

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT: STUDENTS CREATE AND COMPLETE SELF-GENERATED ACTIVITIES IN A DYSTOPIAN NOVEL UNIT

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ABSTRACT

In this reflective piece, two English educators, one high school level and one secondary level, detail how they employed a project-based approach to tackling texts that were problematic for their classrooms. Students in both classes were given control of their learning through a small group approach where they set the deadlines, the assignments, and the outcomes in their work with dystopian texts. Placing the responsibility for learning in the hands of the class was an empowering and motivating experience for the students and an act of reflective practice for the instructors.

This project was a collaboration between two English educators. One of the teachers is a secondary educator and the other is a post-secondary teacher. We became acquainted through the Arizona English Teachers Association, a local professional organization of English teachers and scholars. As educators, we wanted to bridge our divergent yet common curricula. Mary teaches at an ethnically diverse Title I school in Phoenix that is a third Latino, a third African American, and a third Caucasian. Maria teaches first year composition and young adult literature to secondary English education students at a private university in Phoenix. This article describes the instructors' experiences with teaching a dystopian novel unit, one which both instructors struggled with in the past. Using student-driven, project based instruction, students were afforded ownership over their learning, becoming engaged in the process of the lesson, and more excited about what they are studying. Both teachers used reflective pedagogy as a theoretical framework for studying their practice and their students' learning.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In resonance with reflective practice, Donald Schön (1983) referred to educators exercising “professional artistry” when they bring their

expertise and experience to bear on “unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice” (p. 22). While “professional artistry” may appear too weighty a term to apply to our units, Schön’s description is apt. This research culminated because we were working with dystopian literature that was problematic for our instruction. Mary had difficulty engaging herself and her high school students in *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932), the traditionally taught text at the tenth-grade level. She believed that if students could be afforded a choice in the dystopian literature that they read, they would be more interested in its content. On the other hand, Maria’s college students had to read *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008) as a required text, and because of the texts’ popularity and her students’ attachment to and familiarity with it, the text was problematic in generating meaningful discussion. These circumstances, coupled with our prior teaching experiences, allowed for us to experiment with instruction, resulting in greater student engagement.

To achieve the aims of modifying our assignments and motivating our students, we determined that these units would be best if they were student-driven. Kallick and Zmuda (2017) argued that classrooms that do this well find the individual balance of how much of the

lesson is teacher-derived versus student-driven in the following areas: goals, idea generation, audience, evaluation, feedback, instruction, and demonstration of learning. Depending on factors such as student age or proficiency levels, these areas can be dialed toward teacher or student, somewhat like a mixing board, as described by Kallick and Zmuda (2017). These were all areas of consideration as we modified the unit expectations for each of our classes. As much as possible we empowered our students to be, in the words of Zou, Mickleborough, Ho, and Yip (2015), “learning experience designers”(p. 179).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

We modeled our teaching off of project-based learning, which allows for students to take ownership over the content they are studying by co-creating assignments with the instructor. In many instances, students are completely in charge of their learning and assessment; coupled with collaborative work and reflection, a sense of agency is created (Barron et al., 1998). By affording students choice in their reading and activities, they become more vested in their learning (Wilhelm, 2006). When teachers ask for students to engage collaboratively in cognitively complex tasks that involve problem solving, answer-finding and artifact-producing, gains are made in students’ learning and motivation (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). By converting traditional reading and discussion into a kinesthetic, student-driven task, we provided students with the opportunity to gain depth rather than breadth in their learning. Our hope was also to produce greater student engagement than might be found in a typical classroom working with an assigned text. Research has found that student engagement increases when there is an equitable match between student skill and the challenge of the task, when the learning is in the student’s control, and when it is more collaborative in nature (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Steele Shernoff, 2003). These were all considerations in generating our units.

Mary’s Problem

As a high school English teacher, I am taxed with a myriad of activities including lesson planning, grading, and completing professional development tasks for my sophomore Professional Learning Community. By the end of the school

year, I am exhausted, so when I contemplated teaching a dystopian novel at the end of the year, I wondered, where I would derive the energy to do so. Further, I discovered that the novel commonly read for dystopian literature is *Brave New World*. I cannot stand the book! I tried to read it over the summer, but with characters that remained dry metaphors for me, I just couldn’t bring myself to teach it. Desperate, I began foraging in our bookroom and discovered several dystopian novels—*Catch 22* by Joseph Heller (1961), *Anthem* by Ayn Rand (1938), *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945), *1984* by George Orwell (1949), and *Fahrenheit 454* by Ray Bradbury (1953). There were so many books our English department had accumulated that were unused. I decided to ask my students to select their own dystopian novel. I wanted them to create and complete their own reading and writing activities and projects. They wrote their assignments, deadlines for those assignments, and took initiative over their learning.

