The Effects of Student Choice on the Learning Process:

Understanding the Benefits of a Creative Classroom

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Abstract

This paper highlights an action research project concerning student choice and levels of engagement. The focus of the study was a ninth grade World Literature course. The study itself took place over a three-week unit on Greek mythology and *The* Odyssey by Homer. The question centered on ideas such as the desire by students for creativity in the classroom and how the freedom to choose impacts both their learning styles and levels of engagement. Detailed in this paper are the ways in which the study progressed, the steps taken throughout the study, methods for data collection and data analysis, and a summary of the discoveries made. Incorporated in the study is an explanation of student attitudes, observations about enthusiasm and engagement, and reflections regarding adapting both teaching and learning to the needs and preferences of the students. Research for the study was based on Howard Gardner’s ideas of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and other studies done concerning student choice and student engagement.

*Keywords:* motivation, student-choice, engagement

**Contextual Information/ Project Description**:

I work in a K-12 independent school. Our population is only somewhat diverse and the end goal for many of our parent body is entry for their child into a “good” college. It is a traditional school and for years I have wrestled with the ways in which I can bring relevance into my classroom and my teaching of English, particularly the teaching of the Classics. Originally, my idea was to investigate assessing creativity in the classroom. Although I have often incorporated creative projects in my curriculum, I have wrestled with ways in which to assess student performance. In the past I have tried to foster ownership among my students by offering opportunities for them to design their own curriculum, plan their own lessons, etc., and more often than not the kids are hesitant to engage in this kind of responsibility for their learning. The more I reflected, the more I realized that in our school, students do not get the type of flexibility and freedoms in the classroom that would enable them to feel secure enough to take this kind of risk. It is no surprise when I offer them this opportunity as a ninth grader, or even a senior, they balk. After a few more discussions with students, I wondered if they enjoyed the creative project, or if they would rather stay with a more traditional curriculum. This led to the hypothesis that drove the majority of my research.

**Hypothesis**:

My guiding question became: Are kids more engaged when given choice in the learning process, and what are the best practices for incorporating creativity in a more traditional classroom environment?

**Method:**

From *Teacher-Researchers at Work* by Marion S. MacLean and Marian M. Mohr, I understood the idea that “’Meanings don’t just happen: we make them; we find and form them’”(17). Due to the fact that my hypothesis relies heavily on student attitudes and behavior, I decided the best practices for data collection would be surveys, interviews and observations. This idea was supported by MacLean and Mohr as they addressed the reader saying, “You will probably, in the midst of your research, recognize happily that everything is data about something. You are surrounded, immersed, inundated”(36). This helped to validate the fact that most of my research was going to be anecdotal in nature. It would seem, as long as my journal of observations were an honest reflection of what was happening in my classroom and in my teaching, then the research would be validated as well.

I wanted to tailor the types of lessons to different types of intelligences, particularly as I had the opportunity to do so with the creative nature of the project. Of the main types of intelligences, I was able to incorporate primarily the spatial, kinesthetic, linguistic, and intrapersonal types of intelligences. There was a box left blank in which the student could determine their own type of assignment for the tic-tac-toe worksheet, and it was my hope I’d see some musical or mathematical approaches to the lesson by a few of my students. The idea for the tic-tac-toe worksheet for which the students would choose three types of projects to complete for their unit on mythology was inspired through my teacher research group and an article entitled, “Engagement Using Multiple Intelligences and Choice-Based Instruction.” The article was written by Hillary Gardner and published in the *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal.* I was particularly struck by a realization made by Gardner that somewhat mimicked my own. The first time I read about MI I found myself trying to incorporate more of what I learned into my lesson plans. Likewise, Gardner the same to be true for herself, and she understood “that allowing students to work in different media could empower them to engage more deeply with difficult topics while they learned more about themselves and one another. Menus can incorporate any classroom routine and still provide students with an opportunity to choose which skill they want to practice when”(98-99). This idea of allowing students to modify their choices to their strengths was certainly appealing.

A second article that reinforced my desire to incorporate MI into my study was an article written by a fellow educator highlighting her own discoveries about engagement and modes of learning. In the article entitled “A Lesson Learned by Multiple Intelligences” by Sharon S. Sweet, she details her growing understandings of how MI and student choice can foster learning in other areas as well. Through her study she discovered that when a student is allowed to tailor his or her own learning style, it may result in a positive impact on other types of learning as well. She noted a particular student who was a kinesthetic learner in her classroom. As he worked through the part of his project he was confident of, building his model, a direct correlation was seen regarding his writing. Sweet states, “As his model took shape, he became more interested in his written work . . . His writing evolved from lists of words to descriptive sentences”(50). I was intrigued by this idea, which was another reason I decided to include a free choice option in the tic-tac-toe worksheet for which the students could determine their own assignment. I was curious to see what kinds of assignments the students would choose – whether they coincided with their learning style or not. Likewise, I wanted to explore the idea of providing an opportunity for my students to increase their abilities in areas for which they might not be as confident.

