

Incorporating Student Choice: Reflective Practice and the Courage to Change

Katie Dredger was a successful AP English Literature and Composition teacher when she began questioning the exclusivity her course represented. Here she shares how she was able to open her course to all students willing to attempt the challenge, while maintaining and even raising her intellectual standards.

I learned early in my career to shut my door and teach. While I was frustrated by a rigid curriculum that did not meet the needs of all of my students, I didn't feel any power to challenge the assigned course outline. I learned to execute a lesson plan that incorporated approved curriculum when supervisors settled in the back of my classroom to observe. Otherwise, I went back to teaching my way, modeling my cooperating teachers and my most respected high school and college instructors, and dealing with "the push and pull of classroom realities" (Pirie 6).

Although I did not know it at the time, my frustrations mirrored many who leave the profession. National studies show former teachers find more autonomy over their work and more personal influence on policies and practices in their new professions than they did as public school teachers (Marvel et al. 3). We know, as teachers, the frustrations of prescribed, strictly enforced curricula. We know this leads some to leave the profession.

But do we, who are so frustrated by strict rules, allow our students the power of choice? Doesn't it make sense that secondary students feel as constrained by content mandates as their teachers? We can teach the skills and processes of English without a one-size-fits-all approach. Students can succeed when we allow them to choose the courses they take, the texts they read, the processes of their growth, and the products of their achievements.

Changing Demographics: Who Has the Right to Take AP?

By the time I was asked to teach Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition in 1998,

the demographics at my school consisted of approximately 21% minority students, 14% low-income, and 35% four-year-college-bound (National Center for Education Statistics). In contrast, the dozen students in my class were all white, four-year-college-bound, and all were middle-class. The student catalog listed the class as a highly selective, work-intensive course. The district-guided curriculum, essentially a British literature survey, began with *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* and included three Shakespearean tragedies: *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. Fresh from a summer AP workshop, I felt the pull of the modern texts that I wanted to teach. I didn't feel that I had the authority to vary much from my district's curriculum, and I knew that the Shakespeare that I loved was rich with language and themes that would allow for success on the AP exam. My students, all young scholars, invigorated me. That class was like an intellectual holiday. We wrestled with Grendel; commiserated with the Wife of Bath; bled with *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Lear*; moved (quickly) to Austen, Dickens, Hardy, and then to great poets, among them Blake, Browning, and Donne. When the AP scores came out in July, my district sent me a certificate commending me for the tremendous feat that we had achieved: in my school, which was significantly lower socioeconomically than the rest of the district, all of the students passed the test. My students had earned an unprecedented number of 5s, the highest score possible. I felt successful.

The feeling didn't last. Some current professional literature and one student changed my thinking about my idea of success. Caleb was the most gifted student leader that I had ever known, but his

dedication to the student government coupled with his organizational struggles hindered his grades. At the time, a grade of a B or better in eleventh-grade English and a teacher recommendation were required for an AP course. Because of Caleb's borderline grade

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in the prerequisite course, when he approached me about taking my twelfth-grade AP English course, I said no. I felt that the workload would impede his extracurricular activities and cause him too much stress. Four years later, after graduating from college

and winning a graduate fellowship to an Ivy League school, Caleb returned to my high school. I remember wondering what it was that made me think that he could not succeed in my class.

I asked myself whether all students could benefit from the strengths of an AP curriculum. And why should students have to choose between hours of homework and leadership in the student government? Could I teach my AP course differently? Instead of asking whether each child in my class was in the correct placement, I asked, "What circumstances will be the most effective catalyst for this student's development?" (Tomlinson 9).

The platform of AP was changing, too. Nationally, teachers were encouraged to admit students to AP courses without teacher recommendations. A colleague of mine, also an AP English teacher, embraced this philosophy, and we discussed the damage done when students, especially students on the cusp of being capable, are denied the chance to succeed in the course. We considered the possible detrimental effects to our top dozen or so students. Would diluting the talent of a class diminish the learning of those most gifted? How could we retain the challenge for all students while filling our courses with anyone interested? I decided it was wrong to deny students a chance.

