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Motivating Students through Power and Choice

Describing an assignment for which groups of students designed and assessed projects on Arthur Miller's* The Crucible*, a high school teacher and a doctoral student show how curricular freedom can empower students.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he should know, what he shall do" (102). As teachers of American Literature, we admire Emerson's faith in the individual and find Thoreau's resistance to conformity an act of daring bravery, and as we think about these enlightened men and their ideals in relation to students, we wonder: If given the opportunity, would individual freedom and choice motivate students in the 21st-century classroom?

If allowed the time to adjust to such power and guidance on how to use it, we think that individual freedom would motivate students to achieve scholastic excellence and embrace personal empowerment. Teacher control in the classroom has constructed an environment in which we no longer trust students, and they do not trust themselves. We have faith that students want to learn despite the incredible resistance we all face in the classroom. Students aren't resisting learning; they're resisting the whole context in which they are taught. This resistance has encouraged us to examine how changing the power structure in classrooms can encourage creativity and motivate students to have power over their learning.

Theoretical and Methodological Background

Both progressive education and critical pedagogy support the theory that a democratic classroom will lead to more engaged students. George S. Counts critically defines progressive education as education that has "focused attention squarely upon the child; it has recognized the fundamental importance of the interest of the learner; it has defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; it has conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; it has championed the rights of the child as a free personality" (258). William Kilpatrick defines it as a pedagogy where "clues to significant content can be found within the learner and can be developed fully in collaboration with a mature adult who fosters self-direction and independent thought" (qtd. in Van Til 3). However, many critics such as Williamson M. Evers use frightening language suggesting that school will be all "playing" and there will be no room for core (privileged) subjects, nor will there be any need for hard work because it will all be easy, fun, playtime. We think that Evers's criticism is a serious underestimation of students.

William Glasser's "control theory" exemplifies his attempts to empower students and give them voice by focusing on their basic, human needs: Unless students are given power, they may exert what little power they have to thwart learning and achievement through inappropriate behavior and mediocrity. Thus, it is important for teachers to give students voice, especially in the current educational climate, which is dominated by standardization and testing.

Adopting any form of progressivism including critical pedagogy is confusing, laborious, risky, and complicated; however, until our current oppressive climate in education changes, individual teachers can work at the grassroots level by creating

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opportunities that allow us to motivate and work *with* adolescents to ask questions, create knowledge, examine social issues, and further opportunities for critical thinking.

The project presented in this article allowed students to re-present thematic knowledge from a district-sanctioned reading, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible.* Students were given the opportunity to establish the terms of the project by creating the rubric collaboratively as well as to represent Miller's themes as contextual problems in their own lived experiences. Our desired goal was to engage students by inviting them, as Ira Shor does, "to invent with me a negotiated curriculum in a mutual process that repositions us, opening the chance to pass through the membrane separating them and me" (19). Our goal was to begin creating an environment in which students are motivated to perform at a high level by sharing power with them and giving students responsibility and control over their educational experience.

As this project was an attempt to help motivate students through a change in their perception of power in the classroom, we responded by telling them that they had complete control over how their group wanted to portray a theme in *The Crucible.*

Introduction of the Self-Directed Project

As we introduced the shared power structure of a democratic classroom, we explained to the students that there was only one requirement to the project: reflect a theme portrayed in *The Crucible.* We began by telling them that they could do "whatever they want" to reflect the theme, but they should focus on their strengths as a group and ensure that each group member had a significant role in the presentation.

The students found it difficult to think differently from the ways in which they had been previously schooled. Their first question was, "What do you mean by 'anything you want'?" As this project was an attempt to help motivate students through a change in their perception of power in the classroom, we responded by telling them that they had complete control over how their group wanted to portray a theme in *The Crucible.* We then gave them examples of what they could do: skit, video, rap, collage, cartoon, puppet show, song, dance, multigenre project, etc. What each group chose, we suggested, should depend on the strengths of the group members. Some students were enthusiastic, but others were in shock over the lack of rules and restrictions.

Student Groups as a Tool for Motivation

We constructed heterogeneous groups to promote a democratic environment and motivate students in the class. Glasser gives the following reasons for heterogeneous grouping:

1. Students can achieve "a sense of belonging." Teams should be teacher selected "so that they are made up of a range of low, middle, and high achievers."
2. "Belonging provides the initial motivation for students to work." As students experience scholastic success, students who were previously less motivated "begin to sense that knowledge is power and then want to work harder."
3. "The stronger students find it need-fulfilling to help the weaker ones" because successful teamwork leads to friendship.
4. Because "whatever they contribute [now] helps," weaker students are more likely to contribute to the team. When faced with a task to do on their own, "a little effort got them nowhere."
5. "Students need not depend only on the teacher. They can depend a great deal on themselves, their own creativity and other members of their team." By relying on one another and working independent of the teacher, students gain "both power and freedom."
6. "Learning-teams can provide the structure that will help students to get past the superficiality that plagues our schools today." Without heterogeneous grouping, "there is little chance for any but a few students to learn enough in depth to make the vital knowledge-is-power connection."
7. "The teams are free to figure out how to convince the teacher and other students (and parents) that they have learned the material. Teachers will encourage teams to offer evidence (other than tests) that the material has been learned."
8. "Teams will be changed by the teacher on a regular basis so that all students will have a chance to be on a high-scoring team." (75–76)

Glasser's reasoning for the creation of heterogeneous groups suggests that the best motivator for students is cooperation and friendly competition with their peers.