Maria’s Problem

The class I was teaching contained 40 secondary education English students. They were mostly freshmen with a mixture of other grade levels. None of the students had started their student-teaching. Since most of the students had not yet taken an education course I didn’t want them to do a formal lesson plan they would have been unprepared for. However, as future educators, I did want them to grapple with teaching a text, aligning their content related to that text to our Arizona State Standards, and afford them the opportunity to score an assessment in this process.

Unlike Mary, who allowed her students to select their books, my class would read the required course dystopian text, *The Hunger Games*. My students were quite familiar with *The Hunger Games*. Most of them had read all of the books in the series, sometimes multiple times, and they had usually viewed all of the films. In prior semesters, discussing the text had sometimes devolved into students discussing their love for particular characters, or expanded into discussing the plotlines of the series or a comparison to the films. It was often challenging to get them to do anything meaningful with this text because they knew it so well.

I adapted Mary’s lesson by asking students to work in small, instructor-assigned groups to

approach the texts from the perspective of teachers, and planning lessons based on the text that met Arizona State standards. Over the course of two 105-minute class meetings, in week 10 of a 15-week semester, students worked to create project assignments, accompanying rubrics, and exemplar projects.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Mary's Activity

I introduced the dystopian novels to my students. Some chose books we had at school but others selected books that they found on their own: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985), *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006), and *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess (1962) were a few of the titles. I explained my expectations to my students (see Figure 1).

Create the following: A) Deadlines to complete the readings that work for your group. Write these down. Decide if you will read in or out of class or both. You must follow through!
B) Three assignments that allow for people to take notes on the novel (you pick the how (RRJ, Venn diagram, etc.) and the what out of the novel). Examples include symbolism, dystopian themes, motifs, conflict, DSP, etc. *Write the assignment topics at the top of the page for all of these portions! These are worth 20 points apiece, 60 total.
C) Write three to five activities that you can do that will further your understanding of the novel. Write deadlines for them. Then complete these. Run these by me first before you start them and agree on the deadlines with your group. One of these must be a nonfiction article in which you take ideas from the article and apply them to your novel. These are worth 30 points each. These can be written, artistic or a mix!
D) Create some sort of written or artistic project that you will complete in your group as a culminating project. This is due to present to the class May 1, after the novel is completed. This is worth 200 points. (You will be assessed on creativity and hard work).
*You will briefly summarize the book to the class first, then present your projects to us—engage the class in an activity!
*Your projects are due to present on May 1st!

Figure 1. Mary's Assignment Description

I told the students, "This assignment will make or break you. If you work timely and effectively

you will do well. If you procrastinate, you will find yourself in a heap of trouble." The students immediately got to work. Many relied on activities that we had done prior as a whole class, such as taking reader's response notes and writing Socratic questions, and then leading mini-Socratic seminars in their small groups. Other students went out on a limb and chose divergent ideas. Some created timelines of the novel or drawings of the characters. Others listened to music or viewed artwork online, and then juxtaposed those mediums to the novel based on a mini-lesson that I had conducted using Tupac's "California Love," an apocalyptic video well-known for its interesting take on Los Angeles as a dystopia. Students thoroughly enjoyed selecting

Worth 50 points (30 book log + 20 participation) Your job is to plan and implement your own assignment based on The Hunger Games. Begin by finding at least 2 Arizona ELA 9-12 standards that you will assess in this assignment. Create a written or artistic project assignment that you will plan and then complete as a group. The goal of this project is to further understanding of the novel. The project will be presented in class on Thursday. You must deliver the following:
A comprehensive assignment description, including all details and requirements for the assignments. Also include the AZ state standards that this assignment will assess and the targeted grade level. A scoring guide or rubric for how the assignment will be assessed. A completed exemplar project that meets the requirements which you will also present to the class.

Figure 2. Maria's Assignment Description

their tasks no matter if they relied on something they had learned from me or if they initiated their own assignment.

