I have a confession: I do not consistently follow the teaching philosophy I profess. When I began my education career as a junior in the Neag IB/M program at the University of Connecticut, I rarely imagined myself in front of the classroom or assigning papers and activities that didn’t include strong elements of student choice, voice, or creativity. However, when I accepted my teaching position as a seventh-grade language arts teacher in a small town, I found myself working for hours designing activities, lessons, and writing assignments that I thought would support my students’ inquiry and understanding. The seventh-grade curriculum was already constructed around themes that I loved, but rather than develop students’ interests within the thematic units, I taught what I thought would engage them. For example, during the first unit of study, “Perseverance,” students were assigned a story to write. It could be whatever they wanted, I said, except it needed to be historical fiction (we had been discussing and reading historical fiction); it had to have a minimum of four pages, and students were required to complete the various graphic organizers and planning sheets I provided. The seventh-grade language arts team had been assigning this story for years and adored it. Not only did it align with Common Core State Standards, it engaged students in the creative writing process, and it provided for interdisciplinary research work with the social studies team. It hit the trifecta. For teachers.

Despite my best intentions, students weren’t working with the stories they wanted to tell—the stories within them. As a result, they were engaging with the class material on a superficial level. Could I blame them? I wasn’t trying to be an evil teacher who assigned dull and difficult activities and papers; I was trying to provide them with various opportunities that I believed would engage and challenge them. And therein, my reader, lies the problem. As the human rights theorist Iris Marion Young states through her research, “The Five Faces of Oppression,” “In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (41). In my heart of hearts, I believed my classroom lessons supported my students’ growth and understanding of the English curriculum. I did not see it as a system that dictated my perception of what they should know. It was this realization that inspired me to explore the idea of a student-designed-and-led unit in my classroom.

Letting Students Lead the Way

Before starting the self-designed and student-led unit, I took time to explore student choice, its presence in the classroom, and its impact on learners, particularly adolescents. As we all know, adolescence is regarded as a transitional time in a person’s life, marked by increased responsibility, independence, and self-awareness. Yet Patrick N. Beymer and Margareta Maria Thomson remind us, “Unfortunately, schools appear to reduce choices and tighten controls as students’ autonomy needs begin
to increase” (108). Due to the demands of standardized testing and other initiatives, many educational systems are preventing young people from exploring their world, and as Thomas E. Barone points out, “Standardized schools with standardized visions of success tend to produce standardized human beings” (121). This valuable insight leads us, as teachers, to be more conscious of each student’s individual needs and desires.

In the face of this dilemma, teachers and researchers stress the importance of students’ choice, voice, and autonomy in their learning. Facilitating for personalized learning encourages students’ intellectual risk-taking, motivation, and independence in ways that may have been obstructed when working with a standardized curriculum (Jaquith and Hathaway 26). Catherine F. Brooks and Stacy L. Young extend this: “Offering students choices in a classroom may enhance their feelings of self-determination and intrinsic motivation to participate in class activities” (51), which may be done very simply, in fact, as Jean Jacques Rousseau (as cited in Forbes 30) suggests: merely asking a student what she wants to learn can engage her as the leader in the learning process.

Many teachers, however, are apprehensive when approaching significant student choice and a student-centered classroom. Often, teachers worry that a student-led curriculum will not challenge students (Rondone 28). Trust, therefore, is a crucial component in encouraging students to lead. Wendy J. Glenn discovered in an exploration of a co-designed unit on imagination that, “In this process, one of the first things that I had to admit was that students possessed ideas that I had not considered—good ideas, better ideas” (40). For teachers to encourage student voice and growth as learners, they need to acknowledge that they don’t have all the answers.

Additionally, Peter Gray and David Chanoff assert, “Spontaneity, natural curiosity, choice, and enjoyment should be accorded an important role in the educational process” (608). Providing young people the place in the classroom to exercise ownership of their education allows for exploration of new ideas, possibilities, and creativity. Time is, therefore, an important (and potentially challenging) factor in the student-led classroom. According to MaggieAnn Leysath, providing students ample time is crucial. “Time space” allows students to process, challenge, and work with the material in a meaningful way (142). Supplying students with plenty of time allows them to explore and play with the material they are learning, rather than speeding through it. Elliot W. Eisner confirms this, “Efficiency and speed in completing a task are characteristic of tasks that are distasteful” (Kind 22). Tasks such as the ones that Eisner mentions are not student-centered; they are not tasks that encourage student curiosity and independence. Rather, they are tasks that produce much of the same results without individuality, creative thought, and significance in students’ lives in and outside of the classroom.

Examining My Classroom

During my first semester as a sixth-year candidate in the Neag School of Education, I confronted the fact that my classroom had not always reflected the philosophies I have explored and believe. At the time, I was enrolled in a Human Rights and Social Justice in Education course. Each week the discussions centered on various well-intentioned education reforms and movements that, in many ways, hurt the people and students they were intended to help. The discussions of those theories stuck with me, and I found myself examining my classroom with regard to the activities, writing assignments, projects, and discussions I assigned to my students. Was I truly encouraging and supporting them as individual learners? Or was I operating under the pretense of well-intentioned classroom practices that appeared to engage students, but in truth discouraged them from becoming curious and independent learners?

