Instructional Choice:
A Step-by-Step Guide for Virtual Learning Environments

What is instructional choice?
Instructional choice is a strategy in which the educator offers students two or more options during an activity or time period. This practice gives students some control over the activities they do while engaging in virtual learning. Choice can be used to promote decision-making and other self-determined behaviors. Instructional choices can be built into the virtual classroom environment. Some examples of activities for instructional choice include letting students decide if they want to work independently or in a group, which template to use for a virtual background, which order to complete a list of tasks, or choosing how to demonstrate their understanding on a topic.

How do I use this strategy in the virtual classroom?
In the table below, we provide the steps for how to get started with instructional choice in a virtual learning environment. Following the steps are a few quick tips and two illustrations, one for an elementary age student and for a middle and high school age student.

Steps	Description
1	Determine which types of choices you would feel comfortable offering in the virtual classroom and create a menu of choices.
2	Use the menu to determine which type of choices to add to a particular virtual lesson.
3	After choice is built into the virtual lesson, offer the established choices.
4	Ask the student to make their choice.
5	Provide wait time for the student to select their choice.
6	Listen to or observe the student's selection.
7	Prompt the student to make a choice from the available options if they have not made a choice within the time allotted.
8	Reinforce the student's choice and provide them with the option they selected.
9	Offer students an opportunity to give feedback on the choice they selected.

Quick Tips for Success:
- Use an integrated lesson plan to identify opportunities to utilize this strategy in your lesson each day. An integrated lesson plan template is available at ci3t.org/imp.
- Sharing a virtual timer and list of choices on your screen to encourage students to make their selection promptly.
- Use a polling feature or the chat to keep a record of choices made by students.
- Give students a quick break after choice selection in order to organize your technology in preparation of choice time.

- To provide students an opportunity to give feedback, consider using the student social validity forms from ci3t.org/pl.

Using Instructional Choice in a Virtual Learning Environment

Example: With an elementary-age student…

Step 1. Jessie was adjusting to school being remote in the first month of virtual instruction. His teacher, Mr. Baker, noticed Jessie was resistant to doing his math work (not starting work right away, taking longer than usual to complete work) in the afternoon in their virtual learning classroom once they split up for independent work. Mr. Baker decided to offer his class choices during independent work time. Mr. Baker began by making a list of choices he would feel comfortable offering in the virtual classroom: working in the main room with him, an independent breakout room, or a breakout room with a friend. To show their work, students could type it into their online learning program or do the work on paper and take pictures of it to send to the teacher.

Step 2. Mr. Baker created a tic-tac-toe board of options for each student to choose from during math instruction and shared it with families via the family-school communication portal. He also included a free choice activity in the middle square of each board. In the free choice option, each student could choose their own activity as long as they were practicing their math work.

Step 3. The next day during virtual learning, each student could choose one activity at a time. Mr. Baker set up the polling feature in the virtual classroom to allow students to select their choice.

Step 4. The options for all choices on the board were available in the virtual environment in case they were selected. Before taking a break and beginning math instruction, Mr. Baker prompted all students to think about how they would like to complete their task in the next block and be prepared to decide when they return. He also privately messaged Jessie to remind him he could chose whichever option he would enjoy the most.

Step 5. The teacher put a timer on the screen and when the students returned from the break, they each selected where to work virtually by completing the poll. Jessie selected working in the main room with Mr. Baker during independent work, while other students opted to work with a friend or in an independent break out room.

Step 6. While the students were making their choices using the poll, Mr. Baker also modeled how each student could mark their tic-tac-toe board up on the screen to reflect their choice if they printed a copy or created a paper tic-tac-toe board at home.

Step 7. Mr. Baker used the private message feature to prompt students who had not made their choice or completed the poll by the end of the time.

Step 8. Mr. Baker praised the class for returning prepared to make their choice. Mr. Baker also privately messaged Jessie for making a choice. "Jessie, way to go making your first choice! I am excited to spend time with you in the main room during independent math work." Jessie knew when it came time for independent work, other students would move to breakout rooms and he would stay with his teacher in the main room.

Step 9. At the end of the first week, Mr. Baker asked Jessie if he had enjoyed making choices during math work. Jessie said, "I like your help to get my work done. I like getting my choice!" The teacher then asked the entire class to complete a brief social validity form using an online survey tool to gather data on their opinions on instructional choice.

Using Instructional Choice in a Virtual Learning Environment

Example: With a middle or high school student…

Step 1. Kari's teacher, Mrs. Pelton, learned about instructional choice and decided to try it in her virtual classroom to keep students engaged throughout the day. Mrs. Pelton built a menu of choices for the virtual environment for different situations. She thought about ways students could respond. Students could email a picture of handwritten answers, type answers in a word document, make a voice recording, or give a mini-presentations to the class. She also thought about how students could best demonstrate their understanding on independent projects: PowerPoint, Scribe, Prezi, Canva infographics.

Step 2. Mrs. Pelton reviewed the plans for the upcoming unit on a new book and created a menu of choices for all the students. Students were expected to read two chapters and respond to questions each week. For the weekly questions, Mrs. Pelton decided to group questions about plot, character development, and themes into different sections and let students pick two out of each group of three questions to respond to. Students could respond with typed responses in a word document, make a voice recording, or write a response by hand and send a picture. Then, at the end of the book, students would create a project to connect the themes to present day. They could use PowerPoint, Scribe, Prezi, Canva, make a physical poster, or propose a different idea.

Step 3. After Mrs. Pelton finished the complete plan for the menu of choices, they offered the choices to the entire class. Even though Kari was the target student for this strategy, it can benefit all students in the class.

Step 4. After introducing the choices to the class, Mrs. Pelton asked students to select their questions independently each week. However, she wanted the students to think about their choice for the larger project. She told students they would respond with a poll at the end of the week.

Step 5. The teacher reminded the entire class on Thursday that they would be asked to respond to a poll with their preferred project method on Friday to begin planning. On Friday morning, the teacher began with the poll to find out how students wanted to demonstrate their understanding of the book's themes and gave students 5 minutes to respond.

Step 6. Kari's teacher noted she decided to work independently and create a short video to show his interpretation of a book chapter to his classmates. The teacher recorded Kari's choices by observing the poll throughout the week. Mrs. Pelton noticed most of the students had responded to the project poll and had ideas for what they wanted to focus on when she talked with them between activities. She recorded students' responses to make sure they could begin planning their projects.

Step 7. At the end of the five-minute period, Kari had not responded to the poll. Mrs. Pelton messaged her privately prompting her to respond and asked if she had made her choice. Kari said she was worried about making the wrong choice. Mrs. Pelton reassured her that there were no right or wrong choices. She should think about which option would be most enjoyable for her. Kari then completed the poll.

Step 8. Mrs. Pelton praised the students for coming prepared with their decisions and sent Kari a message saying, "Thanks for submitting your choice! I am excited to see your project!"

Step 9. Mrs. Pelton asked Kari privately what she thought about having some choices in her daily work. Kari shared, "It was nice to be able to make a choice for what I felt like working on each day, some days I just feel more creative than others so the choice was great!" The teacher then asked the class to complete a brief social validity form to gather data on her opinion on instructional choice.

Watch a brief introduction to instructional choice here and watch the updated video for virtual learning environments here.

Reference: Lane, K. S., Austin, K. S., Pérez-Clark, P., Allen, G. E., Oakes, W. P., Lane, K. L., & Menzies, H. M. (2020, August). *Instructional choice: A step-by-step guide for virtual learning environments*. Ci3T Strategic Leadership Team. www.ci3t.org

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