Maria's Activity

The activity took place over the course of two class meetings. On the first day, I introduced the assignment and provided them with specific directions (see Figure 2). I also placed the students in small groups. Their task was to plan an assignment for students based on *The Hunger Games*. They needed to identify the grade level and accompanying Arizona State Standards they would be using to create the assignment, and create a rubric to score that assignment. They also needed

to each deliver exemplar projects of the assignment, meaning they were creating an example of what they would expect a student to submit for the planned assignment. Time would be provided during the next class meeting to finalize the projects and put finishing touches on the work before presenting the lessons and sample assignments to the class.

RESULTS

Mary's Results

Some students tried to submit work for a 20-point assignment that took them 10 minutes or less and was of poor quality. I handed back these papers and told them to add to them and think about what 20 points is worth. I said, "If you give me 20 dollars and I give you a donut you will feel cheated. Don't cheat yourself or me; do the amount of work for the points that you are earning." This was a good lesson in initiative. The students went back to the drawing board and generated new assignments. In this way, they reflected upon their practice and co-constructed new projects that were more suiting, a valuable lesson in working in teams and managing their own learning.

The activities were a great lesson in time management and teamwork. For example, in some groups, members did not complete their assignments by the deadline. Their group-mates would admonish these few individuals. "Stop procrastinating and get it done!" exclaimed one female to a male, in her group, who had clearly not finished his work. It was great to see the students advise each other about completing tasks rather than me doing so. It was likely more effective as well.

When it came to the project, which was Part D of the assignment, students generated some ingenious ideas. One group, who read *Anthem*, created a piñata that was a light bulb and filled it with candy. They asked for the class to make a choice, crack open the piñata, and grab the candy or keep the "light" intact. Of course, the students chose to break it open. This became a metaphor for humanity and greed which overtakes the light of the world—the bulb was also a prominent symbol in the novel. Another group, who read *1984*, built a paper mâché globe that displayed different areas of the city that the characters travel through. They used string to mark each point on the globe and created mini-clay models to demonstrate and symbolize

each landmark. These projects were memorable for the whole class and sparked an interest for other students to read these new titles.

One group depicted Billy Pilgrim's internal conflicts in *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (1969). The students painted images of Billy and placed him inside of a four-story house that they constructed from paper and cardboard. They added lighting to reflect the character at different stages in his life. Other projects included hand-painted board games, a newspaper, masks, and movie posters. Students created projects that were inherently meaningful to their experience with that novel that were unique. I could not have asked for a better outcome nor could I have created a more specific project for the students, because their creativity, unique voices, interests, and abilities would not have been captured. Thus, in teaching, often it is more effective when the teacher affords students less guidelines rather than more. This sounds counterintuitive in today's hyper assessment-driven, teacher lesson plan-written educational system, but theory is often disproven when put into actual practice.

At the end of the unit, I had each student complete reflection questions (see Figure 3).

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did you enjoy reading a book and setting the due dates and assignments more on your own, or led by the teacher? Explain. 2. What worked well in your group? 3. What does your group need to improve upon? What steps would you take to improve this? 4. Did you feel that work was done equally by people in your group? Was it more a utopia or dystopia explain. 5. What themes or concepts did you gain from your novel that you think will help you be a more well-rounded person? 6. What did you learn about time management and procrastination from this project?
<p>Score your dystopian group for a 1-5 (5=highest) on questions 1-3.</p> <p>Explain why for each:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Productivity 2. All members are team players. 3. We do an equal amount of work.

Figure 3. Dystopian Novel Reflection Questions

Maria's Results

The students worked in their groups to plan their ideas on the first day, creating the assessments, the

rubrics, and projects. On the second class meeting they were afforded the time to complete these tasks before briefly presenting their work to their peers. The work that culminated was diverse in scope and skill. There were several visual projects. For example, one group created an assignment that was a *Hunger Games* inspired art exhibit. Each student created a drawing related to the text; for example, one student created a beautifully detailed sketch of a Mockingjay using colored pencils. Another group created a poster board that outlined the conventional elements of classic dystopian narratives and how the *Hunger Games* compared to these guidelines. Other groups chose to work with the text more directly. One group rewrote “Deep in the Meadow,” a poem within the book and adapted it to the short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula LeGuin (1973) that we read in conjunction with *The Hunger Games*. One project involved a first-person narrative for a minor character in the book. For example, one student wrote a backstory for the character of the Baker’s Wife, Peeta’s mother, who we heard and saw briefly in the text yet her words and actions left an impression. The student created some context for her actions and words by creating a short character study of her upbringing and marriage. I was pleasantly surprised at the variety of the projects, the quality of the exemplars, and the thoughtful pedagogical instincts behind each assignment created, particularly in light of the limited amount of time afforded to the students.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Van Manen (1995) argued that “reflection is central to the life of an educator” and cannot be separated from pedagogical practice (p. 1). Thus, it is key for instructors who implement a new approach or experiment with content delivery to be deliberate in analyzing the exercise and what is achieved in the classroom. The project-based learning that we implemented in our classrooms exemplified Schön’s “reflection-in-action”: we put our learned professional skills and years of experience to the test in assigning students to work in a non-conventional way with their readings. What follows is our reflection on this process.