In the fall of 2016, I proposed the idea of a student-generated unit. My students, though initially shocked (as evident by their big eyes and hanging jaws), enthusiastically agreed. As a class, we began putting their learning back in their hands.

The Best-Laid Plans

Before my students and I delved into the unit itself, we needed to spend time planning it. We began with a thoughtful and honest discussion: How did we want to proceed? Though I had initially
planned for the unit to be a collective study, I learned more about my students as the year went on and realized that a whole-class-led unit might not be best for all my students. If I truly wanted to explore student choice and personalized learning, I felt compelled to expand the nature of the unit itself. I asked my class if they preferred to work as a whole class or if they wanted to explore other groupings, including independent students, pairs, and small groups. The class debated the merits and concerns of both options before unanimously deciding to work in “other groups.” Immediately, I worried that students would use this opportunity to work with their friends and use class time to hang out. I encouraged students to work with someone new, but when I realized how mistrusting the intention of my statement was, I acknowledged it to the class and explained that this was a new process for me as well. We spent the rest of the class period expressing how we could support one another in this new endeavor.

For the following two weeks, we spent time examining how teachers design essential questions and understandings. We discussed what we wanted to learn about survival and crafted those wonderings into questions. Students selected their groups and met with me to discuss the questions upon which they wanted to focus their inquiry. As a class, we met with the school librarian who was kind enough to pull various fiction and nonfiction texts that contained survival themes. Between the school library, my classroom library, and the seventh-grade book closet, groups and independent studies were able to select texts that intrigued them.

We then met to discuss how to plan the unit. Because students were reading different texts and discussing different concepts, characters, and plots, a collective class agenda would not be appropriate. At this time, I did impose a version of my own planning format. In their groups, or as independent learners, students planned out the next three weeks. We left one period out of our daily double block on Fridays for a class discussion, which students wanted to use to talk to their peers about their inquiries. We also decided that I would meet with each of the groups during the second half of our block. These meetings would provide opportunities for the students and me to reflect on their progress.

During our planning process, students also discussed their final assessments. Using the essential questions we crafted, students asked: How can we demonstrate what we learned to the class? Students agreed that there should be elements of writing and speaking in their demonstration, but the genre of writing and presentation style would be up to the students. Throughout the unit, I used students’ daily reflections as weekly participation grades. Their final presentation was graded in two ways: each student earned an individual presentation grade as well as a content-based grade that reflected understanding, exploration, and application of the selected essential questions.

Throughout the process of crafting guiding questions, objectives, discussions, and final assessments, my students and I had to work to avoid getting caught up in the idea of “doing this unit perfectly.” This was a learning experience for all of us, we reminded ourselves. While rereading Wendy Glenn’s article, “Imagine the Possibilities: A Student-Generated Unit to Inspire Creative Thought,” I found the quote she used from Eisner to be particularly poignant, “Goals need to be flexible and that surprise counts . . . that purposeful flexibility rather than rigid adherence to prior plans is more likely to yield something of value” (36). I shared the quote with my class the following day, and we decided to welcome the surprises in learning.

Throughout the unit and upon its completion, my students and I engaged in daily written reflective practices. These reflections allowed us to consider how we worked that day, what we learned, and what we wanted to adjust or reconsider for the following day. The culminating reflection provided a holistic examination of the unit. The following takeaways from our collaboration address both the successes and challenges of our student-led unit.

This unit was not for everyone.
While some students felt they took a lot from it, others did not. Differences in this regard primarily stemmed from the level of independence. In Conor’s final reflection he stated, “I learned some very valuable things that if I had been in a unit that you designed I would not have learned. I also liked the feeling of being on my own. It made me feel very independent.” In contrast Mahika shared, “I wouldn’t want to do another student-designed
unit again because I don’t feel like I had enough knowledge to be in charge of what I do. I need someone to tell me specifically what to do otherwise I just fool or talk the entire class.” Some students really felt they wanted specific directions and solutions from me. Although this unit by nature was intended to reach all students where they were as learners, I was ultimately confronted with the fact that the unit didn’t serve each student’s needs or desires as learners. However, for students who were searching for more independence and personal inquiry, this unit provided the space and time to accomplish that.

Obstacles and challenges are inevitable—it is all about how you face them.

