent many years as a presenter, consultant, author, and developer for Northeast Foundation for Children, a nonprofit organization.

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Learning to Choose, Choosing to Learn

The Key to Student Motivation and Achievement

Introduction

My son, Ethan, is not typically motivated by school work. In fact, he is often decidedly *un*motivated. In school his default is to do as little as possible, exerting the least amount of effort required. He is clearly capable of so much more, a source of constant frustration for his teachers, not to mention Heather and me, his parents.

Interestingly, Ethan is, and always has been, an incredibly motivated person. When he was 5, he spent hours "projecting" (pronounced project-ing), creating radios out of toilet paper rolls and pipe cleaners, drawing and coloring snakes and other animals, and building complex marble-run structures. When he was 8, after I read the entire *Lord of the Rings* saga to him over a five-month period at bedtime, he picked up the book and read all 1,100 pages himself. As a 12-year-old, he designed and knitted a beautiful winter hat based on the orange and tan checkerboard color pattern of his pet snake, Professor Quirrell. At 13 he got excited about writing and spent hours crafting stories modeled after some of his favorite fantasy and post-apocalyptic novels. His current passion is working at solving the Rubik's Cube. Having received detailed instructions and algorithms from his cousin, he has been practicing this skill with vigor and can now solve the cube in less than one minute. He can clearly display passion and persistence for challenging learning tasks.

And yet schoolwork typically evokes a shrug, a sigh, and a roll of the eyes. Every now and then, however, something sparks his interest. In 6th grade, there was a particular science assignment that unleashed his motivation and strong work ethic.

Students were learning about parts of a cell. The teacher wanted to reinforce content learned in class and assigned the task of creating a labeled diagram of a cell at home. She offered a few ideas for how they might do this. They could draw with pencil or pen, use a computer drawing or painting program, press clay onto cardboard, or come up with another idea. Ethan decided to make a pillow using a combination of felted wool and beads to show various parts of the cell along with a key to accompany the pillow. Had he chosen drawing, he could have knocked off this assignment in 30 or so minutes and would have done little, if any, deep thinking about the content. Instead, over the course of the week, he spent seven hours meticulously needle felting ribosomes and mito-chondria, looking at a cell diagram to make sure he was getting the shapes right and the sizes proportional. His attention to detail was impressive. To this day, he can still point to each part of the cell and name it correctly. His deep engage-ment led to learning that stuck. Importantly, this assignment also allowed him to practice skills of perseverance and responsibility—qualities that will provide benefits long after the need to know what a ribosome is fades.

Like Ethan, all students are intrinsically driven to learn. And, like Ethan, many students struggle to find motivation in daily schoolwork. It may lack relevance and meaning—they can't find any way to connect the work to what they personally care about. It may be that the learning is so easy that it's bor-ing or so hard that it is overly frustrating. Perhaps the work doesn't tap into their strengths and interests. This book is about how we, as teachers, can use choice as a vehicle for tapping into students' intrinsic motivation, helping them find ways to connect with appropriately challenging work to boost their engagement and deepen their learning.

Choice is something I have been thinking deeply about for years. As a class-room teacher, I gave my students various kinds of choices about their learning in reading and writing workshops, science and social studies units, and daily math instruction, gaining many valuable insights along the way through trial and error. My first book, *The Research-Ready Classroom* (Heinemann, 2006),

which I coauthored with friend and colleague Andy Dousis, is all about how to structure independent research projects—an exciting and challenging form of choice. For many years, I worked as a consultant and developer for Northeast Foundation for Children (now Center for Responsive Schools), a nonprofit organization that supports teachers' use of choice as a strategy to boost student engagement. Now, as an independent consultant, I work with teachers in many different schools across grade levels to help blend choice into daily teaching and learning. When I teach workshops for teachers, regardless of the topic, I often use choice to help adults find powerful learning opportunities. This book represents more than two decades of professional learning and growth on the topic of choice.

Choice as a learning strategy is often misunderstood. It is either viewed as something mindless and not connected with real academic work ("You have an extra 10 minutes, choose whatever you want to do") or as something overly elaborate, involving Herculean planning and effort on the part of the teacher (think multi-genre, project-based, end-of-unit synthesis projects). Sadly, it may also be viewed as a relic of a bygone era ("I used to be able to give kids choice, but now we have scripted curricula and standardized tests that make it impossible"). As pressures on teachers and schools have increased, schools' reflexive reaction has often been to clamp down on students, constricting their choices and diminishing their autonomy.

