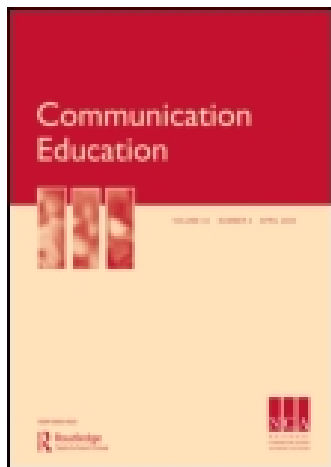


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Choice-Based Learning: Student Reactions in an Undergraduate Organizational Communication Course

Laurie K. Lewis and Pamela A. Hayward

This paper reports the experience of one teaching team's attempt to implement a "philosophy of choice" into a large lecture course at a major university. Choice-based learning is consistent with the movement toward greater autonomy in the workplace. We assessed students' willingness to embrace innovation in the classroom, how choice-based learning impacted student self-assessed learning, and what considerations students take into account when selecting among learning activity options. Using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, we found that students liked the idea of choice in learning activities. Student empowerment was most frequently mentioned as an advantage of this learning model. Self-reported learning outcomes were negatively related to the perceived costs of the learning activities selected and positively related to perceived long-term benefits of the activities. **Keywords:** choice-based learning, organizational communication instruction, student empowerment

Empowerment in both management and education is a philosophy as well as a practice. Philosophically, the move to empowerment is rooted in trust, in the belief that students want more from a class than a grade ... (Luechauer & Shulman, 1993, pp. 4-5).

Increasingly, students in our classes are entering workplaces where "involvement," choice, self-determination, and self-management are dominant forms of organizing. Traditional organizations, not unlike traditional classrooms, structure themselves to emphasize control strategies over the individuals who occupy them. Those traditional organizational structures utilize narrow job descriptions, pre-defined roles, fixed criteria for performance, and eschew use of employee input in decision-making, goal-setting, performance assessment, and production improvement. Those types of organizations still predominate in great numbers today, but increasing evidence is pointing to the advantages of new, more flexible structures that emphasize a highly involved workforce. In these "high involvement workplaces" employees are encouraged to participate in innovation, role design, upward and peer appraisal, and key decision-making (Block, 1987; Cotton, 1993). Modern paradigms emphasize the need for empowered employees who are able to adapt to changes in the environment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Riding the wave of this trend are large business leaders such as AT&T, Johnson Wax, General Foods, GM, Pepsi-Cola, and Frito-Lay (Barry, 1991). We have begun to ask ourselves whether we are

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preparing our students well for these new organizational environments, whether students are being taught how to participate in important and meaningful decisions and manage situations where their own input makes a difference.

This paper describes our effort to embrace this philosophy in a large organizational communication course. Students in the course were offered a variety of assignment alternatives from which they could choose a method for learning the material and a vehicle for assessment of that learning. In the role of instructor for this course, the first author (Laurie) introduced these “à la carte learning activities” and then, with the help of the second author (Pam), devised a means to evaluate the outcomes and process of this classroom innovation. Here we describe what we have learned about the pedagogical effectiveness of a choice-based learning approach. We will address students’ willingness to embrace innovation in the classroom, how choice-based learning impacts student learning, and what considerations students take into account when making decisions about choice-based learning.

Choice-Based Learning: A Rationale

Due in part to the increasing size of many of our courses (Crawford & Brungardt, 1995), instructors are relying heavily on traditional classroom practices that mirror the control strategies of the traditional organization more so than modern self-management philosophies. In the traditional classroom, students are given assignments to complete, told what will be the best way to learn the material, and provided no opportunities to give input on how they will be assessed. We feel that this is an unfortunate trend given that students do have different learning styles and backgrounds, and consequently do find assignments to be differentially interesting, engaging and useful in their learning. By relying on a limited assignment structure, instructors miss opportunities to enhance student engagement in the course material and discipline.