Mary’s Reflection

In their responses to the reflection questions in Figure 3, students expressed that they preferred

selecting their books and generating their assignments over the teacher doing so. They said they felt less stress when they could choose their due dates and the pacing of their activities. Students also liked the freedom they were afforded in taking charge over their learning. When it came to the last question, reflecting on team member participation, only a couple of groups admitted they had teammates who did not do their part. However, in these cases, after making sure that this was accurate information, I had lowered the grade of these individuals, but not the entire team’s grade.

We spent one month on this project in 55-minute class periods. During this time, I conducted mini-lessons using music video clips, artwork, and sharing a few notes on dystopian versus apocalyptic genres with the students. Most of the time, however, the students spent time in their groups in which they generated and completed their assignments. In some classes, students procrastinated too much, so I had to set a due date for the reading or writing activities. This was to ensure that the students did complete their work in a timely fashion for the project.

The use of project-based learning furthered my students’ curiosities in their reading. In fact, some students planned on reading the novels that the other groups had selected. In the case of three groups of students, they rented the films that followed their books, interested in further exploring interpretations of the novel. These self-driven practices affirmed the project-based learning approach. I am curious how project-based learning might work with future novels that I instruct, including more difficult texts such as Shakespeare. I am wondering if tenth-graders would be able to handle this type of project with these entities, even with me filling in the learning gaps with mini-lessons. I continue to critically examine this idea.

Overall, this unit was a great way to end the school year. It gave me the flexibility, as a busy high school English teacher, to grade papers and lesson-plan, and it afforded students the opportunity to plan, negotiate, navigate, model, and adjust their co-created learning activities. I would highly recommend for any secondary teacher to implement a similar project at the end of the year, when students are accustomed to the policies and procedures of the class. It does feel risky handing the reins over to the class, but the more the students

do, the more they learn.

Maria's Reflection

I was nervous when I initially assigned this project. I thought that since the students were working on their own in small groups for both of our class sessions, and my role as the instructor was minimalized, that they would think I was trying to get out of teaching the class. Ironically, at the end of the semester, when I had students complete a course evaluation, many of them mentioned how much they loved the assignment because they were able to practice being the instructor, highly relevant praxis for future teachers. It afforded them a creative way to engage with a text and to interpret this text through the eyes of an instructor. It was fascinating to see the projects they would assign the students, such as the art show inspired by the text; they envisioned unique ways to approach a text that I had not considered. I was impressed by the non-traditional, kinesthetic opportunities afforded students in a reading activity. This resonates with my goal in having pre-service teachers explore teaching strategies that they can use with their students in the future.

Overall, seeing the students' enthusiastic responses to the project and well-thought-out assignments was encouraging. It makes me wonder if their role as future educators impacted the outcomes in a significant way. How would project-based learning look in my freshman composition courses where students have diverse interests and majors and are often less than enthusiastic about course writing objectives? Is there a way to harness these powerful outcomes for other groups of students? Student buy-in is key to the success of any class project, so ensuring student investment is pertinent. Nevertheless, I am immensely happy with the project-based solution to my problem text that emerged from piggy-backing off of Mary's high school lesson.

CONCLUSION

As Schön (1983) asserted, teachers often encounter perplexing issues that derive from teaching through a critical perspective. That reflective professional practice is from where this project and, ultimately, this paper, emerged. At the outset, affording the students the responsibility for their learning originated from different needs. Mary wanted to find an alternate way to engage students

in a topic that she was less than enthusiastic about teaching in the original curriculum, and I wanted to explore approaches to engage pre-service English teachers in the role of language arts instruction with a text they already knew. Our results were positive and empowering for the both of us. As educators, we know that any time a teacher changes a lesson it is always a gamble, no matter how experienced or prepared the instructor is or how pedagogically grounded the coursework is that they are instructing; yet, teaching is a creative endeavor that takes patience, and ultimately, experimentation to have successful results that empower teachers and their students. In both of our cases, we found that challenging students to create their own learning resulted in greater engagement and positive learning outcomes.

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