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# Continuous Becoming: Moving toward Mastery

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## Shifting the Power to Create a More Student- Centered Classroom

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In 2009, I was exhausted. In the middle of my second year of teaching, I remembered my education professors' warnings that many new teachers don't return for a third year. It can be tempting to point fingers when feeling overworked by blaming a policy, an unsolicited responsibility, or an encroaching educational fad. But after some honest reflection, I realized the culprit—I was exhausted from the hundreds of micro-decisions that English language arts teachers make each day.

I knew there was nothing I could do about external decisions, but I felt I could ease the burden by sharing the decision-making process with the people who are most affected—the students. I set out to shift the power differential to create a more student-centered classroom.

For the last ten years, I have been adjusting my own teaching—sometimes with subtle tweaks, and other times with seismic reconfigurations—to move away from

the traditional, teacher-centered model. A series of changes within two categories helped me make this shift: offering structured choice and enlisting students as collaborators. These changes have allowed me to hone my craft and become a more masterful, effective instructor.

### Structured Choice: Choosing among Options

Though I had previously retained control of text selection in my classroom, I decided to devote one day per week to independent reading. This may not sound revolutionary in 2018, but back in 2009, our curriculum consisted almost entirely of whole-class texts and predominantly works of fiction. Energized from attending my first NCTE Annual Convention, I was emboldened after reading two impassioned pleas for student choice: Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* and Kelly Gallagher's *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It*.

Concerned that students might not be able to choose their own books without guidelines, I took advantage of a reading program our school librarian, Julie

Goldberg, developed to promote reading schoolwide. She challenged students to read five books from the American Library Association's list of "Outstanding Books for the College Bound" ([www.ala.org/yalsa/outstanding-books-college-bound](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/outstanding-books-college-bound)). I knew it would be impossible to read every book the students chose, but I felt comfortable narrowing the choices down to the 125 books that had been vetted by librarians and considered to be high-interest texts for adolescent readers. Furthermore, Julie keeps our library fully stocked with the books from the list and features them on a special display. I sent a message to each parent, asking them to support their child in the selection of independent reading books. Now that I have been doing it for a few years, I discuss independent reading on back-to-school nights, sharing my hope that it will help students read books they enjoy.

At first, I assigned book reviews to assess students' independent reading. But I soon broadened the opportunities. Students read self-selected texts in small groups and then pitched proposals for how they wanted to demonstrate their learning. I presented them with simple parameters: they needed to demonstrate that they had read

and thought about their book, and they needed to engage themselves and their classmates in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. One group of students who read *The Toaster Project: Or a Heroic Attempt to Build a Simple Electric Appliance from Scratch* (Thwaites) wanted to build something as their final project. After I asked them to consider how to demonstrate their ELA skills, they offered to build a toy car from scratch and document the process. Their toy car never fully materialized; despite their high hopes and careful design, they had melted the prototype in an accident involving a backyard grill. But we were all thoroughly engrossed in ideas they had gleaned from their book. So often we design our units to prepare students for some assessment, but if we solicit their ideas, students can develop innovative ways to demonstrate their learning.

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Whole-class texts can spark curiosity and inspire students to find new texts and raise questions of their own. For example, I show the film *Food, Inc.* and then ask students to research topics related to food (Goldberg). Recently, I teamed up with our librarian to design a unit on “The Future” using the Guided Inquiry framework (Kuhlthau et al.). The framework requires all students to research a related topic, so we

chose “The Future” after realizing that many topics could be nested within that idea. We launched the unit with a high-interest television program on futurism (*The Jetsons* ABC-TV pilot episode, 1962 [Markes]), and after exploring a few texts together, we offered students a digital library we had curated for them. We previewed the texts—a mix of academic essays, articles, videos, and audio files—and provided reader’s notes to help them with their selections.