We wondered, in devising this study, whether students would be more motivated in the classroom if they had more control over how they demonstrated what they had learned. After all, participation—meaningful participation—has been held up as a key to success in many organizational contexts. Individuals are more motivated in work situations when they have some control over their work and important choices to make over how to execute their work. We wanted to find out if this was true in a classroom environment as well.

The Course and the Assignments

This experiment in learning and assessment took place in an introduction to organizational communication course at The University of Texas. This was an upper division course typically taken by students in their junior or senior year. In this particular semester, 123 students were enrolled in the course. Nearly all of the students were communication studies majors.

On the first day of class, we noted that most college courses base students’ grades on methods of assessment without regard for what modes of response (e.g., multiple choice testing, essay writing) are best suited to individuals’ needs and talents. Students were asked if they felt, at times, that other methods of assessment might not have been better vehicles for demonstrating what they had learned to their instructors. Laurie also expressed the frustration of a professor who, no matter what

she chose to implement as an assessment method (e.g., test, essay, research project), found there were always students who were not enthusiastic and under-motivated by it. The students were then introduced to the “à la carte” learning activities that were being instituted in this course. Students were encouraged to seek activities that combined to meet three criteria: (a) the assignments they selected were creative and exciting to them, even if their selections meant departing from their “comfort zones”; (b) the set of assignments they selected would provide them with rich opportunities to learn a topic in depth and to demonstrate that learning; and (c) the set of assignments they chose would be in concert with their overarching priorities for that semester (e.g., the importance of this course in comparison with other courses and other commitments).

Students were required to complete two learning activities and to take a final comprehensive exam. The learning activities together made up 50% of their grade, and the final examination the other 50%. Students could select from among 10 learning activities. The menu of activities ranged from writing a traditional research paper, synthesizing academic and practitioner-oriented literature, to shadowing a business professional for a day and summarizing the ensuing observations. In some of the options, video or audio productions superceded writing in importance. Details about each activity were given in a lengthy course packet that students purchased. Those descriptions included steps for how to complete the activity, ideas for executing it, supplemental information (e.g., research tips, examples, extended grading guidelines for writing style), explicit grading criteria, and a reminder for exactly what had to be turned in. (Additional details about the learning activities are available from the first author.)

Research Questions and Methods

We sought to understand, from a student’s perspective, the usefulness of a choice-based approach to learning and assessment in a large communication course and the means by which students made choices within this system. We wished to explore the following research questions:

- (1) To what degree did students like having options for learning activities and assessments?
- (2) Did students believe that the choice-based course structure affected their learning?
- (3) What specific instructor procedures and actions did students find most “important?”
- (4) What considerations did students use in selecting their learning activities?
- (5) How did the particular considerations students used to select their activities predict students’ self-assessments of their learning?

Students’ reactions to the choice-based methods implemented in this course were measured with a questionnaire administered in the final week of the course. The day that the questionnaires were handed out, 82 of 123 enrolled students were present. Sixty-eight usable questionnaires were returned. The response rates were 83% (of those present) and 67% (of those enrolled in the class).

The first part of the questionnaire was comprised of 7-interval Likert-type items. Four items (e.g., “I enjoy having options for how I am evaluated in this class”) were constructed to measure students’ “liking” for choice-based learning (Cronbach’s

TABLE 1
IMPORTANCE OF COURSE ATTRIBUTES

Procedure/Action of instructor	Mean importance (<i>SD</i>)
Clear grading criteria for each activity	6.63 (.55)
Detailed written activity instructions	6.48 (.85)
Accessible teaching assistant and professor during office hours	6.32 (.95)
Willingness of teacher to read and react to rough drafts	6.25 (.95)
Example activities to use as models	6.05 (1.05)
Having one grader grade all of the same sort of activity	5.94 (1.30)
Detailed activity instructions given in class	5.72 (1.24)

alpha = .79). Four additional items (e.g., “I am more motivated to learn in this class because I have choices for activities”) were constructed to measure students’ beliefs about the effect of choice-based course structure on their learning (Cronbach’s alpha = .84). The next part of the questionnaire included seven items describing various course attributes (e.g., “clear grading criteria for each activity”), which students rated on a 7-interval scale indicating the degree of importance to the student. A list of the course attributes rated for importance appears in Table 1, along with descriptive statistics for each item. Because we wished to assess the importance attributed to each of these seven course elements, we did not aggregate the items into a single scale.

