

Teaching through Choice

By Elizabeth A. Lasley, Ph.D.

Abstract

An emphasis on a student-directed approach is emerging at the post-secondary level. A student-directed education requires motivation, self-determination, and the affective and cognitive components of critical thinking on the part of students. This article presents both a rationale and strategy for a student-directed instructional approach to course construction and delivery through choice. The Think-Tac-Toe student-directed instructional approach embraces critical thinking, choice, motivation, self-empowerment, and self-direction by providing students with choices that promotes purposeful relevant reading, learning and retention of course content.

Keywords: critical thinking, choice, motivation, student-centered, self-determination/self-regulation, choice.

Course content becomes relevant, rigorous, and sustainable when students' affective learning is considered and included within course construction. Student perspectives of their need for learning evoke several questions when instructors or professors reflect upon the learning process. Why do students achieve in some areas of study and not in others? What facilitates student progress? What motivates students to learn? Why aren't students retaining and transferring course content? Why don't students read or attend class? McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) suggest that educators "recognize students' need for self-determination and autonomy, and opportunities for choice and control" (p 149). Pink (2006) indicates that autonomy, mastery and purpose are factors that motivate individuals and results in achievement. Such attributes require critical thinking and reasoning. Analysis, evaluation and creativity are the actions individuals performs when using critical thinking and reasoning. The goal of any course of instruction is for sustainable learning. Critical thinking promotes sustainable learning that encourages students to reassess and evaluate their perspectives, attitudes and values based on self-awareness, self-determination, and social-emotional confidence.

What attributes do we truly wish our students be able to express during and after exposure to the particular concepts presented in our course? What depth of knowledge, intentional and significant learning that promotes autonomy, mastery, and a sense of purpose do we wish students to possess when they complete our course? The construction of avenues for students processing and internalizing concepts is therefore a critical concern when it comes to understanding the learning process and assessing the grasp of course concepts (Weimer, 2002; Wiggins, 1991). The promotion of critical thinking that embraces decision-making, problem solving and persistence through the development of social-emotional skills (affective domain) becomes part of the construction of course curriculum when responding to the above questions.

Students' affective domain must be considered when contemplating course content, key concepts, instructional strategies, and assessment criteria for or of learning. Affective learning is interpreted to be interest level, assumption of responsibilities, ability to focus and listen, and interactions with others (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Glasser, 1998; Goleman, 2006; Goleman, 1995). Social-emotional skills emphasize communication, collaboration and personal management skills (Glasser, 1998; Goleman, 2006; Goleman, 1995; Pink, 2006). Therefore, decisions regarding course development and instruction should focus on answering questions such as how will student learning be assessed, what are students' interest level, how much responsibility, voice and choice can students assume, what instructional approaches can be used to foster students ability to focus, listen and interact with others (Weimer, 2002; Wiggins, 1991)? Glasser (1998) wrote "no human being is unmotivated . . . But every living creature, including students, is not necessarily motivated to do what you, I, or anyone else thinks they ought to do" (p.44). Facilitating the perspective taking decision making process is part of the transformational process to adulthood as well as the learning process within the college academic settings.

How might we promote relevance, rigor, and sustainable learning within a particular course? Student-directed instruction focuses on students constructing knowledge based on standards/learning outcomes and criteria/assessment of learning (Weimer, 2002; Wiggins, 1991). Therefore, the concept of “options” becomes a key component within the learning process. Options within the learning process allows for the possibility of stimulating students’ intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation includes the demonstration of achievement, responsibility and competence – autonomy (self-directed learning or self-governing). Students’ desire to improve increases cognitive competence, self-worth, and mastery based on intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An opportunity to choose the framework for learning and demonstrating content knowledge promotes autonomy, mastery and purpose. Research indicates that “teachers oriented toward supporting autonomy seemed to promote intrinsic motivation and self-esteem; teachers oriented toward controlling behavior seemed to undermine it” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 255).

A student-directed instructional approach promotes intrinsic motivation, mastery of course concepts, and sense of personal accomplishment. It requires student thinking, problem solving, and persistence when analyzing and synthesizing key concepts within a course throughout the semester. The focus becomes choice and the construction of personal learning experiences based on student interest, dispositions, strengths, abilities and content (Tomlinson, 2005). Roberts and Inman (2009) provide examples of such an approach with a Think-Tac-Toe format based on the game Tic-Tac-Toe. Tic-tac-toe is a game in which two players take turns marking individually selected squares within a 3 by 3 grid (9 squares in all) with “X’s” or “O’s”. Players take turns until one player connects three squares horizontally, vertically or diagonally.