A final article that was helpful in my understanding of engagement, particularly as I move forward, was from *Active Learning in Higher Education*. Although some of what was included was not relevant to my particular subject area, the ideas presented were ones that helped guide my observations and will provide focus for the next steps in the process. Nick Zepke and Linda Leach, in their article, “Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for Action,” highlighted some ideas about engagement and self-efficacy. Of particular interest were the first few: “Enhance students’ self-belief . . . Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives . . .Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships . . . Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities”(169-171). Zepke and Leach state that

“A number of reports link engagement to deep learning. Coates et al. (2008) found that while students’ attitudes to learning varied greatly, those who engaged in higher forms of learning such as analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating tended to be most engaged. This finding is supported by Hockings et al. (2008), who suggest that students who reflect, question, conjecture, evaluate and make connections between ideas whilst drawing on the ideas, experiences and knowl­edge of others are most deeply engaged. Teachers need to create rich educational experiences that challenge students’ ideas and stretch them as far as they can go”(171). It is in this the idea that engagement depends on interest in the subject matter seems to be key. Student choice seems to be linked to engagement as it implies the student will be more interested in the subject he or she is studying.

**Process and Data Collection:**

Fortunately, I have three sections of the same course – World Literature for ninth graders. With this in mind, I was able to use one class as a control group for different stages in the process.

**Step One:** The process for my research began with a student questionnaire. Within the questionnaire I asked questions such as student preferences for assessment, moving out of one’s comfort zone, ways in which knowledge is shared best, and attitudes concerning student choice.

**Step Two:** The next step was handing out entry/exit slips. Their entry question concerned how the students felt about classical mythology and reading Homer’s *The Odyssey*. On this day my control group had a traditional seminar class focusing on myths taken from the work, *Classical Gods and Heroes* translated by Rhoda A. Hendricks. Upon their exit I asked them to reflect on how much they enjoyed the class and how much they felt they participated in the discussion. For my other two sections I asked the same exit/entry question, but I had the class create skits based on the myths we were reading. Not surprisingly, the exit response for the control group exhibited an attitude similar to that of their entry question. My other two groups were much more enthusiastic in their exit responses.

**Step Three:** The next day I followed up with some basic comprehension questions to see how much each class retained of the information disseminated the previous day. My control group was definitely more reserved in their discussion, answering in a very matter-of-fact way. The groups who performed the skits were much more animated and recalled much of the information by connecting it to some aspect of the visual presentation.

**Step Four:** The next step was to hand out the assignment sheet for the unit. This was inspired by a conversation with my research group and an article about MI. The choices of assignments were set up in a tic-tac-toe formation with a diagonal of more traditional assignments running through it. The traditional assignments included discussion questions, a response essay, and a presentation. Some of the creative assessments included the transcript between a god of their choice and Jimmy Fallon from his late night show, the creation of one’s own god, the creation of a myth, a commercial advertising the use or purchase of a special power, a glogster depicting the Olympian gods, a space for free-choice, etc. The goal of this project was to determine the percentage of students who chose the three traditional options versus those who chose to do two creative pieces and a traditional.

I gave the students a week to work on their unit assignment. During the week we had an additional exit/entry slip and I had the students reflect in their journals about their attitudes and feelings toward their projects. (I’m working through one more set of journals now).

**Step Five:** At the end of the unit I gave a quiz on the information that was found in the reading. It was interesting because the students who chose the more traditional options from their tic-tac-toe assignment sheet tended to score better. This surprised me, for throughout the process I kept daily observations and thoughts in my research log. For the most part I found that those students who chose the more creative options tended to come to class excited to work, collaborated openly with others, and were very enthusiastic about what they were doing. This, however, did not translate into their quiz grades. I’ve yet to read their journals addressing the idea of preparedness and I’m intrigued as to what I’ll find.

**Step Six:** I have the students keep journals and during this process I asked them to monitor their feelings about how things were going: did they like the activities for the day? What was their favorite? What did they dislike? At the end I asked how they might change the unit to make it suit their needs a bit better.

