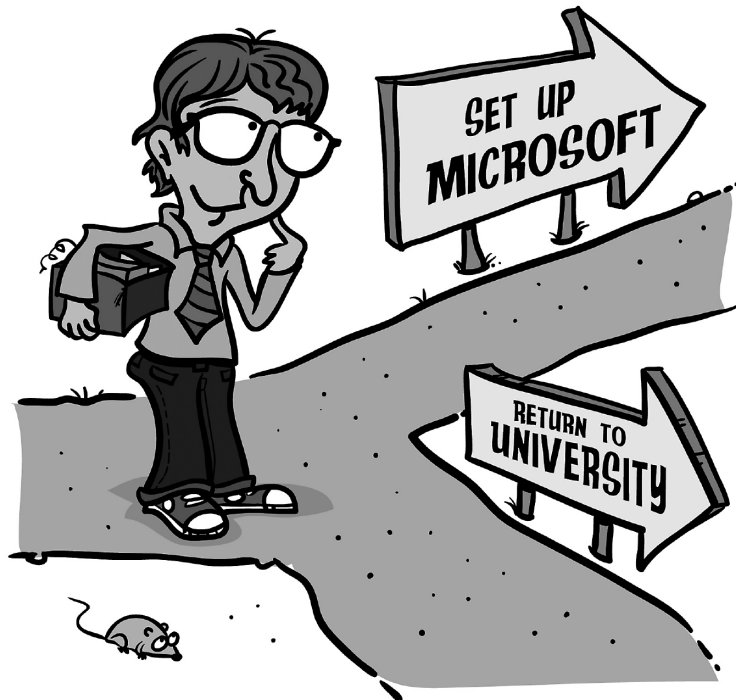


1

True Learning Communities

Students Taking Responsibility

**YOU'LL NEVER REGRET
DOING THE RIGHT THING**



***Breach the Dam!** A natural step in the course of any child's development is taking charge of her life and becoming her own person. Instead of attempting to dominate and control them in the classroom, we can consciously channel students' desire for control into taking charge of the classroom environment, thus both encouraging this process while simultaneously creating a more productive and positive classroom experience.*

OVERVIEW

Students have a wealth of time, energy, enthusiasm, and focus they could potentially bring to any classroom situation. But, how do we get them to invest these precious resources into the learning process? The starting point is to bring students onto our side of the table, by *offering choice* and *sharing responsibility*. By giving students real input into the learning process, we create a solid, supportive classroom community.

Offering choice to young learners is not a common theme in education. In many schools, “good” behavior is equated with students mindlessly obeying commands. While this may be better than anarchy, it has nothing to do with learning. Teaching is not crowd control: It’s about firing up young minds—not beating them into submission.

Red light classrooms are essentially run like kingdoms. The King (or Queen, as is frequently the case in many elementary classrooms) has full control and makes all the important decisions. From a Green Light perspective, there are many problems with this arrangement in terms of teachers, students, and learning outcomes.

Total Control Exhausts Teachers

The feudal classroom is tough on teachers. For one thing, it takes a huge amount of effort to maintain control and order. In our kingdom example, monarchs rule by force, spending huge amounts of resources on maintaining their armies. Security and defending the realm are the monarch’s highest priority. Arming the troops is more important than feeding the people. In a classroom, red light teachers are essentially making the same resourcing decisions. If a large portion of the teacher’s time and energy is spent purely on maintaining proper order, then, clearly, the teacher will have less time and energy to spend on any actual teaching.

Here’s a challenging thought: If all teachers created a learning community in their classrooms, *we could discard a significant portion of teachers’ professional development*. Every year, we expend an incredible amount of energy on teaching both new and experienced teachers “better

classroom-management techniques.” But, the primary focus of most of these techniques is controlling students or “damming their energy.”

If our classroom systems supported choice and gave students responsibility for learning, would we need classroom-management strategies? Could we take the time, energy, and money spent on teaching educators negative control techniques and invest it in developing better learning strategies?