This unit required a lot of student autonomy in regards to the content as well as their ability to monitor themselves and/or work with others. On my personal reflection for March 23, 2017, I discussed a challenge that was taking up much of my time: “I still have one pair that is struggling to work together, even though they’re friends. Which, perhaps is one of the reasons they’re struggling. So, it’s difficult for me to mediate without really stepping in too much.” As a result, I sat down with the girls and we discussed our expectations of ourselves as well as expectations of each other. I shared with them how I manage disagreeing with colleagues with whom I had to work, and we identified various strategies that they could use to succeed. Our conversation helped resolve some of the issues they were facing and assisted them in fixing future disagreements. In many ways, lessons such as these were more valuable than the project itself. Time constraints can pose additional challenges when trying to resolve interpersonal issues within groups. In such situations, students did what they felt was necessary. Irene noted, “One was Tiffany getting stressed and getting angered and sad about the project. I had to ignore it in order to work on my part of it but at the same time, I had to make sure that I kept her and Sofia from fighting.” Other students also felt, at various points, they had to disregard the group dynamic to accomplish the goals they set for themselves. Resolving group conflicts can take time, which was a pressure both the students and I felt.

We learned more about ourselves as learners.

The idea of learning about oneself as a learner encompassed a variety of factors. Some students realized they enjoyed engaging in certain activities, and others became aware of how they learned or worked as an individual. Lauren shared, “What I really enjoyed about this unit is that if we needed help you were there to help us but we got to figure it out on our own and learn from our mistakes.” As the unit progressed and after it ended, I saw more students who were willing to solve issues on their own without needing or wanting to ask me for assistance. I found this level of independence encouraging and exciting. Lauren C. cemented her need as a learner to create: “A main part of the project for me was understanding characters. I would write character traits of characters on a human-shaped tracing to further my understanding of them. This technique definitely worked for me, I was able to understand each character and know how they felt during situations. Some activities that didn’t work for me were simple writing activities.” It was valuable also for students, not just as learners, to learn more about themselves, what they thought would be good for them, and what they may not have been ready for.
I would like to engage in this process again. However, there are a few key elements that I would like to change. Facilitating this process made it clear to me that a collective class inquiry might be a better option. In this capacity, students could pursue smaller independent elements, but the whole class would explore, learn, and work together, myself included. Also, I would focus less on interviewing students and more on communicating with them in real time. I was able to do this throughout the unit, but I believe my interactions with students would be more effective if I were more flexible about the timing of when those conversations would be most helpful, rather than strictly following a schedule. I realize that this more accurately fulfills Eisner’s admonishment of what I had planned to do. Lastly, I do not want to fear interjecting myself into their learning process as much as I did. Because this was a student-led unit, I wanted to give them the space to work out their own conflicts. Too much interference on my part risked imposing myself as a teacher rather than an agent. Students rose to the challenge, but in doing so, some, I believe, felt varying degrees of additional pressure.

Conclusion

This unit inspired in us a willingness to take risks, embrace imperfections, and welcome surprises. As James P. Carse tells us in *Finite and Infinite Games*, “Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries” (10). In developing and leading this unit, students became infinite players who explored personal interests and inquiries, often expanding themselves beyond the limitations of a teacher-determined curriculum. It is this that brings us to the heart of education, to “make each individual aware of his [or her] own human potentialities and his [or her] common humanity with others. Only then can schooling be truly liberating, as it frees the individual to think and act beyond the confines and conventions of his [or her] own age” (Sykes as cited in Glenn 41). When provided the space to wonder and explore beyond the restrictions of a dictated curriculum, students were freed from the constraints they typically felt. They were able to wrestle with, reflect on, and negotiate their learning. Despite the challenges we faced throughout this unit, it was truly a learning experience. For 90 minutes a day, over the course of six weeks, we learned more about each other as individuals and learners; we spent more time listening to one another, and in letting go of my ideas of how my classroom should look, I was able to take a step back and learn to appreciate my students as the critical and creative thinkers they are. As a class we learned how to learn, how to communicate and collaborate with one another. It is so simple, but the truth is, “When adults show youth they care about their ideas and provide them opportunities to voice them, it sends a powerful message that they are valued” (Nichols and Good 15). When I look back on this unit, my mind returns to two main lessons: for my students, one of self-discovery, and for me, one of humility, which taught me to be more of a guide and less of an instructor.

Works Cited


Glenn, Wendy J. “Imagine the Possibilities: A Student-Generated Unit to Inspire Creative Thought.” *English Journal*, vol. 92, no. 5, 2003, pp. 35–41.


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<th>READWRITETHINK CONNECTION</th>
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<td>Because student-led projects address the research process as much as the product or results of the research, students need time and space to reflect on and record their day-to-day progress. This chart asks students to consider their challenges and successes across the span of the research process, from question formulation to the final write-up. <a href="http://bit.ly/2ChH9YH">http://bit.ly/2ChH9YH</a></td>
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Late Comer

The muezzin rose late
began his calls later than the others
whose strains now filled the thin air
before his baritones could wake the birds,
contain the pre-dawn silence.

He had wanted to be first, strain his voice
earlier, the most forceful—but now berated
himself for being last, the much later than
those pre-emptive callers to their moon—
a lantern of recitations offered
to sleepers now rising up, bending over
in layered repetitions of competitive prayers;
hands cocoon ears, hold in phrases of faith
paragraphs of sound for the soul’s soul
written paper voices poured from minarets.

The loudest calls predominate, overlap
this johnny-come-lately caller out to all
who finish as he started—late.

—Melanie Swetz
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