I knew that there were naysayers and that the parents of my most-gifted students liked their mini-private school within our public one. Their elitist reactions mirrored those reported in a recent study of student attitudes toward traditional tracking structures: the highest-achieving students felt that the meritocracy was necessary and "believed their inherent intelligence and motivation warranted greater access to good teachers and rigorous

curriculum" (Yonezawa and Jones 19). While I was filled with righteous indignation toward this snobbery, I was experienced enough to recognize its implications. I could not sacrifice my best students to this action research project. I tried to tell myself that if I sacrificed a few 5s, it was OK, that all student experiences were important.

Weighing the Unintended Consequences of Inclusion

I did not underestimate the chance I took. The parents of my AP students were generally supportive but would not have agreed to anything that would impede their children scoring less than the coveted 5. Still, I persevered, and I dropped entrance criteria for my course; I only asked that students make the choice to accept a challenge. I visited eleventh-grade English classrooms and invited students with statements like, "If you are considering college, try this course." The numbers slowly grew, but I did not deviate much from the prescribed curriculum. I increased my time working with students after school and extended reading and project deadlines. I taught explicit reading strategies and dropped a few texts, electing close reading of fewer passages. By 2004, 88 students, 30% of the senior class, enrolled in the course.

Limited Choice: A Safe Challenge to the Status Quo

That year, responding to Alfie Kohn's reminder that "students do better when they are given choices" (8), I took a chance. I safely challenged my district's curriculum. I was not quite the maverick I had been in my younger days, when I would have shut the door and told the students to read anything they wanted. Instead, excited by my purpose, I started with Shakespeare. Over six weeks we danced with The Bard through three great tragedies as I allowed students to construct their own meaning from *one* of the texts instead of all three.

Early in the marking period, I introduced the three texts. I shared themes, characters, length, and varied plots. I was as honest as I could be about each level of difficulty. Students were given a week's time (outside class) to choose a text and a group (if desired). I felt comfortable guiding decisions as this process unfolded, but I conscientiously respected the students' decisions. In class, they col-

laborated to determine process and product. I gave few parameters: Mondays and Fridays (as shown in Figure 1) were structured by me and I promised no outside work. On these two days, I varied systematic vocabulary instruction, reviewed text structure

and literary devices, wove recurring themes and language, explored literacy critiques in various lenses, and shared poetry with related themes. Tuesdays were reserved for *Othello* group presentations, Wednesdays for *Hamlet*, and Thursdays for

FIGURE 1. Student-Suggested Project Choices

WEEK	MONDAY	TUESDAY: OTHELLO	WEDNESDAY: HAMLET	THURSDAY: LEAR	FRIDAY
1	Mondays were reserved for plot comparisons of the three texts and other literature, language analysis, and systematic vocabulary instruction. We incorporated poetry and related essays during this time.	Student work time			Fridays were writing days. We reflected on passages, analyzed language choices, or connected themes to our lives. The comparisons of the three tragedies became obvious, as did the relevance of each text, even in modern society.
2		Act 1: dramatic interpretation in modern dress and language	Act 1: class viewing and discussion of Kenneth Branagh's <i>Hamlet</i>	Act 1: three digital stories told from the perspectives of Cordelia, Lear, and Edmund	
3		Act 2: Socratic seminar led by students	Act 2: a romp through the Internet, with sites worth bookmarking, including podcasts at http://www.folger.edu and discovery of a <i>Macbeth</i> literary field trip with Google Earth at http://www.googlelitrips.org	Act 2: <i>King Lear</i> in musical interpretation. Students chose songs with themes and moods that mirrored the text.	
4		Act 3: viewing of selections of film <i>O</i> and poster that compared/contrasted versions	Act 3: students created a paraphrase game where students worked in small groups to interpret text	Act 3: an original graphic novel of the act shared with the class	
5		Act 4: Desdemona depicted in art, symbolic representations, and sharing of an original Desdemona in colored pencil	Act 4: a mock <i>Dr. Phil</i> episode with Hamlet, Ophelia, Gertrude, and Claudius	Act 4: the fool recites his important insights while a class discussion encourages reflection	
6		Act 5: video-taped dramatic interpretation	Act 5: live performance of the final scene, leaving Fortinbras to bring closure	Act 5: selections from <i>Ran</i> , the Japanese epic, and discussion	

This figure depicts the use of class time (45 minutes). Students (groups of about eight) were not limited to these suggestions. Because students were required to take an active role in three of the five presentations, presentation committees tended to comprise about five members.

