



9-1994

Responsibility in Choice (Sometimes the Best Choice is No Choice)

Kathy Sanford-Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sanford-Smith, Kathy (1994) "Responsibility in Choice (Sometimes the Best Choice is No Choice)," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol9/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

Responsibility in Choice (Sometimes the Best Choice is No Choice)

by

Kathy Sanford-Smith

I have always believed that students should be involved in making choices about their own learning, but recently I have reconsidered my general position on this issue. At a parent-teacher interview, I discussed my fourteen-year-old daughter's progress in language arts and the language arts program in general with my daughter's teacher. What I heard disturbed me a great deal.

The conversation focused on the current novel study unit the class was involved in completing. The teacher had selected the novel, and the students were to complete a choice of activities. The choice of the novel was a good one, and most students found it quite entertaining. The teacher had also constructed a variety of follow-up activities that the students could select from. These activities included (1) end of chapter questions, (2) a response journal, (3) a media presentation, or (4) an alternate activity of the student's choice.

At first these choices sounded great. Students were finally allowed to choose their own learning experiences. The teacher was pleased with his plan and, initially, so was I. My daughter has always been creative and has enjoyed working on projects independently. Here was an opportunity to work from her position of strength. Here was an opportunity to focus on more than spelling and neatness.

However, when I spoke with my daughter, our conversation caused me to reconsider my initial positive reaction.

"Shannon," I asked, "What project are you going to choose?"

"Oh, I'm doing the end of chapter questions," she responded.

Disbelieving, I asked her why.

"Well, they're the easiest, and I know how to get them right," she responded.

"Most of the students are actually choosing the questions," added the teacher. "It doesn't seem to matter what we do, they all like structure."

At this point I became alarmed, although I couldn't quite put my finger on the cause of my concern. The students were given choices, weren't they? Their creativity was not being stifled; they were doing it to themselves. Or were they? As I thought about what happened, I began to consider some of the responsibilities and educational choices that I consider to be part of a teacher's job.

Teaching offers many choices—both to the teachers and to the students. One of the most exciting prospects of teaching English language arts is the opportunity to make choices about content, style, theme, and approach. Yet there are times when choice seems to work against the best intentions of the teacher, and there are times when choice is detrimental to the students' learning.

If junior high students are offered the choice between a safe and easy assignment and a risky and challenging assignment, it is reasonable to assume that most students would make the first choice. Students generally want to succeed, and most are smart enough to know how to best attain success. Our school system perpetuates the belief that success is achieved when the teacher approves and rewards the students' performance with good marks. As a result, when students are offered a "choice" between a traditional, non-threatening, and relatively easy assignment and one that challenges them, causes them discomfort, and forces serious thought, are they really being offered a choice?

Sometimes teachers can hide behind the concept of choice. In the name of progress, following the mandated curriculum and the concept of involvement of students in their learning, we offer students the choice between challenging and safe, between mindless and thought-provoking. Yet what are we really offering to the students? We are offering them the opportunity to grow and develop, to engage in a meaningful education; or we are offering them chances to choose lazy, and easy, and non-threatening. These choices are not really choices at all; as far as the students are concerned, they are non-choices. And, when we offer these types of non-choices, we are giving up our responsibilities as professionals.

In my recent discussion with this junior high language arts teacher about the program he was offering his students, I saw an abdication of his responsibility as a professional. This teacher, who has been known for keeping abreast of the latest developments in the field, for belonging to committees that encourage continued change, and for knowing what directions language arts learning has been taking, does not reflect these understandings through the assignments he offers to his students. He professes to know children, to understand how to reach them and how best to teach them to be critical and creative thinkers. How, then, can he offer students these kinds of “choices” and believe that he is leading them to be thoughtful, analytic, and open-minded?

Professional educators should encourage students by modeling and guiding them through worthwhile activities that develop proficiency not only in reading and writing but in thinking and learning. Teachers need to give students the desire, the ability, and the challenge to continue learning throughout their lives. Students can only make legitimate and informed choices when they have been taught the skills necessary to make such choices. We cannot expect students to learn these skills without our guidance, and we cannot legitimate the continuation of our traditional non-educational practices by hiding behind the appearance of choices that we offer to our students. Rather, if we are to be truly professional, we must be prepared to make some of the choices on behalf of our students. Sometimes, only by making these choices, can we encourage them to grow and develop as lifelong learners.