A Think-Tac-Toe format for student-directed learning is very similar in construction. Students have the option of selecting one activity or product from each row within a 3 by 3 grid

(9 squares in all) (Roberts & Inman, 2009). The pre-constructed options address various learning styles, needs, interests, and abilities and connect directly to content learning outcomes/standards. Such a format may be used for the selection of assignments, projects and products. Criteria for each option for learning are presented before students select how they wish to learn. Critical thinking and reasoning is in each project or assignment selection. Each project or assignment requires recognizing the need to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate key course concepts. Specific requirements for each project or assignment will depend on how the instructor designs the Think-Tac-Toe.

How does Think-Tac-Toe work in the college classroom? Depth of concept development within projects and assignments are constructed to build upon each other (systematic sequential learning) throughout the length of the course, such as one semester or eight (8) week session. The first row of projects is developed as the foundation for the next two rows of projects. The second row of projects provides the concept foundation for the third row. One project or assignment is selected from each row to be completed by a student or by small groups of students after all the project or assignment requirements are presented. Each student or small group has a choice as to which project or assignment to complete within each row. The first premise is that no matter which project students select students will analyze and define key concept problems and issues as well as related information for value based on the credibility, emotional appeal, unsupported assumptions and possible faulty logic. The second premise is that key concepts within the first row of projects or assignments need to be understood in order to understand and meet the second row of projects or assignments. The third row of projects or assignment embraces the need to synthesize and master the first and second row of key course concepts. The last premise is that each project or assignment choice, in each row, must connect

with practical real life application to meet the intrinsic motivation need for relevance and sustainable learning. Figure 1 contains an example, based on content standards, within a special education college course. Specifics for each selection are provided separately within course handouts or syllabus.

<p>What are the trends for career-technical (vocational) education in your district? Construct a comparative analysis and make recommendations.</p>	<p>How have IDEA and NCLB enhanced the role of parents and families in their children's education and transition planning? Construct a comparative analysis.</p>	<p>What is the local school district's student transition team and interagency agreement for transition coordination? Construct an analysis and make recommendations.</p>
<p>Develop an outline for an in-service training curriculum for teachers that addresses/important items to know about transitions services and the laws that authorize and promote it.</p>	<p>Identify and compare three theories of career development and theories of adolescent development. What are the distinguishing assumptions among the theories?</p>	<p>Conduct a transition assessment of an individual with disabilities, the environments to which the individual will potentially transition to and the correlation with student needs. Make recommendations.</p>
<p>Why are self-determination and self-advocacy important concepts for students and families? How would you implement and evaluate a program that emphasizes self-determination and self-advocacy?</p>	<p>Create a staff development program to train transition personnel in effective ways to conduct transition assessment of youth with disabilities. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of such a program?</p>	<p>Interview parents (or sets of parents) of a student with disabilities regarding concerns and/or plans for the student's further and transition from public school to the adult community. How would you evaluate the recommendations and programs serving the parent and student with disabilities?</p>

Figure 1: An example of Think-Tac-Toe as used in a special education college course.

The construction of each project places emphasis on valuing perspective-taking above self-interest and personal biases. Each project requires comprehension, analysis, inference, and synthesis of complex relevant issues and information that promote independent thinking. The projects encourage student- directed questioning that challenges existing facts, opinions, personal

biases, and currently held values and beliefs. The use of inductive and deductive reasoning within written and the oral exchange of differing points of view are required.

In conclusion, learning is a process (Tomlinson, 2005; Weimer, 2002; Wiggins, 1991). The learning process embraces various degrees of critical thinking and motivation (affective domain). The ability to analyze, evaluate and synthesize course concepts facilitates the overall learning process and critical thinking. Motivational factors that promote learning include students' self-determination, self-efficacy, self-regulation, perception of self-competence, sense of empowerment, and beliefs that correlate with and provide a sense of achievement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Choice facilitates such an empowerment. Fink (2003) indicates that colleges and universities need to engage students in critical thinking, significant learning experiences, and self-directed learning. A sense of personal control over decisions and the ability to execute assignments free from external interference, a sense of choice, and preference with respect to initiating, continuing, or eliminating a selected direction increases productivity and achievement (Glasser, 1998). Achievement is a basic goal for the majority of students. Therefore, achievement becomes the analysis, synthesis, and application of content concepts, critical thinking and reasoning, and the ability to communicate effectively based on individual perspectives. The Think-Tac-Toe student-directed instructional approach embraces critical thinking, choice, motivation, self-empowerment, and self-direction by providing students with choices that promote purposeful relevant reading, learning and retention of course content.

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