

THE FIVE BIGGEST FEARS THAT KEPT ME FROM EMPOWERING STUDENTS

By John Spencer June 2, 2017 4 Comments

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I recently wrote about [my journey toward empowering students through ownership](#). It began with a “throw away” week during state-wide testing when I felt the freedom to do something different. From there, I ultimately

embraced this idea of student empowerment. However, I was afraid along the way.



MY PRINCIPAL MIGHT
JUDGE ME FOR THIS



THEY MIGHT FAIL THE TEST



I COULDN'T PREDICT WHERE
WE WERE GOING



IT MIGHT NOT
FIT THE STANDARDS



IT MIGHT GET TOO LOUD

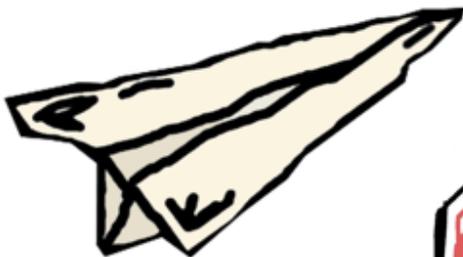
THESE WERE
MY FEARS



KIDS MIGHT TALK
THE WHOLE TIME



THINGS MIGHT GET
CHAOTIC



KIDS MIGHT BE OFF-TASK



IT MIGHT TAKE UP
TOO MUCH TIME



I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO
TRACK HOW MY STUDENTS WERE DOING



STUDENTS MIGHT
STOP WORKING



IT FELT LIKE A GAMBLE

I'd like to explore some of these fears a little more in-depth.

Fear #1: Classroom Management Might Suffer

I was terrified that students would turn their freedom into anarchy. Would the emphasis on empowering students lead to misbehavior? Would they challenge the classroom rules and go crazy? Or would the lack of emphasis on grades mean simply refuse to work? I had been in classrooms that felt crazy and chaotic; where teachers said, "this is controlled chaos," but for me, it felt terrifying. Was this simply a cost of student ownership?

Reality:

Classroom management turned out to be easier when I emphasized student ownership. Don't get me wrong. I had to go over expectations about volume, movement, and safety. We negotiated the procedures together with the class-wide procedure grid. However, I failed to anticipate the positive aspects of ownership. Students acted more responsible when I entrusted

them with more responsibility. They worked harder and stayed focused because they cared more about their work.

It was never a utopia. I still had certain students who didn't finish their projects. Students occasionally argued with their group members. However, there was a preventative aspect to student ownership. By empowering students to own the learning, they were then better able to own their actions.

Fear #2: Students Wouldn't Pass the Test If They Are Choosing the Topics in Projects

I remember being terrified that students would fail the test if they were working in a student-centered, choice-driven environment. It seemed like it wouldn't transfer, going from collaboration, choice, creativity to a standardized, irrelevant, solitary, one-size-fits-all test.

Reality:

The reality is mixed here. Often, when I empowered students to own the learning, I was able to "teach above the test." Simple areas of student choice paid off on standardized tests. For example, they had developed a really long reading endurance because of choice-driven silent reading (which took 40 minutes a day). They knew how to think through hard questions because they had been asking hard questions.

However, it didn't always work. Although our class remained in the top 10% of the district average, I had one quarter when my students' scores

plummeted to the bottom quarter of the district average. The test simply didn't fit what students had learned. This is why I'm sympathetic to the fear. I hated being in a high-stakes environment, wondering what might happen if we had another quarter where my students didn't perform well.

At the same time, educators have to be bold enough to let students own their learning, even if it means facing our fears of low test scores. It is difficult. There is no guarantee of success. But ultimately, it sends a powerful message when teachers say, "I'm worried about the test scores but I'm more worried about who you will become if you never get the chance to own the learning." This is a chance to model courage. Students are watching and when they see that kind of courage, they never forget you.