Motivating through Collaboration

Another way we motivated students to achieve high standards was to give them the power to set those standards for themselves; therefore, a class-created grading system was needed. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy,* Shor states, "I also took the initiative in distributing responsibility for evaluation. . . . [I asked the students] to do written assessments of the oral project reports, which I then relayed to the groups. In addition, I gave each group my own written evaluation and a group grade" (163). We followed Shor's lead by having the class collaborate and create expectations in the form of a rubric.

The entire class would grade the quality of each group presentation based on the class-created rubric, and the teacher would also give a separate grade. The average of the teacher's grade with the class's grade produced each group's final grade. Creating the rubric together allowed the groups to discuss the quality they wanted to see from their classmates' presentations and what they thought they were realistically capable of producing by the deadline. This power alone made students more secure in their ability to be successful in fulfilling the project requirements, motivating them to be creative in their presentation to the class and less focused on "what the teacher wants." The rubric they created (see fig. 1) was similar to any teacher-created rubric, but the language was different and the point value assigned to each requirement is based on what the students thought was most important: creativity. Composing the rubric in the students' language also helped students in grading presentations because they did not have to decipher the teacher's language.

Our class-created rubric shows how students have the ability to set high standards for themselves and motivate one another by holding their peers accountable for those standards; accountability need not be forced on students, disproving Evers's criticism of democratic and progressive classrooms as all play and no work.

FIGURE 1. Class Created Rubric for *The Crucible* Group Projects

Creativity _____/30
Original idea, unique presentation, visually appealing, entertaining

Quality _____/25
Quality effort is apparent.
Theme is accurately represented.
If there are props, they are explained and used effectively and aren't just "there."
Facts are correct, group members are knowledgeable about their topic/theme.

Group Participation _____/20
All group members have a substantial role in the presentation/project.
It is apparent that they worked as a group, and one person didn't do all the work.
They engaged the audience.

Organization _____/15
All group members know their role in the presentation.
Presentation "flows" and is not choppy or disjointed.
It is obvious that the group rehearsed.

Presentation _____/10
Voice projection, eye contact, no gum chewing, etc.
No "ummmm" or "like, you know."
There was appropriate energy.
The presentation was between 8–15 minutes.

Comments: **Total: _______/100**

Motivating through Creative Freedom

When first beginning their group projects, students resisted freedom and sought out teacher leadership and approval. Most of the time, the questions began with, "Is it OK if we . . . ?" When faced with this question, we tried to direct it back to the group. We asked what the other group members thought of the idea, if it fulfilled the requirements on the class-created rubric, and if it portrayed a theme from *The Crucible.* By posing these questions, students were motivated to answer their own questions by anticipating the teacher's questions.

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The actual presentations varied in quality and creativity and were graded accordingly by the stu-

dents. Each group chose a theme that they found most interesting in the play, such as how revenge can backfire, how guilt can destroy a person's self-perception, how superstition if not balanced with logic can lead to chaos, and how corrupted authority figures can manipulate others to conceal the truth. To portray these themes and others, students made videos that parodied the play or portrayed a modern interpretation. Students created multigenre projects that included raps about their theme, cartoons telling the fate of the characters after the play ended, drawings that portrayed a theme, and skits of scenes they thought should have been added to the play. Most groups composed a variety of genres to ensure that all group members' talents were utilized. Having been given the freedom to choose how they would represent a theme, the students produced more creative, interesting, and insightful work than anything we could have told them to do.

When given high expectations set by their peers and the faith of the teacher in their ability to be fair and accurate, students can assess themselves in a manner that appropriately represents ability and effort.

Motivating through Equality

As stated earlier, the average of all class grades was averaged with the teacher's individual grade to obtain each group's final score. Out of 18 groups, the grades broke down as follows:

- The number of times the average class grade was **higher** than teacher's grade: 9. (In these cases, the average difference between the teacher's grade and the average class grade was 2.4 points out of 100 total points.)
- The number of times the average class grade was **lower** than the teacher's grade: 4. (In these cases, the average difference between the teacher's grade and the average class grade was 3 points out of 100 total points.)
- The number of time the average class grade was **the same** as the teacher's grade: 5.