### Using Choice in Writing—Beyond Choosing Topics

Choice can empower students to approach their writing more critically. For note-taking, I model different options early in the year, prompting students to consider which format(s) works best for a given task. For example, students choose whether they prefer to take notes digitally or on paper. This may make things less convenient for me when students submit work in multiple formats, but I justify the inconvenience when I see the quality of their work improve—simply because they chose their own format. As digital literacy experts Kristen Hawley Turner and Troy Hicks remind us, digital literacy is not an “either/or” but, rather, a “both/and” (6). When I want students to make a table, for example, I draw it on the board and review how to make one in Microsoft Word and Google Docs.

Penny Kittle urges us to write alongside our students. I frequently invite students to read my writing and, more importantly, to critique it. Sometimes I

ask the class to indulge me, and sometimes I enlist a small group to help me revise a draft. We craft and examine all types of texts together, including essays, blog posts, visuals, emails, and tweets. I seek teachable moments that allow us to explore topics such as diction and tone, writer and audience. Together, we wrote a short blurb about one of their projects for the principal’s weekly newsletter. Recently, I asked students for help composing a message to the custodial staff about a noise coming from the ventilation unit. Occasionally, I project my screen and compose a message on the spot. I sometimes find myself struggling to find the word that conveys precisely what I mean—and my students will rush in with suggestions that we test out together. I want them to witness and understand that words have power, and that all writers struggle.

### Shared Decision-Making in Culture and Structure

I also make it a point to involve students in daily decision-making. Some days, I write options for an agenda on the board and invite students to help me consider the sequence and timing; this not just an illusion of shared decision-making. Students offer ideas that I would not have come up with on my own. I might tell them, “I have one activity that’s quite active and collaborative, and another that’s calm and independent. Which one should we do today, and which one tomorrow?” We sometimes negotiate how many days they think they need to work on an assignment, which helps them learn to manage

their time. I may ask, “What do you think is a reasonable amount of time for us to devote to this in class?” That begins a conversation. I even urge students to open the windows themselves if the room feels hot, or to get up and stretch or switch seats if it will help their learning.

### My Aha Moment: Let Them Tell Me What to Teach

My students were working on a research assignment that required several independent tasks. Since students were at various stages

in their projects, their needs varied. I had recently come across ALL-ED (Bondie and Zusho), a research-based framework for differentiating instruction. After exploring the framework, I realized I had been going about things all wrong. Instead of relying on my observations and hunches to determine which lesson could help my students, I could simply ask them what they needed help with. As a result, I would design better lessons, and they would become more metacognitive.

I adapted an “expert chart” self-assessment tool (Zucker)

from ALL-ED (see Figure 1). The chart prompted students to consider their skill level and check off a column to indicate their expertise: beginner, intermediate, or expert. I listed ten skills relevant to the unit. Making a significant revision to the original chart, I added a column for students to prioritize the skill they wished to practice with me. In this way, students could tell me what to offer for individual or small-group instruction. I distributed the handout at the beginning of class, students quickly completed it, and

**FIGURE 1.** Research Skills: A Self-Assessment

**Step 1:** For each skill, place a check in the column that describes how you are feeling at the time.

	<b>Expert</b> I can do this on my own and explain how to do it.	<b>Got it</b> I can do this on my own.	<b>Practicing</b> I can do this with help, or I need more time to practice this.	<b>Step 2: Prioritize</b> Check off which skill(s) you would like to practice today. Write “teacher” in this column for one skill you’d like to practice or discuss with me today.
Locate and find a book in the library or online related to your research topic				
Choose a research question and write sub-questions				
Read your book and extract key quotations				
Analyze quotations with your own ideas				
Develop a thesis (what is your argument?)				
Find resources online related to your topic				


Adapted from ALL-ED (Bondie and Zusho).

I fanned out their papers to look for patterns. Even though I gave ten options, students selected one of three skills to practice with me. While their classmates worked independently, I offered three minilessons, inviting students to join any they deemed valuable. This method allows me to tailor my instruction to students' self-identified needs.

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### Trust Students to Rise to the Occasion

There is risk attached to giving up some control, but sharing it with students can open new pos-

sibilities for discovery and learning. Teachers who seek input will find that students are eager to share decision-making in the classroom. Given opportunities to make choices and reflect on how those choices affect their learning, students will be empowered to develop the capacity to become independent thinkers. 

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