

CTRL+Z: Undoing and Rethinking Power and Student Voice in the Classroom

Michelle Lo

How virtual teaching led to centering student voice and choice by sharing power.

During a precalculus class on Zoom, a student wrote to me privately in the chat, “Ms. Lo, can I have more time on the test? I can’t finish my test right now because I have to take care of my little sister. I have work later so I won’t be able to work on it until 7:00 p.m.” My stomach twisted. The first math test of the year was due 10 minutes after class. A slew of questions tumbled through my head. Could I give extensions? Would it be fair to the other students? I had been conducting classes on Zoom due to the COVID-19 school closures in California, where I teach high school mathematics. Up until this point, I had made the unintentional choice of setting deadlines for assessments and assignments. After all, this was the norm based on my own experience as a student and in other classes at my school. I had never thought deeply about the reasons why deadlines existed, much less the impact on students and their needs under different conditions and especially during an uncertain time. This was only one instance where an unintentional choice impacted my students’ experience in my class. I negotiated a deadline with the student and we came to an agreement to turn in the test by 9:00 p.m. that day.

Several days before the test, another student asked me a question I never considered before as a teacher: “Can we use notes on this test?” Realizing that the norm of “no notes” was again a choice I had made without much thought, I paused. “Yes, you can use any notes you

have.” So, open-note summative assessments became the norm across my classes. My other alternative was to resort to the honor system or continue surveillance on students—both options involved using control to take away the learning that students want to voice on assessments. Stress levels were high, and I believed allowing notes provided some relief for students juggling multiple responsibilities at home. Allowing students to use notes supported them in building upon their authentic voice when applying concepts on assessments.

Given the typical norms around taking tests, what prompted these students to ask for a time extension or to use notes on the assessment? Not only did these students initiate change surrounding test-taking norms, but they also pushed the boundaries of choices I had made unintentionally and intentionally. These two experiences led me to reflect about the choices I have as a teacher. I learned how the decisions I make as a teacher affect students’ voices and power in the classroom and came to see two different “types” of control that were available to me: one that reduces students to rule followers and one that establishes an environment where students share voice and power.

Who decides?

When I first started student-teaching, I made millions of conscious and unconscious decisions each day in the classroom. Some decisions were related to academic material, and some were related to facilitating student participation and engagement, which included how, when, why, and who participated. In the classroom, I made decisions about who to call on to answer

a question. I also decided on the types of student discourse allowed (e.g., turn-and-talks with a partner, presenting to a class, etc.) during different activities. I even decided when students were silent: during an assessment, a presentation, or silent work time. When the pandemic was underway and I started my first year of teaching, the virtual Zoom format also yielded several privileges for me and very little for the students. For example, I decided who entered my Zoom room. I decided whether students spoke by unmuting their microphones, whether students could communicate with each other privately in the chat, and whether students could share their screens or annotate the screen during a call. Although some of these were default settings, I made intentional decisions about student voice similarly as I did in the classroom. I also had the option to move a student into a waiting room with the click of a button if a student was “misbehaving.” As a second-year teacher still figuring out what exactly classroom management means, I wonder: can I re-imagine what, exactly, I am managing? Can I strive to share power and center student voice through intentional decision-making?

One way I learned to center student voice and power during my first year of teaching was in the co-creation of how to be in the classroom. Instead of providing the norms to students this past year, I co-created norms with them, which I called “Class Commitments.” This list included commitments that students agreed to commit to as well as commitments I made to them. After I shared my initial requests of commitments from students, they worked in groups to discuss the commitments they wanted from me this year, and then we shared as a whole class to collect everyone’s ideas. The day after, I organized common themes from students’ requests for commitments and created a final version to share and make “official” for students. Some examples included, “Try your best by completing all work and engaging in class as much as you can (e.g., completing Desmos, entering in the chat, unmuting to speak, etc.),” and “Honor others’ thinking by respecting each others’ questions, contributions, voice, and ideas (‘I agree/disagree because . . . ’ instead of ‘That was dumb. She already said that!’).” This shift from providing norms to co-creating norms with students was in itself a way to deepen the trust between students and myself.

By letting go and sharing some of the power in deciding how to exist and be in the classroom, I trusted my students to be themselves in a way that is also safe for others. I believe my students developed further trust in me when I relinquished some power in the classroom. However, I still retained control by compiling the final version of the list of commitments. In the future, I can further share power and voice with students by letting them finalize their compiled list of commitments. I

also hope to revisit these commitments frequently throughout the year for revision and reminders for students. Although there is room for improvement, I believe this foundation of commitments allowed students to use their voice and power in the classroom to challenge the choices made in this class, such as asking for more time on assessments or permission to use notes to improve their learning experience in my class.

