

# Choice and flexibility: some thoughts on the new curriculum

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The latest drafts of the grades 10-12 [English](#) and [social studies](#) curricula and the recent announcement of BC's [new graduation requirements](#) confirm what many secondary teachers have feared: the continued (and perhaps accelerated) slide towards a consumer-oriented education system that offers little accountability.

Let's start with the new curricula. [Because I am a secondary humanities teacher, I'll confine my remarks to English and social studies; from what I can see, these two disciplines appear to be at the bleeding edge of this general curricular shift.] The central, recurring motif of the new English and social studies documents is *choice*. In the latest English draft, for example, we see choice as the key to student motivation:

*Enabling students to be active participants in their learning is well-recognized as a powerful motivator. For this reason, choice is provided to students early in the Graduation years, as a testament to their capacity as young adults to make judicious selections from a variety of English Language Arts Options and to allow them a sense of agency in their own education. This is consistent with a strength-based rather than a deficit-based approach to education.*

Leaving aside the horrifically loaded jargon of the final sentence, it's clear that this is a *system full of choosers*. Choice is "powerful", leads to "judicious selections" and provides "a sense of agency".

Given this core value, both curriculum proposals have been adjusted to maximize student options. The latest [English](#) proposal offers a Core course [*Ed. Note: It is once again English 12.*] and five different optional courses: Composition; Creative Writing; Focused Literary Studies; New Media; and Spoken Communication. According to the latest proposal, students entering Grade 10 will choose two of the five "Optionals" via two half-year (i.e. two credit) courses; this will equal the four credits that students currently receive for English 10. Students in Grades 11 and 12 will select one of the Optionals in a presumably more advanced four credit version, and take the four credit Core course, "which represents 'essential learning' in language arts, including reading and writing, speaking and listening, viewing and representing."

The commitment to choice is even more pronounced in the latest [social studies](#) draft. First, the curriculum has been revised and condensed downward. Social Studies 9 and 10, ironically, are positively crammed with content, quite the opposite of what teachers were seeking. However, the solution is obvious: *pick and choose* your content to reflect thematic Big Ideas. Want to discuss "conflict" in the [new Socials 9](#)? Sample some of these topics:

- Opium Wars
- Boxer Rebellion
- Boer War
- wars of independence in Latin America

- Armenian genocide
- Chilcotin War
- Fraser Canyon War
- American Civil War
- Franco-Prussian War of 1871
- Russian Revolution
- Crimean War
- Russo-Japanese War
- Chinese Rebellion of 1911
- World War I

As we can see, these topics are not listed chronologically or even alphabetically, but that's on purpose. [Traditional historical thinking concepts like continuity and change, or cause and consequence](#), are largely supplanted by *sampling*, as if history is a potpourri of exotic ingredients mixed into a thematic soup.

Social Studies 11 will be eliminated. In its place, secondary students will choose a final course from a veritable smorgasbord of optional secondary titles. At the time of writing, there are *a staggering 17 secondary options*, with "more more courses in draft form". Many of these courses are reboots of existing offerings (Law 12, History 12, etc.) but most of them look like 1st year university survey courses. Whether all of these could be realistically available even in the largest of schools is a matter of debate, though students moving between schools or taking online courses seems like a likely solution.

So we've established that choice is a foundational concept in the curriculum revisions and that the new drafts have responded in kind. Yet one question continues to come to mind: Is this faith in choice justified? Worryingly, only one piece of evidence (in the English draft document) is provided:

*The aim of the ELA 10-12 curriculum structure is to maximize students' chances of success by allowing them to choose the Optional courses that are most engaging for them and to achieve deeper learning. Because the curriculum has been redesigned to be less prescriptive and more flexible, there are increased opportunities for students to pursue their interests, aspirations, and passions and to benefit from more specialized areas of language arts study. Choice also includes encouraging increased opportunities for students to select the types of texts they will use, such as a variety of text types in the context of literature circles, particularly in the Options (e.g., Focused Literary Studies or New Media):*

*"Research has demonstrated that access to self-selected texts improves students' reading performance... This is especially true for struggling readers...." (Krashen, 2011). From: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar12/vol69/num06/Every-Child,-Every-Day.aspx>*

After reading the article above, I'm a little perplexed. It refers to children (apparently of elementary age) who are

choosing books within a classroom. But how does this apply *to adolescents choosing courses for an entire year?* I really don't find this reference particularly convincing, and it seems like another example of "progressive educators" building an edifice without a solid base of research. Speaking of research, I'm reminded of John Hattie's work, in which he concludes that the positive effect of "student control over learning" is [almost negligible](#). One [synthesis](#) of Hattie's research explains that the effect "of student choice and control over learning is somewhat higher on motivation outcomes than achievement outcomes, but neither have major consequences on learning and too many choices can be overwhelming."

Perhaps the Ministry of Education will eventually buttress its curriculum with more evidence, but in the meantime it's probably more fruitful to see this commitment to course-based choice as part of a larger commitment to neo-liberal education reform. Much of this is inspired by [GELP](#), a [corporate sponsored](#) global education reform organization [connected to BC's Ministry of Education](#), and manifested in the current government's [BC Edplan](#). At its most ideological level, GELP aims to "to design public services that deliver different and better outcomes [at a lower cost](#)". At its most benign level, the [GELP approach](#) is designed to "create better opportunities for parents to engage in their child's learning with more flexibility and choice with respect to what, how, when and where their child learns". Even here, though, the policy above is preceded by a chilling notion that "parents and students still have choice and opportunity to decide which school their child attends within the public and independent school systems". Given BC's current discussion about a [two-tiered](#) education system, it's a little disconcerting to hear our current Minister of Education [defend private school funding](#) with similar language: "When we look at education in British Columbia, I would say we don't fund private schools. We fund students. We fund opportunities for students and those opportunities are chosen by parents." At this point, it sounds awfully similar to the logic of the [voucher system](#).

Overall, we appear to be facing a curricular worldview in which students are viewed as consumers rather than citizens. Consumers choose their preferences rather than work together for a greater good. In the fragmented (or, rather, "specialized") market place we see above, there doesn't seem to be much space for common cause or a common narrative. I'm not saying choosing courses necessarily leads to vouchers and market-based schooling (after all, this might simply be another example of BC's reductive obsession with improving the graduation rate) but surely there's an affinity between course choice and a funding system that encourages parents to "decide which school their child attends". And if we accept the former as "common sense" or "obvious", then the latter becomes much easier to introduce.

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