Similarly, students rated the degree of importance of 15 possible reasons for selecting a learning activity option (e.g., “amount of effort involved,” “how much I would learn”). A list of the considerations for activity selection appears in Table 2, along with descriptive statistics for each item. To reduce the list of considerations into a more manageable set and to discover underlying groupings of types of considerations, the list of considerations was subjected to a principle axis factor analysis with varimax rotation. Criteria for factor and item retention were (a) eigen-values greater than 1.0; (b) primary factor loadings of at least .60; (c) reliability of the factor at or above .60; and (d) interpretability of the resultant factor structure. Results of this factor analysis are reported below.

TABLE 2
IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Considerations	Mean importance (<i>SD</i>)
How likely I was to get a high grade	6.27 (1.06)
How difficult it would be	5.98 (1.12)
Amount of effort involved	5.95 (1.03)
Clarity of instructions about how to complete it	5.88 (1.32)
Time it would take to complete	5.88 (1.38)
How interesting it would be to do	5.23 (1.76)
How much fun it would be to complete	4.76 (1.75)
What the professor said during office hours	4.68 (1.67)
How much I would learn	4.62 (1.52)
What the professor said during class	4.55 (1.71)
What other students said about the activity	2.98 (1.76)
What the T.A. said about the activity	4.18 (1.81)
How similar it was to assignments I’d done in other courses	4.14 (1.74)
How applicable it would be to my career plans	3.76 (1.96)
How many others were doing that activity	2.98 (1.76)

TABLE 3
FACTOR PATTERN MATRIX FOR CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	Eigen- value	% of Var.	Alpha
Factor 1—Social Influence						4.45	29.7	.81
What the professor said during class	.88	.14	.16	-.01	.04			
What other students said	.79	.02	.06	-.12	.19			
What professor said during office hours	.71	.28	.34	-.03	-.29			
How many others were doing the activity	.67	-.11	-.16	.31	-.06			
What the T. A. said about the activity	.65	.25	.30	.29	-.05			
Factor 2—Costs						2.33	15.5	.78
Amount of effort involved	-.01	.92	-.05	-.04	.02			
How difficult it would be	.20	.76	.20	.01	-.10			
Time it would take to complete	.07	.79	-.11	.05	.12			
Factor 3—Short-Term Payoffs						1.73	11.6	.74
How interesting it would be to do	.09	-.18	.84	.30	-.05			
How much fun it would be to complete	.06	-.04	.84	.22	.01			
How likely I was to get a high grade	.24	.37	.59	-.16	.25			
Factor 4—Long-Term Payoffs						1.38	9.2	.67
How much I would learn	-.06	.04	.17	.87	-.10			
How applicable it would be to my career plans	.40	-.03	.22	.71	.26			
Factor 5—Familiarity						1.16	7.7	.46
How similar to assignments in other courses	-.06	-.02	.01	.05	.91			
Clarity of instructions	.26	.25	.51	-.09	.51			

Finally, the survey contained two open-response questions asking the students to indicate the key “advantages” and “disadvantages” of having choices of learning activities in this course. Those comments were transcribed and thematically analyzed.

What We Learned

On average, students reported that they liked the learning activities approach (Liking, $M = 6.34$ ($SD = .77$) on a 7-point scale) and found that it encouraged them to learn to a moderate degree (Effect on Learning, $M = 4.22$ ($SD = 1.23$)). As indicated by the mean values reported in Table 1, students saw importance in a variety of instructional procedures. They valued all seven of the procedures about which we inquired. Clear grading criteria and detailed written instructions for activities received the highest absolute mean ratings with the smallest variances, and therefore seemed to be especially critical from a student’s perspective. The factor analysis of the 15 considerations used by students to make choices of learning activities produced a 5-factor solution that accounted for 73.8% of the variance (see Table 3).