This wouldn't just be better for students, it would also remove massive stress from teachers. If the teacher is the only person responsible for managing the classroom, this puts her under a vast and unnecessary pressure. Most of us can manage to be fair and reasonable most of the time. But, everyone has bad days. When we are under stress, our ability to keep order breaks down. Typically, we either allow our mood to permeate the classroom (dragging our students down with us) or we simply don't have the energy to maintain order—and our students sense this and run riot. What we need to realize is that we don't *have* to take on the whole responsibility. We can share it with our students, thereby setting aside a hugely stressful burden.

It's possible to create a classroom community that makes better use of everyone's time and energy, puts teachers in touch with their students,



and reduces the stress created by discipline issues. All we have to do is give up our crowns and tap into our students' seemingly endless energy by inviting them to join us in running the classroom. By proactively and consciously allowing students to become a significant part of what happens in their classroom community, we can focus more of our own energy on creating and delivering dynamic lessons.

Offering Choice Improves Learning Outcomes

When teachers share control with students, test results improve because having ownership of the education process allows learners to make the choices that will be most beneficial to their success. Also, students are more likely to be engaged with and proactive and enthusiastic about classroom activities they chose, as opposed to those foisted upon them by their teacher. And together, these factors increase attention, understanding, and retention (Glasser, 1999).

At a more philosophical level, giving students choice also lays the foundation for critical thinking. Today's students get little value from learning facts they can find on Google in less than three seconds. But, they derive a huge advantage from high-level decision-making and critical-thinking skills. Anyone can look up facts and dates. We don't need someone who knows the date the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima; we need a thinker who can decide what they will do to promote world peace. As a society, we should be developing people who are comfortable with taking control of their destinies (Winger, 2009).

The growth of this characteristic starts in the earliest years of a child's development. It is not a talent we suddenly acquire at the age of 18 or 21. The art of learning from mistakes and making good decisions is a *life-long process*—and one that many adults fail to master. It requires us to make our own decisions and discover which ones were correct (Whew!), which ones were incorrect (Yikes!), and what we would do different next time. This is a long and often-treacherous process that requires constant practice and guidance. Only when students are allowed to make as many of their own decisions as early as possible will they evolve this skill to the point where they make useful decisions most of the time.

This course of development is already well under way by the time children reach kindergarten. They have been learning to make decisions every day, sometimes on their own, often with a parent's or sibling's guidance. So, when students arrive in our classrooms, we have to make a choice: Will we attempt to squash this natural process of development in them, or will we encourage it?

The Green Light choice is to look for ways to actively promote this vital developmental path because when students make more of their own choices and take more responsibility, *they change emotionally*. This emotional shift takes them from *reacting* to a situation in which they feel trapped to *proactively* taking their places in the world.

The difference between these two emotional vantage points simply cannot be overstated—it's huge. The first drives students to act out and to disrespect their peers and teachers as they struggle to maintain a sense of identity in their world. The second is empowering, allowing students the freedom to learn new and powerful decision-making strategies as they revel in being a significant, vital, and essential part of their world. By consciously supporting this process, Green Light teachers underpin the overarching goal of all education—producing better-developed, emotionally mature students who become happier, more-productive adults.

Replace Teacher Directions With Student Decisions

Offering choices makes the student responsible for the lesson. No longer is it a *teacher direction*, but a *student decision*. This does not mean students are ready to take charge of their lives and make every decision for themselves. Nor does it mean your students will always make the best decisions. If they make decisions that won't work for the class, you can always exert control to get back on track. For example, in picking groups, if the groups are not to your satisfaction, find a reason to ask students to pick again until you have the groups you want. Or simply allow some opportunities for students to pick their own groups, and other times make these choices for them.

But, there are a surprising number of decisions students are capable of making by themselves, and many more they can sensibly make with appropriate guidance from a teacher. Wherever we can, we need to let them make those decisions. If we include, guide, and empower our students by allowing them to make simple everyday choices, we create vested team members, not robots.

While this may look like giving up control, it is simply leading from behind. As Nelson Mandela said, "A leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind" (Mandela, 1995).

Think about it for a moment: What does it matter *how* students learn, as long as they do? If letting go of surface "control" helps your students to learn, doesn't it actually put you in true control in terms of meeting the lesson's objective?