Fear #3: We won't cover everything on the curriculum map

I remember looking at the curriculum map and thinking, "This is so crowded as it is. If I try to do things like Genius Hour or project-based learning, we'll never get through it all." I didn't have the time or the space to add something new. Don't get me wrong. I knew that I could combine a few standards when they worked on a project. But what would happen when they chose a topic and never chose the topic from a specific standard? What would I do if they chose a strategy but never learned one of the skills in our standards? I worried, too, that students would be working at their own pace and some of them would simply never get to every standard they need to master.

Reality:

At first, I viewed design thinking, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning as additions to a packed curriculum. Then I realized they were all frameworks; a new way to organize the content so that students could dive deeper into the subject and engage in creative thinking. I realized that student ownership could actually free up the time because I spent less time on direct instruction and testing.

I noticed, too, that many of the standards were content-neutral, meaning students could master the standards while choosing their own topics. As they worked through projects, they could practice specific skill-based standards in areas where they still needed intervention. So, they actually had more time to master certain standards because they weren't wasting time practicing skills they already knew. We also layered standards, so that students could work on multiple standards while engaging in a specific task.

This wasn't always easy. It took me a few years to figure out the logistics and design a system where students could self-select skills, topics, and standards while they worked on their projects. We still had moments of direct instruction or even review. But as student ownership increased, we actually felt less rushed compared to the traditional approach I had been using before.

Fear #4: Students won't know what to do if they own their learning

I knew that if I said, "Hey class, you choose the content, the strategies, and the assessment," students would be lost. Students needed some type of structure and system in order for student choice and ownership to work. Although I wanted to empower students, I knew they needed a toolset to

own their learning.

Reality:

This fear turned out to be valid. I made the mistake of trying a failed Genius Hour, where they treated the time as a study hall instead of using it to pursue passion projects. At that point, I made a few corrections. Here are a few things that worked:

- designing specific systems for self-assessment and peer assessment
- using a project-based learning and a design thinking framework to structure the creative process
- modeling how to select skills and standards
- conferencing with students to help them self-reflect and monitor their own progress
- creating structures for project management and project design
- doing an onboarding process for student choice and ownership

Each summer, I did an “ownership audit” of my classroom, where I looked at all the systems and asked, “What am I doing for my students that they could do on their own?” From there, I worked on designing self-explanatory systems that students could modify and adjust to fit their needs.

Even then, I realized that students sometimes struggled with so much student ownership. This is why I created a scope and sequence of how I would introduce additional ownership throughout the school year. This was essentially a gradual release process, where students started with student ownership of the topics and themes and eventually moved into full ownership of the assessment, intervention, and enrichment processes. This allowed me to introduce strategies and structures that students could add to their toolbelt.

Fear #5: I was worried that my leaders would view student ownership as teacher laziness

What would the principal think if she saw students working individually, in pairs, and in groups at the same time? Would she think I had given them free time if so many students were working on different tasks at a different pace? Would I look ineffective and weak?