**Data Analysis and Discoveries**

**Analysis – Step One:** The initial feedback I found on the surveys was surprising in the sense that about a quarter of my students said they preferred to be given no choice in the learning process. For the most part, their feeling was that they wanted specific instructions regarding expectations for success. This was a bit higher than I thought it might be, but makes sense considering my initial reflections on the idea that my students are a bit fearful of taking responsibility for their own learning. One student said it best when asked whether she like to be told what to do with no room for creativity, or whether she liked a little freedom. She replied, “I don’t like free-falling because I don’t want to do something wrong.” It was interesting to me that she equated freedom and creativity to “free-falling.” This attitude of doing something “wrong” was repeated among quite a few of my students’ responses.

**Analysis – Steps Two and Three:** The exit/entry slips were a good indicator of attitude, particularly when comparing my control group with my creative groups. Although I was focusing much of my research on attitude and engagement, there were a few opportunities for explicit activities to be explored. I did find that when I asked for students to recall specific facts, my creative groups were not as accurate as those of my control group. The traditional format seemed to help them with regards to remembering specifics. However, each group offered the same accurate responses when asked to make larger connections to theme and the big picture.

**Analysis – Step Four**: When offered the tic-tac-toe assignment sheet, what I discovered was that the majority of my students chose at least two of three options for creativity. This was not surprising; however, I anticipated more considering the feedback from their initial surveys. With regards to attitudes and engagement, those that chose the creative pieces tended to be excited for class seen through the responses on their exit/entry slips and my observations found in my research journal. One of my students came in and asked if we were working on our tic-tac-toe or discussion. I recorded the conversation in my journal: “When I told J we were working on the tic-tac-toe he jumped out of his chair and said, ‘Cool! I did a ton of work on it last night and need to put it all together. Can I go to the lab? I want to see what it looks like.’ I almost fell out of my chair. It has been a struggle to get J to do any work outside of class so the fact that he did work at all was amazing.” I made similar observations of others reacting with this kind of enthusiasm throughout the project.

**Analysis – Step Five:** Although I’m still working through the quizzes, the grades tend toward those who worked with the more traditional models. It leads me to wonder if the make-up of the quiz was biased towards that method of learning. This is something I’m going to continue to analyze.

**Analysis – Step Six:** There was a real fear of failure when the student was uncertain as to what the final product should “look” like. This occurred more often with the more creative, open-ended assignments on the worksheet and was reflected in many of the student journals I was able to read and conversations I had. One such instance from one of my one-on-ones highlights this kind of uncertainty: “When I asked S if she had any questions, she responded with, ‘I just don’t know what you want.’ I said I want you to make the choice, choose something you are really interested in and then it’s not just an assignment, it’s learning and it’s enjoyable. To this she said, “But what is it you want it to look like?” This attitude about working to my satisfaction rather than theirs is one that was fairly pervasive with many of my students and I think it has to do with our environment at our school. This begs a closer look but is a big idea that will need time. It is this that I am hoping to address as I move forward and look toward additional research on developing a classroom in which engagement, self-efficacy, and high levels of confidence among the students are evident.

**Implications:**

**For my practice**

Now that I know the majority of my students do appreciate creative assignments, I need to find a way to reconcile that with the students who are more comfortable in a more traditional setting. What I’ve come to understand is that, just like any other skill, scaffolding needs to be in place in order not just to engage students, but to push them forward in order to foster a more participatory learning environment.

**For other educators**

I do think that this study could be easily replicated by others educators. The tic-tac-toe worksheet provided quite a bit of insight into student preference, which could be beneficial for any teacher in order to better understand his or her students.

**Reflection – what I learned about my teaching and myself**

Upon reflection, I believe that my research was a valid study and I learned quite a bit about my students. Not only was I able to understand the types of assessments they preferred, but I also learned a lot about the many different types of learners I have in my classroom by tailoring my creative assignments to their different types of multiple intelligences. One of my weaknesses as an educator is anticipating questions and issues in the planning stage. It would have helped had I thought a bit more about the kinds of concerns my students would have concerning the creative assessments. As I have not spent a lot of time working toward independent learning in the classroom, the worksheet might have been a bit aggressive. Likewise, I’m going to have to re-evaluate my reading quiz as it is in somewhat of a traditional form.

**Further Questions to consider:**

One of the implications this study had on my practice is the need for offering guidelines, or parameters for my students who are more fearful of taking ownership for their own learning with enough freedom to allow them to both fail and be successful. How do I create an environment in which students will welcome the opportunity to become participatory learners and creators of their curriculum rather than passively respond to the demands of the course set forth by me? Finally, how do I effectively assess this with a tool that is unbiased toward any kind of particular learning style.

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