King Lear. The students proposed their presentation ideas, including an original dramatic production, film, class involvement, and modern technology use such as video editing, music, or the Internet. Each person had to serve on three of five committees (each representing an act), and each had to present a dramatic reading of a soliloquy. The students were left to decide who, when, and how to structure each presentation.

Each group constructed meaning and shared its interpretations, and the understandings of the rest of the class grew in ways that I could not have imagined. Only three students, probably the future English majors, chose *King Lear*. Their attention to the text was astounding. And, no, the rest of the class never read *King Lear*, but I had to ask myself whether they would have within my traditional approach. Furthermore, the students' expertise with video-editing software astounded me. I learned more in that six-week time period as a teacher than I had in years. As Sara Kajder's student explained, I was no longer the only expert in the room; my students constructed their own meaning and used the Internet to research various technologies to share their constructed meaning.

I continued that year with the philosophy that students can choose their own reading, that they do not *have* to read the whole text, that engagement is increased when students are given freedom and a forum for collaboration, that schoolwork should be personally constructed and meaningful if it is going to engage their evenings and weekends. My students were more dedicated to these projects than anything I had ever assigned. These children-turned-scholars demonstrated Richard Allington's assertion that managed choice yields a "level of engagement in academic work [that is] high and sustained" (278). The culminating 45-minute timed-writing assessment produced some of the best writing I had seen.

Then: Success; Now: Deep Satisfaction

That summer, as I waited with trepidation for the July AP score report delivery, I reread students' spring course evaluations. Students felt challenged, even going so far as to state that although they were worried about the effect of the "other kids" (nontraditional AP students), they were surprised by the rigor of the course and they felt rewarded by the

experience. I reassured myself that I would continue to be experientially open, that I could improve next year. I could weather whatever storm awaited me. After that first experimental year, I looked over my "predictions list"—the list I make every spring where I privately imagine the AP score of each student in my class based on my AP training and all the classroom assessments. I hoped for at least five scores of 5, and I expected that at least 50 of the 88 would pass the exam with a 3 or better. I braced myself for about ten 1s. Because every student in the class chose to take the test, I was encouraged.

The intrinsic rewards of my experiment were great; I had sent minorities, English language learners, and mainstreamed special education students off to college in greater numbers that one year than all of my previous years of teaching combined.

Those students who would have been successful without me learned to mentor others and grew socially in ways I had not expected. Still, I needed the extrinsic reward of the AP score report: Every student met or exceeded my expectations, and eleven of the students had achieved a perfect score. When I received a district commendation for AP scores that year, I felt a deeper satisfaction than I did on the receipt of that first certificate years earlier. It wasn't simply that I stepped back and gave the students in my mixed-ability classroom a choice. I used tools to diagnose and differentiate. On reflection, I noted that these two building blocks allowed for student achievement.

Meeting Students Where They Are: Diagnosing Reading Level, Interests, and Motivation

I completed diagnostic work with my students before embarking on this project. Student achievement on careful selections of past AP exams gave me a sense of the reading levels. I was also able to access past PSAT verbal scores and state assessment scores. I discovered that students reading below grade level had enrolled in the course. Instead of approaching the guidance counselor for a student course change, I approached the media specialist for appropriate text choices and referred to my professional library for best practices in teaching reading comprehension at a variety of ability levels.