I would argue that choice is *more* relevant and important in today's educational climate than it ever has been before. As students come to us with increasingly complex needs and abilities, they need diverse and personally relevant opportunities to learn and practice skills and content. When students leave school they will enter a world where self-motivation, creativity, autonomy, and perseverance are all critically important, and these are characteristics that are hard to practice in an environment centered on standardization and compliance. When students have more choice about their learning, they can both find ways of learning that match their personal needs and engage with work more powerfully, building skills and work habits that will serve them well as lifelong learners.

Throughout this book, you will find numerous examples of choice in action with students, ideas to try, and a step-by-step process to help guide your

planning and implementation of choice. You will also see many references to research and other great work with choice that's going on in the field of education to help place this book into the broader conversation. I think it's also important for readers to understand that this book is based on a few important foundational ideas about teaching and learning. Though these are my fundamental beliefs, which I have developed over more than two decades of work with learners of all ages and stages (not to mention my own experiences as a learner), I have also found these beliefs to be shared by the vast majority of teachers with whom I work. These beliefs should be highlighted here, before we begin to dig into more specific content and strategies, because the best teaching flows from teachers' most deeply held positive beliefs about learners and learning. Unfortunately, too often in education today, teachers are asked to adopt programs and approaches or try new ideas and strategies without any connection to their own beliefs. When this happens, teaching can become shallow and vapid—a series of activities and strategies unhinged from who we are and what we believe.

In this book you will see evidence of these beliefs in action.

- **All students are already motivated and want to be successful.** Though there are many roadblocks that might lead students, especially as they get older, to disconnect from school and appear unmotivated or even unable to learn, I firmly believe that all students are learners. When basic needs are met and when conditions are right, all people can be curious, self-motivated, and successful.

- **It is more important to be a learner than to "be learned."** In today's world, where most people carry a device in their pocket with access to unlimited information, it is more important for students to know themselves as learners and be able to learn than it is to simply acquire information. While content acquisition is still an important skill, the actual content acquired is less important than it once was.

- **Teaching and learning should be joyful.** Students should look forward to coming to school each day. Teachers should look forward to coming to school each day. And when students and teachers look forward to walking through those school doors each day, it should be the work that inspires us

and gets our blood pumping. Not pizza parties. Not grades. Not pep rallies. And certainly not standardized tests. The work itself should be inherently rewarding—worthy of our time, attention, and maximum effort.

This book is divided into three main sections. Section I will explore some basic ideas about choice: What does it look like when choice is used effectively, and what are the payoffs—how does choice boost student learning?

Section II will address one of the most common questions about offering students choice: "How do we help students to make good choices?" We will explore how to create safe and supportive learning environments that enable students to choose well, how to help students develop more ownership of their learning, and how to help students better understand themselves as learners. In addition, these chapters may push your thinking about topics such as how you speak to students, how you assess student growth, and the dangers and drawbacks of incentives.

Section III will focus on implementation. As teachers, how do you facilitate choice effectively? You will learn many concrete, practical examples and strategies for using choice throughout the school day. Each chapter explores a different phase of the planning and implementation process: creating good choices, helping students choose well, facilitating choice work, leading student reflection, and engaging in professional reflection. In each, you will consider ways to help students find more meaning and self-motivation for work through choice across grade levels and content areas. While you examine these varied examples, please think of them as inspiration—jumping-off points for your own teaching. The examples used were chosen to offer a wide variety of possibilities, but certainly aren't supposed to be fully exhaustive. My hope is that this book offers you opportunities to come to new understandings about how to use choice effectively to boost student learning, whether you teach high school physics, middle school literacy, self-contained kindergarten, or music across all grade levels.

Before we launch into the main content of the book, let's think once more about Ethan's cell pillow. Although having the choice of how to practice learning the parts of a cell might have boosted his intrinsic motivation, having choice in and of itself wasn't what was most important. If his teacher had assigned the

project of creating a cell pillow, he probably would have been just as inspired (though likely many others wouldn't have been). The key is that having choice allowed Ethan and his classmates to all find ways of engaging with work in meaningful, personally relevant, and inspiring ways. This is important. Using choice is a vehicle—a means to an end—not an end in and of itself. Teachers shouldn't blindly give students choices about learning any more than they should follow a scripted program without thought or understanding. Choice is a powerful way in which teachers can help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in school and beyond—a way to help them work with purpose, joy, and passion—and a way to make schools a place worth coming to each and every day, for students and teachers alike.

SECTION I

THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF CHOICE

This first section of the book explores the many and varied benefits of offering students choices about their learning. Before digging into *why* teachers should consider using choice more often as a learning strategy, it is important first to be clear about *what* it is. There are four key characteristics of choice when it is used effectively.

