Student Choice in the Language Arts Classroom

Effects on Learning, Interest and Motivation

by Julie Hendershot

"The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning ... For by doubting we to come to inquiry, and by inquiry we arrive at truth." -Peter Abelard, French philosopher

Preface

In the wake of inquiry-based education comes the teacher as inquirer. This movement in the education of our students and those who teach them has re-emerged from philosophers, such as John Dewey, who believe that authentic learning happens as a result of seeking answers to our questions. The key word is "our." True inquiry is not the investigation of questions others feel are significant to learning; rather, true inquiry occurs when we seek answers to our OXAM wonderings about the world.

I began my year as an intern in the Professional Development School, or PDS, which is a yearlong intensive student teaching program that immerses its interns in the life and culture of the students and the school. My particular PDS is a collaboration between State College Area High School and the Pennsylvania State University. Paired with an English teacher from State High who served as my mentor over the course of one school year, I experienced teacher preparation in an apprenticeship model. Together, my mentor and I co-planned, co-taught and co-assessed our tenth grade students as a team.

The word "inquiry" was commonplace in all of our PDS our discussions. The secondary English PDS embraces an inquiry cycle of immersing, identifying, contextualizing, representing, critiquing and transforming. This cycle revolves around the central research techniques of wondering, question asking, note taking, observing, interviewing, and analyzing data (Beach and Myers 19). I, however, wasn't completely sure how I would tackle my own inquiry. If I didn't really even understand what it was, how could I immerse myself in the inquiry philosophy of the PDS? The beginning of my inquiry was fraught with first trying to understand the discourse of my new learning environment before I could begin pursuing answers to my questions.

I can remember a conversation with my mentor, Marianne Myers, in which I voiced my confusion about inquiry. While we were talking, she mentioned some movements in education that she had been wondering about, one of which was the democratic classroom. A democratic classroom, I thought, sounded interesting. From there I buried myself in the literature.
As I sought answers for my questions about the democratic classroom, I was discouraged by how negative the stories were. Although in theory a democratic classroom sounded ideal, putting it into practice was another story. The reality of me, a beginning teacher, implementing these ideas into my own classroom is a battle I’m just not willing to wage this early in my career. And so I abandoned my quest, though not entirely.

Without realizing it at first, some of the beliefs of the democratic classroom had become imbedded in my thinking about students: choice and voice.

The following is one of my journal entries from January 2002:

*How does student choice in the English classroom foster interest and investment in learning? How does choice empower students? Choice, making decisions, leads to self-selected experiences. Some experiences are successful while others are failures. Some are positive while others aren't. But, from these experiences, learning occurs (how would I do this next time? etc.) These learning experiences, therefore, are not dictated by an authority figure. Although the Y choices may be scaffold initially, ultimately the student chooses the path he or she desires. Learning through experience is authentic learning and a way to bridge school life to lives outside of school (real life).*

Here, from the reflections on the questions posed earlier in my journals, began my inquiry about the effects of student choice.

**The Setting and Participants**

My inquiry project took place in a tenth grade language arts classroom at State College Area High School in State College, Pennsylvania. Situated in the center of Pennsylvania, State College is home to both State College School District and Penn State University. The school district's students are drawn from a 150 square mile area surrounding the small yet diverse community. The total enrollment of students in the 2001-2002 school year was 7,255. Of those, the enrollment in grades 9-12 was 2,378.

Participating in my inquiry project were 45 students from two separate English Ten classes. My inquiry was structured around the culminating activity for a unit I designed on Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

**Description of the *Henry V* Unit**

*Henry V* is a core novel in the 10th grade English curriculum and an independent unit I created. The following is a summary of the Unit Plan:
Objectives:
Students will be able to understand how the struggles of the human today are similar to those 500 years ago. Students will also understand the different effects of a performed piece of literature (such as this play) and pieces of literature they read. Ultimately, students will be able to make connections between literature (Henry V) and life.