Readers at all ages are more capable when the subject appeals to them. Adolescents have myriad

experiences, and connecting these experiences to the text increases motivation (Alvermann and Moore 403). Taking the time early in the semester to learn about students' hobbies, talents, and goals was elemental in my success with guiding student reading choices. I had great success with journals. I gave prompt ideas but didn't mandate them (see figs. 2–5). Topics that encouraged students to share their experiences with reading and their lives outside of school were especially rich. I could encourage students to attempt more difficult texts when they had an interest in the subject and a relationship with me. I was able to motivate a student when I knew his or her future plans by offering authentic purposes for reading and writing, often shared personally before or after class. Additionally, I recognized that students have prior knowledge that I could only imagine, and that student experiences, especially with language learners, are different from mine. These journal entries were invaluable as I balanced standardized assessments with students' perceptions of themselves as readers and how they felt about the traditional practice of literary analysis. I was able to gauge students' comments in combination with my own judgments and students' prior achievement in order to determine appropriate reading selections (see fig. 3).

Seasoned teachers know that burn-out, often called “senioritis,” affects even the best high school students. When guiding student text, process, and product choice, I considered student work ethic.

FIGURE 2. Suggested Journal Topics to Diagnose Reading Affect

Create a timeline of your reading life. Include your first reading experiences and any books, magazines, or websites that you can recall being favorites and when. Color code types of reading and use personal symbols to indicate your emotional response to each text. You may use <http://www.xtimeline.com> if you choose.

What are your goals personally and professionally? Where will you work? What will your family look like? What will you read? Choose any year in the future and share your vision. How will your current reading help you achieve your goals?

Create a pie graph [see fig. 4] of the way you spend a typical weekday. Create another of your *ideal* weekday. Do the same for a weekend day. Explain why your actual time allocation does or does not compare to the ideal. What would you like to change? How will your time allocation allow you to reach your goals in life?

Some students live to read; others have to make it to a three-hour basketball practice before picking up a younger sibling from the day-care center. When students are invited to share how they spend their time each day (see fig. 4), two important things occur. The teacher acknowledges and values these conflicting pressures, and the students see that their daily choices of time affect their ultimate life goals. Sometimes students need this simple exercise to change their day-to-day time allocations, and others feel that at least their teacher knows of these existing constraints. Diagnostic work of this kind is invaluable when guiding student choice. It is hard for students to be motivated to read when their lives are so cluttered.

Text, however, *can* foster motivation (Guthrie and Wigfield 422). Journal entries and student-produced graphs give teachers information to guide reading choices. These responses may remind teachers that often students are reading; they are just not reading the traditionally assigned texts. While we must diagnose general levels of motivation, tapping into the best-case scenario for students can be the

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FIGURE 3. Suggested Journal Topics to Diagnose Reading Ability

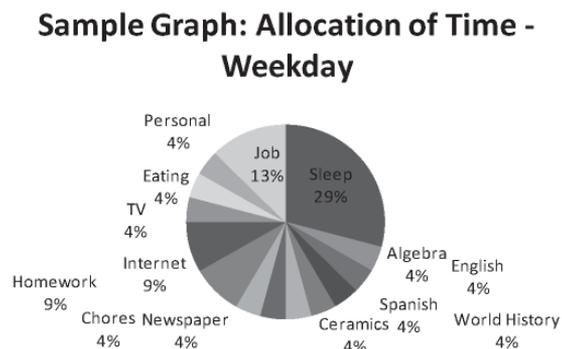
Consider your assigned reading in high school. List the assigned texts that you have read independently. Place an asterisk (*) beside the titles that you read in their entirety, a check plus (√+) next to the texts that you read most of, a check (√) next to the texts that you read some of, and a check minus (√-) next to the assigned texts that you did not read outside of class independently at all. Explain.

Describe your perceived ability as a reader. Create a line graph with grades 1–12 on the x axis and your perceived ability on the y axis [see fig. 5]. Interpret the results.

When your teacher suggests the meaning of a symbol and possible themes of texts, are you generally frustrated, surprised, or satisfied? Explain how you usually respond to these emotions in English class.

What reading for school are you most successful with? What readings outside of school enrich you? Consider books, websites, magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc.