We dropped the fifth factor from further analysis on the basis of its low reliability ($\alpha = .46$) and a double loaded variable. (Clarity of instructions loaded equally well on two factors.) The final 4-factor solution accounted for 66% of the variance. The four overall factors that students considered in selecting various learning activities were (1) “social influence,” which included students’ use of different comments offered by the professor, other students, and the teaching assistant; (2) “costs,” which included the time, effort, and difficulty the student estimated each activity would require; (3) “short-term payoffs,” which included three potential benefits that a student might earn from completing the activity in the short term

(i.e., interesting activity, fun to complete, likelihood of earning a high grade); and (4) “long-term payoffs,” which were a set of two potential long-term benefits that the student might gain from completing the activity (i.e., learning, applicability to career plans). In terms of the absolute rank order of the factor means, “costs” ($M = 5.94$, $SD = .99$) and “short-term payoffs” ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.30$) were considerations judged most important by students in selecting activities. “Long-term payoffs” ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.52$) and “social influence” ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.31$) were least important considerations.

We were next interested in determining if students’ emphasis on different considerations in their choice-making related to the degree to which this model affected their self-reported learning in the course. In other words, we wanted to know if students who had different priorities in making choices thought differently about how the choice-model impacted their learning. In order to determine this, we used the composite “effect on learning” scale as the outcome measure in a standard regression analysis, where the four selection consideration factors scores were the independent or predictor variables. The results (after listwise deletion, $n = 63$) indicated that students’ use of various considerations in choice-making accounted for 27% of the variance in student self-reports of learning ($R^2 = .27$, $F = 5.59$, $p < .001$). Interpretation of the standardized beta weights for the model indicated that the more students focused on costs ($\beta = -.30$; $t = -2.56$, $p < .01$) as considerations in selecting learning activities, the lower their self-reported learning outcomes in the choice-based model. However, the more the students focused on long-term payoffs ($\beta = .43$; $t = 3.45$, $p < .001$) in choice-making, the more likely they were to perceive high learning outcomes. Neither “social influence” nor “short-term payoffs” exhibited significant beta-weights.

Qualitative thematic analyses of the open response data were conducted independently by each author. Discrepancies were resolved via consensus. Five themes of “key advantages” and five themes of “key disadvantages” were identified. The themes, the degree to which they were manifest in these data, and some representative quotes are presented in Table 4. The advantage of choice-based learning expressed by the majority (63%) of students pertained to increasing choice, empowerment, or control. The most frequently expressed disadvantage of the choice-based model was mentioned by only about one-third of the students. These responses pertained to unfair or subjective grading.

Reflecting on the Choice-Based Learning Model

Frymier et al. (1996), found that students are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to exercise choice in classes. This certainly must contribute to a sense of discomfort at best, and extreme panic at worst, when confronted, upon graduation, with high stakes choices in the workplace. Part of the lesson of this study gives cause to reconsider whether emphasis of uniformity, compliance, and directiveness are good for our students in the doses they are receiving them. Perhaps a better balance needs to be struck between learning lessons associated with following directions and standardization on the one hand, and lessons about decision-making, setting priorities, and knowing oneself on the other.

As we have continued to use this model beyond the period of data collection reported here, we have made several adjustments in our practices. First, based on the findings of this study, we made sure we provided explicit written instructions