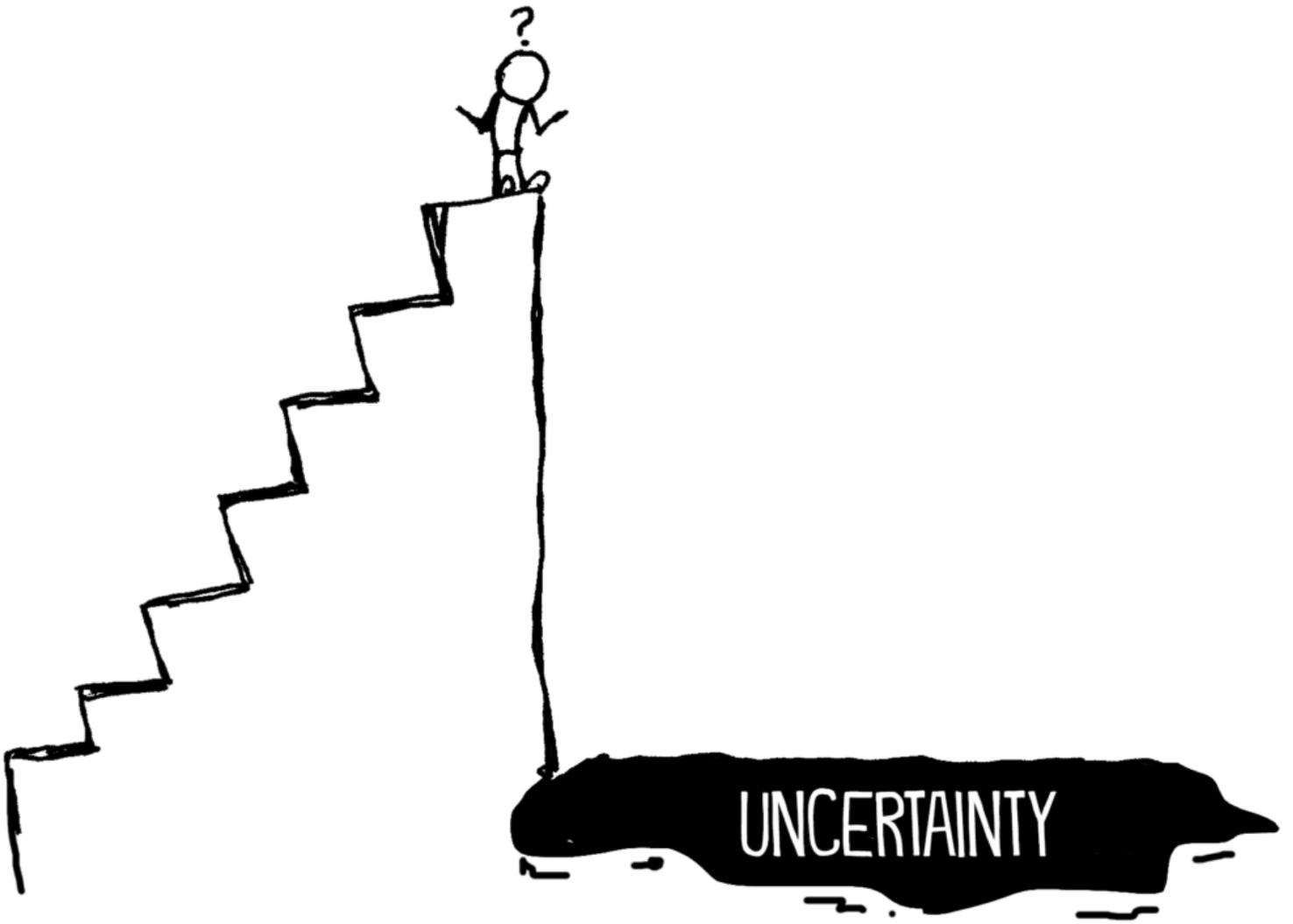
Reality:

Most of the principals I worked for embraced the idea of student ownership. They loved the fact that I had embedded intervention into the lessons and that students were so aware of their progress toward the standards. Instead of viewing it as chaotic, they saw students who were focused and they valued the differentiation going on.

For a few things, I had to pitch the idea and say, “I would like to pilot this and if it doesn’t work, I’ll scrap it completely.” Fortunately, I had some forward-thinking principals who embraced experimentation.

The Journey Toward Empowering Students

I was afraid of student ownership. However, I was more afraid of what would happen to students if they never owned their learning. So, I took the leap into the uncertainty.



And it worked.

Sometimes.

Okay, the truth is I made tons of mistakes along the way. I had moments of crushing self-doubt when I wondered if I was crazy for believing students could own their learning. I sometimes provided too much student ownership without enough structure and then I would stifle student agency by designing rigid systems.

But I also saw the transformation that happens when students own the

learning. I watched them fall in love with learning as they chased their geeky interests and asked hard questions. I saw them embrace a maker mindset, which is why, for all mistakes I made, I am convinced of this: There is power in student ownership.

Empower Your Students with Voice and Choice

Want to get started with student ownership? Check out [this page](#) with free articles, videos, and resources. Also, check out the Empower Blueprint and Toolkit below.

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