Reexamine Classroom Rules

Take a look at the practical difference between students taking responsibility and the common teaching approach where teachers cling onto control. Let's take classroom rules as an example. In traditional red light classrooms, rules are often already posted on the walls (ominously, in bold print) as students arrive for the all-important first day of school. One of the first things the teacher does is carefully review them with the students and describe in excruciating detail the penalties that will follow if any rule is broken. And, thus, the classroom tone is set.

Rules that are presented as mandates from above will always be a problem. If we impose them on students, they have no meaning. They become just one more thing students are being told: Except for fearing reprimand, the students are not connected to the rules in any real or relevant way.

By contrast, in a Green Light classroom, the idea of classroom rules is handled in a different way. As you will see later in more detail in the Five-by-Five chapter of this book, you can *create rules with your students* at the end of your first week. You need to wait this long because it takes time to build a classroom dynamic that encourages trust and sharing. By then, you'll have modeled appropriate classroom behavior, so you'll get the sort of rules you were hoping for!

Or, to take this thought one step further, many Green Light teachers believe that if the rules can implicitly be learned by the students—meaning they unconsciously come to understand them—*then perhaps you don't need official rules at all.*

It doesn't matter which option you choose. If handled carefully, the idea of classroom rules may indeed be a productive and fruitful discussion. However, if students can learn to work effectively with each other in a true learning community without the teacher ever needing to hem them in with a mandated set of rules, isn't that an even more empowering choice?

The way we handle rules is just one example of the many, many ways—large and small—of including students at higher levels of decision making. The following section gives you a host of other ideas for creating a self-perpetuating learning community in your Green Light classroom.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Tell Students Everything

One important way of including students is to share *every bit of information* with them. While this is contrary to the “need to know” information culture in many schools, telling your students the real reasons behind classroom decisions works on multiple levels. It demonstrates trust and respect, and it shows students you're all in this together.

So, if your principal hands you a stack of data indicating the areas of weakness for your class, don't hide it—share it! Tell your students you need their help in formulating a plan to overcome your class weaknesses. Share information about benchmarks and city goals. Explain how the test affects each student individually and the class as a whole. Talk openly about where the class needs to improve. Ask your students to set themselves a goal and choose learning activities to help meet it.

Often, when given all the available information (and the power to do something about it) your students will construct much-more-rigorous timelines and goals than you would have even considered.

For example: Let's say you get a reading-test score report back that states that the class is weak in vocabulary. You could create a sense of ownership by handling this situation as follows:

- **Include:** Hold a class meeting. Tell the students you need their help in an important matter. Perhaps ask them to pretend they are teachers. Share and explain the data.
- **Guide:** Give them a list of some suggested strategies that might work: flashcards, word of the day, practice tests, computer programs, word play.
- **Empower:** Let them choose which strategies to try in class. Students cannot complain about an activity when it is their idea! You can even let them choose how often to take quizzes to check progress. When they see the big picture, they understand why assessments are needed (Pressley et al., 2003).

Let Students Choose

There are plenty of opportunities in the course of a school day where you can provide opportunities for choice, without allowing your classroom to descend into anarchy. The key is to give choice within the context of what you, the teacher, wish to happen. For example, perhaps you're asking your students to draw a picture. You could let them choose whether they do so sitting at a desk or sitting on the floor. It doesn't matter *where* they do this task—as long as it gets done. Similarly, you want your students to review some material. You offer them the choice of making flashcards about the topic or making up a song about it or creating a collage. It doesn't matter *what* they do—as long as they learn the material.


The following eight suggestions all have this idea in common: They allow for student choice while progressing towards a lesson's aims (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). However small these choices seem, they can be extremely powerful when used consistently over time.