FIGURE 4. Student Allocation of Time—Weekday

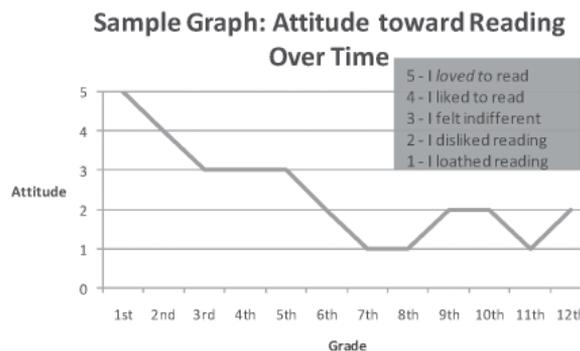


difference between reading enjoyment and aliteracy in the classroom. These probing journal prompts can be the bridge that joins the students' lives outside of school with the teacher's preconceived notions of those lives. Students will share the reasons that they don't read. We just have to ask.

They're All Different! Differentiating Content, Process, and Product

I started with a safe unit that allowed for limited student choice among three Shakespearean tragedies. Then, I got bolder. In my tenth-grade class, it became obvious that some students succeeded with independent reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, some found the screenplay helpful, and others benefited from watching the film prior to guided reading. Some students' interests were piqued when reading related court cases during the time of Jim Crow, others with psychological cases that mirrored Boo Radley's. When considering classroom objectives, text choice is profound. Douglas Fisher and Gay Ivey agree, explaining that the class novel is only effective when teacher objectives are that students become familiar with the characters, plots, and themes of the particular work: "Literature provides the reader with a mirror to examine oneself, a window to consider alternative experiences and beliefs, and a door to walk through forever changed." And, there isn't one text "that does this for every member of every class at the same time" (496). If the vocabulary or text structure is too difficult, there is little point in asking that students read independently. While, especially for adolescents, meaning is often created in collaboration, group work is

FIGURE 5. Attitude toward Reading Over Time



painful for some. Deadlines can vary; amount and ways of reading can diverge. Some compose in outlines, some on the keyboard, and some with pen on paper. Some students thrive with current technology; others prefer to cut and paste magazine pictures on a collage.

I hear teachers complain that they would love to give choices but that they simply cannot differentiate product, that students have to be prepared for the test. I disagree. Students can choose how to demonstrate their knowledge; by high school, most know how to take standardized assessments. Drama productions are not staged in their entirety until the dress rehearsal; football players do not train in full pads for 60 minutes of intense hitting every practice; runners do not practice for a marathon by running 26 miles. They train in a variety of ways and run shorter, more pleasurable, distances in preparation.

From Risk-Taking to Personal Satisfaction

This major shift in my thinking often frustrated and challenged me. I doubted myself and at times reverted to my traditional strategies that emphasized breadth over depth. I forgave myself and persevered with my new philosophy that English curriculum should be differentiated. To reach the greatest variety of learners, I had to offer students some choices. To find deep satisfaction, I had to have the courage to change.

I continue to wonder why we are still having this conversation, why student choices are still so limited in many English classrooms. Is it because some teachers are so wedded to the one text they

have been “teaching” for years? Are we, as teachers, concerned that students will choose a text that they read last year or that is the “territory” of the subsequent teacher? Is it because some principals do not want to fight the battle that can result when parents challenge book choices? Is it because district assessments are content driven? Is it because some supervisors don’t trust the choices that teachers may allow students to make? In my classroom experimentation, I achieved the confidence that allowed me to be a teacher leader. I no longer felt the need to teach a different lesson plan for the shows that were my twice-yearly evaluative observations. I earned respect in dialogue with my colleagues and supervisors, searching for a better way. I allowed myself the possibility of failure, but I did what I enjoyed. This is what our students need to do, too. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Short Story Fair: Responding to Short Stories in Multiple Media and Genres” invites students to read short stories from a collection in small groups and then prepare responses in multiple media and genres to be shared in a culminating Short Story Fair. Students’ presentations in the fair focus on communicating basic information about the story and encouraging others in the class to consider reading the piece. By the end of the activity, students have been exposed to dozens of short stories and their literary elements. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=418