Rationale:
Shakespeare's work is used because of the timelessness of the text; human conditions and themes transcend time and people. Henry V is used because of its "coming of age " theme, which many students are undergoing at this point in their lives.

The Final Project

I decided to explore my inquiry questions about the effects of student choice with the culminating Henry V activity. Rather than assigning the students a formal exam or an essay to write, I decided to leave the medium and topic (relating to Henry P) up to them. At the beginning of the unit, we brainstormed possibilities for the final project together. Some of these possible mediums included but were not limited to: video/movie, quote collection, student-led circle discussion, formal exam-4 paper/report, poetry collection, documentary, modern interpretation, PowerPoint presentation, imovie, newspaper/magazine article, student led lecture, tri-fold poster, song or musical composition, skit, monologue, or newscast.

The next component for the culminating project was to choose a topic. Some of the possible topics included but were not limited to: theme(s) from the play, an event from the play, a character, author's language, or real-world connections.

Because students had the potential to create very different projects, they had to be approved by me via a project proposal. My goal for using the project proposal was to assure that all projects were adequate and comparable to one another. In the project proposal, students were required to include the following information: name(s), an explanation of chosen topic, the medium, the rationale, an outline of project completion, an explanation of how the project will be shared with the class, and technology needs (if any).

Rationale

From my research about the democratic classroom, I internalized the value of giving students choices. I know that I am more interested and engaged in learning when I am given the authority to determine how and what I want to explore. I wondered if the same was true for my students. Will they be more motivated to learn about Shakespeare, a text they have difficulty understanding, if they have the power to choose what they learn? Will they be more interested in the text if they can choose the
medium in which to explore it? Ultimately, will their learning be enhanced because of motivation and interest? The only way to find the answers to my questions was to test my assumptions.

One component of the final project was a project proposal. I didn't want my students to think that because I was leaving the choice in their hands that I wasn't taking the project seriously. I also wanted to incorporate a formal piece of writing in the project. The purpose of the proposal was to compel the students to decide exactly what type of project they wanted to do and every detail they would need to complete it. I wanted them to set goals for themselves and work to achieve those goals. I also wanted to know why they were drawn to a particular topic and medium. Finally, the project proposal was a way for me to ensure equity; I felt the projects needed to be adequate and comparable to one another.

One student's project proposal:

_for my final project, I will be working by myself and will be doing a paper/report on Shakespeare. I will write about his life, major accomplishments, and what influenced him to write Henry V. I have chosen to do a report because I feel that I learn the most, or get the most out of something when I do research on it and then put it into my own words. I plan to start MY research by Thursday, and have a rough draft done by the end of this weekend that way I can revise my rough draft in class on Monday, April 15, and do the final copy at home that night. I will probably use the Internet for most of my research. I plan on sharing my paper to the class by summing it up and stating the major points and explaining them to the class._

Once I approved the students' project proposals, they were free to begin working. They had the option of using class time to work on their projects or to read the book they selected for the choice novel unit. For our choice novel unit, the students selected their own book from a collection of about ten in the curriculum. There are only a few components to this unit: identify and learn ten vocabulary words from the book, write five reaction journals to the book, and take an essay exam upon completion of reading the book. Each day, the students were given time in class to read or work on vocabulary and journal entries. They also had the option of using class time and school resources to work on the _Henry V_ project. At school, many technological resources are available for the students' use, which is why I felt it necessary to allow them to work on the projects during class. Because both the final project and the choice novel required mainly independent work from the students, this was good practice for them to prioritize work and use time productively. Also, because of the hectic schedules many of them have, school is often the only time they are able to meet with group members, if they chose to work in groups.

The following chart is a summary of the mediums the students chose to use. 23% of the 45 total students chose to take a formal exam, 20% chose to create a tri-fold poster, 13% created a PowerPoint presentation, 13% also chose to create a video, 11% created a quote collection, 9% created a model, 7% conducted an interview, and
4% wrote research papers. The students also chose a wide variety of topics to explore, including those listed below:

**Henry V Final Project Topics**

- Research paper about Shakespeare and Henry V
- Collection of significant quotes in the play
- Modernization of scenes in the play
- Information about life in the 1400's
- Symbolism of a scepter
- Explanation of significant scenes in the play
- Interview with Dr. John Moore, Penn State English professor
- Research about castles during the 1400's
- Studying for the exam

We negotiated due dates for each project together as a class. We determined when they were due based on the complexity of the project and the availability of resources they would need to complete them. Students presented their projects to the class over the course of a week. As you can see, there were a variety of mediums used and topics explored.