1. **Where to sit:** Let students sit where they choose, with the respectful note that they will be asked to choose a different seat if this one proves disruptive. Green Light classrooms constantly involve students moving from one table to another, so letting children choose their seats for the five minutes of that part of the lesson should be workable.
2. **Length of time to complete a task:** For example, give students a choice of 6, 8, or 10 minutes to complete a task. Does it really make or break the lesson? No, so give up that control. Let them feel that they are guiding the lesson. In the long run, you actually have *more* control because your students are following your plan to the end.
3. **Which partner to work with:** Let your students work with their friends once in a while. If they can choose to work with someone they like on occasion, they feel empowered and happy.
4. **The order of the lesson:** Share your lesson plan with your students. Is there anything in your plan that can be just as effective in a different order? If so, let them choose the order. Does it really matter if they do fraction games before the fraction sheet? You still get the same end result.
5. **Where to display work:** Let them decide on the decor of your classroom—the color of background paper, the position for different displays, the pattern of arranging artwork. Every time your students look up at the classroom walls, they will feel empowered by the fact that they chose their environment.
6. **What to read next:** Give your students responsibility for making sure they read right across the spectrum of genres during the year. Give them a list of what needs to be covered, and let them decide their own reading order.
7. **Which questions to answer:** Let your students choose 10 questions to answer out of 14. All of the questions assess the learning, so why not let them feel in control of which questions they want to answer?
8. **How to present projects:** Give your students the choice of presenting projects in a song, a play, a report, or a visual demonstration. As long as they get the key elements across, it doesn't matter how the information is presented.

Figure 1.1 shows a very specific example of how to let students choose their level and manner of participation. This spelling-assignment chart allows students to choose their preferred method of learning.

Figure 1.1 Spelling Menu

Name: _____ #: _____



SPELLING MENU

September 21–25

All work is due *Thursday*. The spelling test is *Thursday*.

5 Points	5 Points	5 Points
Create a <i>word web</i> for all of your words.	Create a <i>word pyramid</i> for all of your words.	Create <i>word toons</i> for all of your words.
10 Points	10 Points <i>Must Do!</i>	10 Points
Create a poem using five of your words.	Sort your words, and draw a picture next to each word for the meaning.	List your words. Next to each word, write the part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, or adverb).
15 Points	15 Points	15 Points
Write a sentence with each spelling word. Your sentences must be at least five words long.	Write a paragraph using 10 of your words.	Find each spelling word in the dictionary, write the guide words and page number for each word.

Weekly Goal: 30 Points

3 Points: Parent signature on spelling menu (all 3 days).

Day	Number and Description of Activity	Points	Parent Sign Here
<i>Monday</i>	#___		
<i>Tuesday</i>	#___		
<i>Wednesday</i>	#___		

Let Students Talk

Once you introduce choice as a natural part of the school day, you'll find a new dynamic developing. You will talk less—and your students will talk more (Coleman, Rivkin, & Brown, 1997; Palinscar & Brown, 1984). This is a very important development and one you should welcome with great satisfaction. Remember, conversation leads to comprehension.



**CONVERSATION LEADS TO
COMPREHENSION**

When students talk, they are highly engaged, able to pay attention for longer periods, and are actually processing the information. By contrast, when you talk, they can easily disengage and not be thinking about what you're saying. Perhaps even more important, the less you talk, the more your students own the learning process.

Be warned! If your current teaching style is to have long periods where you're the only one talking, this change will feel strange and possibly even a little uncomfortable. Some teachers actually start feeling guilty they are not teaching "properly" because they are no longer lecturing. Nothing could be further from the truth. As long as your classroom conversation remains on subject, your students will learn far more if they are the ones talking about the information.

Every time you have the instinct to present information to your students, see if you can find a way to allow them to talk about it. For example:

You Talk	They Talk
You tell the class they have weak spots in vocabulary.	You give students a graph showing average class scores in vocabulary on one curve and your class score on another. You ask them to discuss what this means.
You tell them about the activities you're going to use to improve their vocabulary.	You ask them to devise an action plan* to improve their vocabulary.
You tell them which activity they're going to start with.	You ask them to choose which activity they're going to do first.

*Most times, their plan will include all of the things you would have planned as well.

Another way to minimize how much you talk is to use nonverbal cues for instructions (see p. 95 in the Five-by-Five chapter).

Let Students Negotiate Change

From the very first day of school, send a clear message that you are open to suggestions and ideas (Jensen, 2008a). This means letting students know you value their input by constantly asking for and taking notes on their opinions and keeping the lines of communication open.

In particular, students should feel comfortable sharing their frustrations with you. If they come to you with a complaint or a dislike, try not to take it as a personal attack. They're simply telling you how they feel, and you

should feel honored they trust you enough to share their feelings. If you respond negatively, they'll never trust you again.