The small variance in the average between the class's grade and the teacher's grade shows that there is no need for the teacher to take absolute control of the classroom to get accurate results. When you "respect the child," the child will respect the task assigned (Emerson 102). When given high expectations set by their peers and the faith of the teacher in their ability to be fair and accurate, students can assess themselves in a manner that appropriately represents ability and effort. However, to motivate students to grade fairly, the grade the class gives must have meaning, or the teacher is not showing genuine trust in the students. In addition, "if 'student empowerment' is going to be meaningful, students not only need to be involved in some of the problem-solving and posing practices . . . , but teachers must fundamentally change their methods" (Peterson 374). In this case, the class's averaged grade and the teacher's grade were weighted the same and had equal importance to the group's final grade. Knowing that their voices counted motivated students to express their ideas and act in a responsible manner.

Using Class Surveys as a Tool for Future Motivation

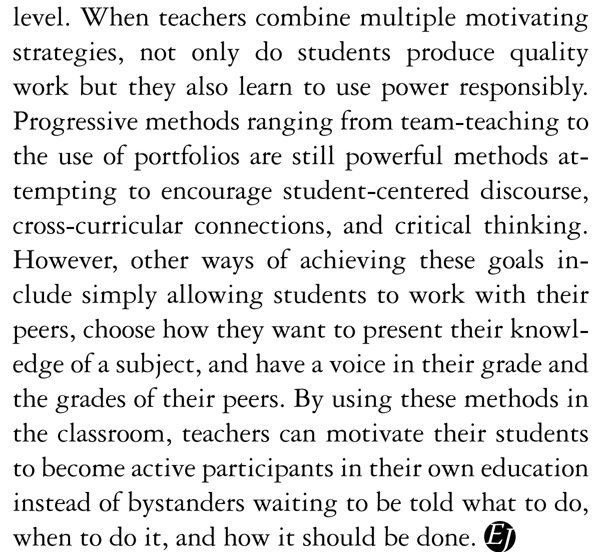
When the project was completed, students were asked in a survey designed according to Shor's model if they had any suggestions for future projects. The most repeated request was to let them choose their own groups. When we discussed it in class, there was strong emotion expressed. On one side of the argument, students said that teacher-generated groups broke up cliques and allowed them to meet new people. On the other hand, those who wanted to choose their groups said it had nothing to do with cliques but with talent. For example, one student, a member of the drama club, said he would have created a better product if his group had more people who like to act. He said he had a lot of people in his group who feared public speaking, so the skit wasn't very good. Others nodded their heads in agreement and said the same things about art and musical ability. As teachers, we faced a conundrum because we strongly support heterogeneous groups for the reasons stated above, but if we did not take their opinion seriously or try to compromise, our attempts to create a more democratic classroom would be disingenuous. Our goal was to motivate students through empowerment, and according to Robert Peterson, "Empowerment does not mean 'giving' someone their freedom. Nor does it mean creating a type of surface 'empowerment' in which one gives the students the impression that they are 'equal' to the

teacher. The challenge for the teacher who believes in student empowerment is to create an environment which is both stimulating and flexible in which students can exercise increasing levels of power while regularly reflecting upon and evaluating the new learner-teacher relationship" (373–74). If nothing was done with the information the students provided, we would be promoting the myth of empowerment, not creating it within the students, therefore deflating any achieved motivation for future success. Before the next project, we will try something new as a compromise: Students will write down their talents or abilities and at least three project ideas. After collection, the teacher will look at the array of talents and ideas and match the groups according to interest and ability.

We also asked the students if creating a rubric collaboratively and allowing the class to grade the groups were good ideas. One student said that it put too much pressure on students to be judged by their peers. In response to that comment, which concerned us, another student came up with a philosophical answer. He said, "We are judged every day when we walk down the halls of this school. At least in this project we are judged on our work." Most students agreed that knowing they were going to be graded by the class motivated them to work harder because they wanted to give their classmates a reason to give them a high grade. Therefore, the class grading system created healthy competition that encouraged most students to perform at their highest level.

Conclusion

This project demonstrated that there are many ways to motivate students to perform at their highest



level. When teachers combine multiple motivating strategies, not only do students produce quality work but they also learn to use power responsibly. Progressive methods ranging from team-teaching to the use of portfolios are still powerful methods attempting to encourage student-centered discourse, cross-curricular connections, and critical thinking. However, other ways of achieving these goals include simply allowing students to work with their peers, choose how they want to present their knowledge of a subject, and have a voice in their grade and the grades of their peers. By using these methods in the classroom, teachers can motivate their students to become active participants in their own education instead of bystanders waiting to be told what to do, when to do it, and how it should be done.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION **Lisa Storm Fink, RWT**

In "An Exploration of *The Crucible* through Seventeenth-Century Portraits," students incorporate analyses of characters from *The Crucible* into examinations of original 17th-century portraits of Puritans to create a visual portrait of the character. The project culminates in a "Portrait Gallery Walk" during which students present and defend their artwork. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploration-crucible-through-seventeenth-30513.html