**Assessment**

Because every project was unique, it was difficult for me to devise one common grading rubric for every project. Instead I chose to use this self-evaluative format:

*Type of Project:*

*Reflect on your project and its quality. Considering the description of the project, that it should portray a scene, theme, idea, character, etc. from Henry V, what letter grade do you feel you have earned?*

*Grade:*

*Justify this grade. Without considering the effort you put into this project, explain in detail your rationale forgiving yourself this grade. Please remember, do not use the words "effort" or "time" (or other similar words). Focus on quality.*

*On the back of the page, explain what you have learned by doing this project. Do you understand something about Henry V differently or more clearly? Explain your thoughts.*

One student's project evaluation:

*Type of project: PowerPoint*
Grade: B

"The quality of my power point I thought was well. The content seemed to give everyone at least a generalization of the real King Henry V I met my minimum of 10 slides and even went beyond that. I don't think I presented my project all that well because I didn't get a chance to go over how to pronounce some words, or practice."

"I got a better understanding of who King Henry V really was and it was cool to see some parts of the play show up in the research I did such as the Battle of Agincourt. It was just really fun to compare and contrast Shakespeare's portrayal of King Henry V, and the real King Henry V I really learned about King Henry V through my research because it was easier to understand than Shakespeare’s language. Over all it was a great learning experience for me and I got a lot out of it."

Another student's project evaluation:

Type of Project: Tri-fold poster

Grade: A

"I think the quality of our project was very good X and I had high expectations for our poster and we are satisfied with the final outcome. We didn't want to be like everyone else because we thought that some of the other students' projects were boring and our goal was to make it more exciting. I think we reached that goal. I know I'm not supposed to tell you about the effort we put into it, but I'm going to! We worked our butts off making our poster good and we deserve an A! Plus, it was fun, colorful, and informational. 😊"

"I now fully understand the battle of Agincourt. While reading the play, I found myself very confused, but doing all kinds of research on it helped me really understand it. It became more clear to me. The whole play seemed very boring, but doing a project on it made it seem a lot more exciting. I think I understand things better when I do some type of follow-up activity on things like this. So doing this poster benefited my knowledge of King Henry V."

I found in general that students' evaluations were consistent with what I felt they earned. In my experience, they tend to justify a grade by talking about effort, but by removing that variable and focusing only on product and quality, it forces them to do a different kind of self-evaluation. On the back of the self-evaluation, I asked the students to reflect on their learning as a result of their self-selected projects. 30 students wrote that they learned more about the part of the play they chose to study further. Although they didn't necessarily understand the entire play better, they did understand a portion of the play or about Shakespeare and King Henry V more clearly.
Three students felt that their learning was not changed by this project. 10 students chose to take the exam and therefore did not do a self-evaluation.

I found high value in the students' responses to what they learned by doing this project. This helped me to see exactly what they understood better as a result of doing the project and served as an authentic way for me to monitor their learning.

Inquiry Writing Prompt

As a follow-up to the final project, during class I asked my students to reflect on the following questions. After each question, I've included a selection of students' responses:

1. How do you feel when teachers give you choices in class about assignments, due dates, projects, etc.?

"Student choice is a good thing as long as students understand what needs to be done."

"I would rather have choices. That way you can do what you are capable of. It isn't fair when teachers tell you to do like artistic work because some people can't draw."

2. Does choice allow you to do things that interest you or allow you to use your talents?

"I like making my own choices because it allows me to be more creative."

"When choices are given, students will put in more effort because they will probably do something that interests them. Choices = Quality."