Choice Can Be Highly Varied

When you think of "choice" in school, what comes to mind? It may be images of preschoolers or kindergartners exploring open-ended centers or having "free choice" time. Or perhaps you envision project-based learning in the upper grades where students spend weeks researching complex topics and designing elaborate showcase projects. Or maybe you think of choice as a classroom management strategy—something students do if they finish their work early.

While each of these examples can be an effective use of choice, there are also many other possibilities—ones that can be simple or complex, short or

A	
A Few Effective Uses of Choice	
Simple Choices	**More Complex Choices**
• 1st grade, music: Students choose one of three percussion instruments to explore for five minutes: symbols, triangles, or rhythm sticks.	• 1st grade, reading: Students study an author of their choice over the course of two weeks. They both choose the author and select the books they want to explore.
• 4th grade, reading: Students choose a good place in the classroom to read during reading workshop. The spot must be physically comfortable and a place where they can focus on their reading.	• 5th grade, math: Students design their own quilt square design using pattern blocks. Each design must incorporate the various geometric principles studied in the unit.
• 8th grade, science: Students watch the same video about Newton's Third Law of Motion. They choose one of three note-taking sheets to capture important information.	• 8th grade, science: Students use clay and toothpicks to construct three different molecules (of 30 possible options), demonstrating how atoms join together.
• 12th grade, science: Students either draw a comic strip, create a diagram, or write an explanation about what happens to trash to reinforce what they've been learning.	• 12th grade, senior project: Students have 11 weeks to work on a cross-curricular research project of their choice.

long in duration, and used in any content area at any grade level as a part of daily instruction. Although there are some common elements of well-planned choice experiences (see Section III), good choice is not formulaic. It is highly flexible, designed to meet the particular learning needs of students given the particular content at hand. Figure A includes a few examples that highlight various choices.

Choice Should Be Used with Purpose

If choice is used as a filler after students finish their "real" work, invariably, some students rush through work trying to get some choice before the period ends, while other students never get any choice because they have a hard time finishing assigned work as quickly as others.

Choice should instead be used as a vehicle for boosting student learning as a part of their regular work. Choices should flow directly out of standards

and the daily curricula as well as the interests, strengths, and needs of your students. The examples below offer some ways choice might be used as a part of daily teaching and learning.

- Kindergarten, science: Students choose one insect to study and draw as a part of their science unit.
- 2nd grade, reading: Students are learning about "just so" stories and either read stories on their own, listen at the listening center, or join an adult for a read-aloud.
- 7th grade, health: Students choose one category of drug to learn about: depressants, stimulants, or hallucinogens.
- 10th grade, drama: To prepare to produce their own version of *Hamlet*, students choose to read either the original or annotated version of the play.
- 12th grade, calculus: Students choose which differential equation to solve that is at the "just right" difficulty.

All Students Should Have Choices

Often the students who are labeled as "gifted" or "high performing" are likely to have the most autonomy and opportunities for creative work. They build models, create hands-on projects, and engage in independent research. If there's any population of students who is most desperate for appropriately engaging and personally relevant learning, it's the students who most struggle. And yet, for many students who are labeled as "learning disabled," "remedial," or "low-functioning," what they tend to get is dose after dose of drill-and-kill, rote seatwork. Imagine what schools would be like if all students received the benefits of a "gifted and talented" education!

Choice is one of the most effective vehicles teachers have for differentiating learning in a truly inclusive setting. I vividly remember one scene from my own classroom during a social studies unit. All students had chosen a topic within the theme of Conflict in U.S. History, such as Jackie Robinson, the Battle of Little Round Top, Rosa Parks, and the Space Race. I helped each student create a personally specific set of goals and requirements that complemented the whole-class learning objectives for which everyone was responsible. The

diverse class included students who could read college level texts, several with various diagnosed special needs (including Down syndrome, ADHD, bipolar disorder, and several learning disabilities), and a wide range of students in between. Within this setting, all students could fully participate in appropriately challenging and personally interesting work because they had meaningful choices about what to study, what goals to challenge themselves with, and what projects to create to share their learning.

Choice Is Taught, Not Simply Given

Giving students choices involves so much more than simply saying, "Here are your choices—have at it!" Instead, teachers need to help students think about choices before they make them and teach the skill set involved in making appropriate choices (more on this in Section III). Once students have made their choices, teachers continue to play a powerful role—that of coach. And then, after students have finished, teachers help them reflect on their work and the choices they have made so they can get better at being self-directed learners. This all takes some work and effort, but it is what makes choice so incredibly effective and powerful.

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