Of course, you can't stop a teaching practice because a student doesn't like it, nor should complaining students be let off the hook. But, perhaps you can find another way of achieving the learning objective. Tell them the goal of the activity they dislike, and challenge them to come up with another way of meeting it. They will not only engage more enthusiastically with their alternative practice but will also have learned the art of compromise—another vital life lesson.

Case Study

The teacher required all students to complete short summaries about every chapter of their novel. After reading a chapter, they were required to stop, write down a few summary sentences, and then continue reading. This worked well for many readers in the class who needed help with comprehension, but Andrew—the most proficient reader—absolutely hated it. Andrew despised having to stop his flow of reading to write the summaries. He loved reading, finished chapters quickly, and couldn't understand the possible value of the summaries.

In a red light classroom, where students are taught never to question teaching practices, Andrew would have slowly lost his love of reading. Seething about the unfairness of it all, he would have scribbled down nonsense in his summaries, so he could quickly get back to the story, giving his teacher the impression he didn't understand the book. Eventually, he would have detached from the process of reading, hating school more with every passing day.

Fortunately, Andrew was in a Green Light classroom, where the teacher was open to students making suggestions. At the class meeting, Andrew tentatively suggested a different practice: Could he and other students have the option of writing a longer comprehension piece when they finished each whole book? His teacher readily agreed and Andrew, and a few of the other fast readers, joyfully stopped the hated chapter summaries and instead began turning in lengthy and enthusiastic book critiques.

Model Critical Thinking

All the practices in this chapter are fundamental building blocks for the skills required for critical thinking: gathering all the information, making decisions, discussing issues, coming up with solutions, and arguing a point. To help your students pull these building blocks together, the final piece of this strategy is modeling and celebrating critical thinking and problem solving (Mansilla & Gardner, 2008, p. 14–19).

As much as possible, model how you evaluate your own decisions, and discuss other choices you could have made that would have been more productive. This can be a constant theme in class meetings, reviewing class

decisions and figuring out whether they were good ones and what you can learn from the outcomes.

Giving your students responsibility for learning not only improves test results; it also teaches higher-level thinking (perhaps the most important skill they will ever learn). Teach your students a fact and they pass a test. Teach them to think, and you equip them for succeeding in every area of life (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001, p. 113).

Translations to Technology—Principle 1

Device	True Learning Communities: Students Taking Responsibility
Computer	<p>Reflect your learning community in a class Web site—hosted on your school’s intranet to ensure privacy—run by your students. Your Web site could include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress—showing full class test results (not individual results); • Profiles—students’ own pages; • News—where students post family announcements; • Achievements—individual and class awards; • Blog spot—where students blog about their experiences in class; and • Library—photos and video clips of content-related activities to use for review before a test.
iPod	<p>Allow students to choose the music for group activities.</p>
Digital Camera	<p>Just like pencils and paper, make your digital camera one of the basic resources available to your students at any time. Encourage them to use the camera whenever they choose—perhaps to help present a project.</p> <p>Take lots of digital photos of students every week. To support this, get your students into the habit of identifying “photo opportunities” when the class, a team, or an individual has achieved. Start every Monday morning with a PowerPoint show putting the best images to music (perhaps “Happy Together” by The Turtles or “Time of My Life” by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes). Be sure to include every child in the class. The photos will create a sense of joint achievement and also act as a review—your students will remember the content they were covering when the photo was taken.</p>
Interactive Whiteboard	<p>Use your interactive whiteboard to display the photos.</p> <p>Make a suggestion box on the interactive whiteboard to use during class meetings to encourage students to contribute.</p>

KEY POINTS

- When classroom systems give students choice, teachers expend significantly less energy on classroom-management and discipline issues.
- When students are given responsibility for the learning process, they feel empowered and engage in the lessons at a higher level, increasing attention, understanding, and retention.
- Allowing students to make decisions—instead of telling them what to do—produces higher levels of engagement and ownership.
- Telling students everything demonstrates trust and respect, and it shows you’re all in this together.
- The include-guide-empower sequence provides a concrete structure for allowing students to decide how to tackle important challenges.
- Frequent student-to-student conversations both improve comprehension and put students in control.