While my students used their voice and power to challenge the choices I made in my class, most students likely do not even realize that they deserve to have voice and power at school, given that adult permission is required for almost everything: to speak, to use the restroom, and the list goes on. Though I didn’t realize at the time, I also experienced control as a student in the public school system. I was an obedient student, which is perhaps why I did not realize I was subjugated to methods of control: following strict school dress codes, standing neatly in line for recess, and being silent to follow a teacher’s cue, among many others. I simply believed these rules existed to maintain order among students to prepare us for the “real world.” In addition to my obliviousness towards the systems of control as a student in school, I did not realize something perhaps more crucial to my own growth as an individual: the amount of power and agency I had to challenge the spoken and unspoken rules, critique why different rules existed, and consider how these rules could be more fair. Now, as a teacher, I wonder if my students are aware of their own agency and how I can



As a second-year teacher still figuring out what exactly classroom management means, I wonder: can I reimagine what, exactly, I am managing? Can I strive to share power and center student voice through intentional decision-making?"

shed light on the possibilities. I wonder if my intentional and unintentional teaching decisions replicate these methods of control in my own classroom, taking away student power and voice.

Reflecting on the impact of my classroom decisions on student voice and power, I see two forms of control: one that constrains students and another that encourages their agency. The first type of control seeks to reduce students to rule followers, obeying the written and unwritten rules of being a student. The second type of control seeks to maintain safety and some level of direction while still making room for student freedom and voice.

Changing What I Control

As a new teacher, I felt the need to make up for my novice status by asserting my authority over my students. Earlier in the school year, I primarily lectured about the mathematical content on my shared screen, which centered and highlighted my view of the curricular content, such as going over problems using one strategy, deciding who gets to present, and deciding what parts of a strategy receive airtime. Students who followed these rules were “successful” in my eyes, thus reinforcing the first type of control.

Then I started to ask—what does it mean to shift into the second type of control and let students lead the conversations in the classroom? This might mean that norms are co-created, like previously described, such that students can advocate for a strategy to a problem that they want to discuss more, encourage others to present their thinking to the class, and share multiple approaches to a problem. I started to allow students to share their screen and even to annotate on each others’ screens. As a way of creating more classroom discourse beyond the chat and unmuting, I wanted students to get a chance to share their thinking and work with the class by means of deciding what to share. Additional students leapt at the opportunity to explain their thinking while others simultaneously annotated for their sharing partner. By allowing students to share their screen, which is a mode of expression during virtual teaching, I made space for students to share their voice.

Learning to let go and share power with students, especially when teachers are typically seen as authority figures in the classroom, is not easy for me. However, my developing beliefs as a teacher in letting go and sharing power with students have been shaped through maintaining a view of students through their assets instead of their deficits. When I view students in terms of their strengths and capabilities instead of things they lack, I feel less need to “fix” students through means of control. I cannot work towards achieving equity if I

am constantly in control over students’ voices, actions, and even ideas. Having complete control as the teacher strips students’ agency and power away from them. Early on, I used to teach with the goal of empowering students. However, this assumes that students are inherently powerless, and that teachers (with power) need to teach students how to have power. I believe that students inherently have power as human beings. Yet schooling, with its rules and structures, takes that away from students by means of the first type of control and reduces them down to rule followers. I wish to continue working towards the second type of control, where there is direction in the classroom but also room for freedom and agency for students to bring forth their own power.

Despite the hardships, this past pandemic school year was not entirely a waste—going back to “normal” is no longer an option. What can I re-imagine for the future? What aspects of my teaching are habitual and “the way things have always been” such that I am unaware of the inequities resulting from these controlling practices? I strongly believe that new strategies, actions, and practices are better supported when I can re-imagine for the future. Namely, can I re-imagine what it means for teachers to let go of aspects of control as a means of sharing control with students in their classroom? How might I continue to center student voice and agency? As evident through the examples I shared, my current classroom is not my ideal classroom yet. I am still working on ways to let go of control in order to eventually share control and power with students. In an ideal classroom, I would share power with students by implementing the second type of control mentioned earlier: control that seeks to maintain a level of safety and direction while making room for student freedom, flexibility, and voice.

Citation

Lo, M. (2022). CTRL+Z: Undoing and rethinking power and student voice in the classroom. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 9(1), 11–13.



Michelle Lo,

a 2020 Knowles Fellow, teaches high school mathematics in San Jose, California. She teaches classes ranging from Integrated Mathematics 1 to precalculus and also devotes time towards creating professional

development opportunities surrounding equity, antiracism, and social justice for her school staff. Reach Michelle on Twitter at @meshellow or via email at michelle.lo@knowlesteachers.org.