TABLE 4
THEMES OF KEY ADVANTAGES AND KEY DISADVANTAGES OF CHOICE-BASED LEARNING METHOD

Themes	% of students expressing theme	Sample quotations
Advantages		
Increasing choice/empowerment/student control	63%	“not everyone is the same, so it gives options to what style the student wants to learn” “allows me to be graded on my strengths, and that lies in writing and analysis skills. Gives ME the freedom to choose what assignments I think I can do well on”
Allows student to avoid too much test-taking and provide evidence of learning without taking tests	24%	“If you don’t do well taking tests you can do something else” “for many people objective tests are detrimental to them. I, for example, am much better at essay tests so these were helpful to my kind of ability”
Increases motivation, interest, and creativity	20%	“ kept me interested in somewhat dry topics” “I found it motivated me to learn”
Increases flexibility, ability to balance workload in other classes and jobs	17%	“Honestly, between going to school and working full time, it was nice to pick a project I could complete on my own time and being able to choose one that wouldn’t take too terribly long to do” “students have different schedules, so it was nice to have a quiz and activities due on different dates”
Learning more	8%	“ it opens more doors for learning” “The chapters used when writing my paper were more engrained in my brain because I read them more closely and applied the theories in the paper”
Disadvantages		
Subjective grading	36%	“since everyone does different activities, I don’t think the grading will be fair” “too drastic of difference between grading. Easier to get a high grade on one thing than another”
Concerns about equality of effort	18%	“some are easier than others and consideration should be given to that factor” “different levels of effort [are required]”
Difficulty of making choices	16%	“different options leads to procrastination” “sometimes it makes people nervous when they have to choose”
Final comprehensive exam	14%	“takes away from being able to do well on the comprehensive exam” “disadvantage of not taking the quiz and then taking the final, because you would not be familiar with the types of questions asked”
Topic-focused projects	7%	“a learning assignment doesn’t cover all of the material we have learned in class” “the activities can generally be done using relatively little amount of information from class”

and clear grading criteria for each option. Second, we have made ourselves more available to consult with students who may have additional questions on carrying out the options. Third, we have had to be continually creative in designing learning activities that are perceived as fun, interesting and/or novel; to establish clear criteria and high expectations for completion that allow the instructor to differentiate the student who has mastered the course concepts from one who has not; and to design descriptions of activities that make sense to students, and lead them to useful interpretations of what is expected. Fifth, we have learned that we need to remind ourselves that each student has a different motivation for the assignment selections he/she makes.

This study illustrates the wide spectrum of considerations that students use in selecting learning activities and thus serves to sensitize us as instructors as to the issues that may be important to students as they contemplate the opportunities for stimulation and learning that we put before them. Our results raise the question of why students who have their eye on long-term academic and career goals are more likely to see choice-based learning as beneficial to learning than students who are most concerned with costs associated with effort and difficulty. It may be that the benefit of this model of assessment is most likely realized by the student who is “practice-oriented.” For the student who is most interested in finding applicable knowledge, this model offers a way to find a learning vehicle that is individually relevant. However, for the student who is more “efficiency-minded” and who is mostly concerned with balancing workload, getting credits, and graduating, the complications of choice and this more “empowered approach” might be viewed as hindering their progress.

Given that students reported more use of the “costs” criterion in assessing their assignment options, we may further speculate that the choice-model is perceived by a specific minority of students to improve their learning. If true, we are left with at least two options: attempt to change students’ priorities so they can embrace this approach and benefit from its advantages more or reserve the choice-based model for students with special interests that more likely focus on long-term career goals (e.g., in special seminars or advanced courses). Our approach to the apparently sizable number of students who might view choice-based learning as an impediment has been to try to convince them of the potential benefits of this class model.

Students’ comments offered in the open-response section of our questionnaire suggest that they appreciate the efforts to increase choice, empowerment and student control. But those comments also reflect a suspicion about this new model as somehow “trickier” than traditional assignment models. Students reported worrying about subjectivity, difficulty of making good choices, and the fairness of a model where different people are assessed for different types of performance. To us, these comments are particularly telling that students are not well prepared for a workplace, indeed a life, filled with choice-making situations. They want the freedom, but fear the responsibility of choice. They want the power, but lack the knowledge as to how to use it wisely. They like being treated individually, but worry about the differential treatment of others with whom they are compared. While the students view these as “problems” with the choice-based model, we see them as the lessons of choice that they are likely to find most useful in their futures. What is encouraging is that despite their suspicions and concerns they seem to like the choice model.

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