3. Do you like having choices or would you rather be told what to do, when to do it, and how to do it? Why or why not?

'I like having choices as long as I know what's expected of the project and when it's due."

"I really appreciate it [choice] because then I can complete and make schedule changes for other assignments and homework in other classes."

4. How is your learning affected when you are given a choice regarding an assignment? In other words, do you feel you learn more or less?

"Choices on assignments help you search through your mind, and let you show your abilities (art, thinking ability, writing). I think you learn (not necessarily more or less) but you think in a different way, which helps you learn."
"It [learning] can go either way. I think it just depends on whether a person is serious or not. I tend to learn more when I choose something because most likely the reason I chose it was because I was interested Therefore, I would want to learn about it."

"I think I learn more when I do an assignment I want to do because I actually go back and understand the material."

"Sometimes letting the student choose (a project, due date, material on a test, etc.) opens up the mind of the student to be able to show his strengths. This also opens the mind of the teacher, through their students' thoughts and decisions."

5. Did you like having the ability to choose your final projects of the Henry V unit? Why or why not?

"In the case of our last assignment you got to choose a medium you were comfortable using and I believed that made a lot of projects better."

"Matt and I got to choose and we chose to make a video. It was fun. We actually got to make use of Matt's computer graphics class."

“You're more interested in the project and it explains the book better."

My Discoveries

The following chart was composed using the data I collected from the Inquiry Writing Prompt handout:

Clearly interest and motivation are closely correlated. Students responded on the questionnaire that both interest and motivation to complete a project increase when they are given choices. Students also felt that their learning increased when they were given choices. What I found interesting were the nine students who said that their learning was not affected by choice. Many of these students wrote that while they may be more interested in a project and more motivated to do it, they don't think they necessarily learn more or less. However, in the self-evaluation, nearly every student said they thought they learned more about the topic they chose to explore further in Henry V.

Although this data does have a margin of error because every student did not complete every piece of the project and the questionnaire, the overarching findings show that student choice positively affects interest, motivation and learning in most students. What I find most telling are the students' own words. The quotes listed previously came directly from their pens, unaltered in any way.
Do I think they were more interested and motivated to do these projects because they were given choice? Yes, for the most part. Did they learn more? Definitely. This text was a challenge for me to teach and for my students to comprehend. I think they felt a level of dissonance from the play and really had to be pushed just to understand the language. Had they not been given the option to narrow their focus of study, I don't think they would have taken away much from this play. The truth is, I was pleased they were able to better understand something about the play, whether that something was the language, a scene, a character, the real Henry, or even Shakespeare. They did learn. Had they not been given the power to choose the medium and topic of the culminating activity, I don't believe they would have experienced the level of success they did.

**So What?**

So what does this all mean to you as an educator? Consider how my students responded to student choice. Think about their words. Remember that they are more interested and motivated to learn when they have a say in what and how they learn. Nearly every choice we as educators provide our students is grounded in a framework already established by the state, the district, or ourselves. Although we may not be allowing our students total autonomy, we are allowing them a reasonable amount. The key is balance. This model I have illustrated will not be successful with every single unit nor with every single class. Think about what you are teaching and who your students are. Can this type of approach enhance their learning? If you answered yes, consider the following suggestions:

- Give students class time to work independently on their projects.
- Check the availability of resources such as the computer lab, LCD projector, library, TV, VCR, etc.
- Negotiate due dates with your students. Be firm yet flexible.
- Have students complete a project proposal and revise after reading your comments, questions and suggestions.
- Incorporate the many language arts skills, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking and researching.
- Have students complete a self-evaluation of the completed project.

The projects my students completed were all very unique. They explored topics I didn't consider and used mediums I wouldn't have suggested. It was exciting to hear their ideas and see their finished work shared with their classmates each day. Not only did they learn by doing, they also learned by listening to one another's presentations. Learning is a process in which meaning is constructed. In this case, my students were able to construct their own meaning with autonomy. This final project allowed my students and me to experience learning together-a necessary ingredient in any successful classroom.