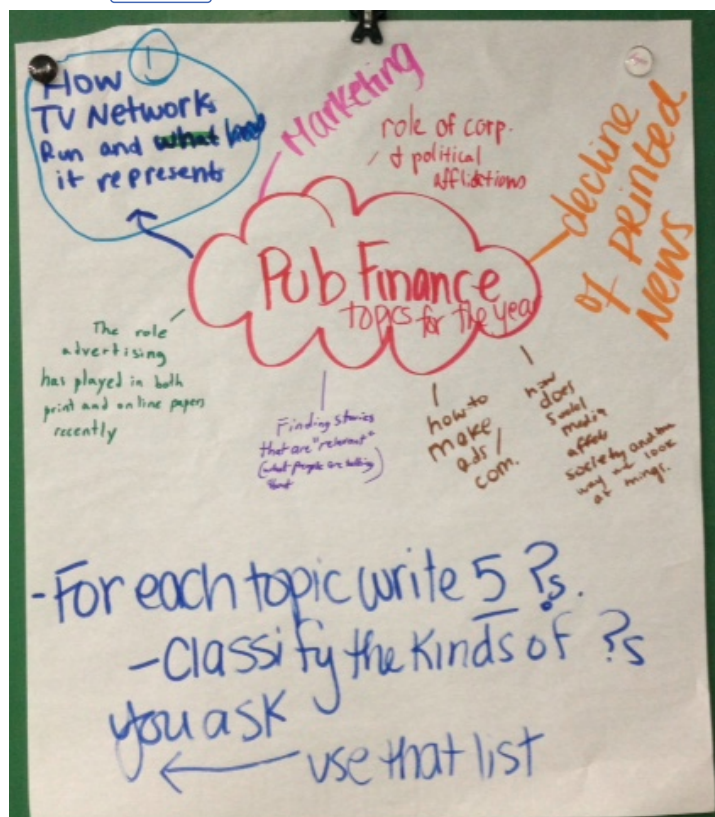


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Authentic Learning Begins With Student-Designed Curriculum

By Starr Sackstein on March 22, 2018 5:00 AM

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Teaching suited my natural need to organize and orchestrate. The inherent excitement about planning a new year's course of study with a blank planner and a pack of colored highlighters, pens, and pencils speaks to me, begging me to tell them what to do. And I thrived on it...

Usually...

But then I fought my obsessive **need for control** and took a giant step closer to my ultimate end goal of a fully authentic learning environment by empowering my students to generate our curriculum.

Consequently, when burdened with this task, the students went through a plethora of emotions.

First excited to be able to choose what they would learn, then bewildered because they didn't know where to start, and then frustrated because it turned out to be harder than they anticipated.

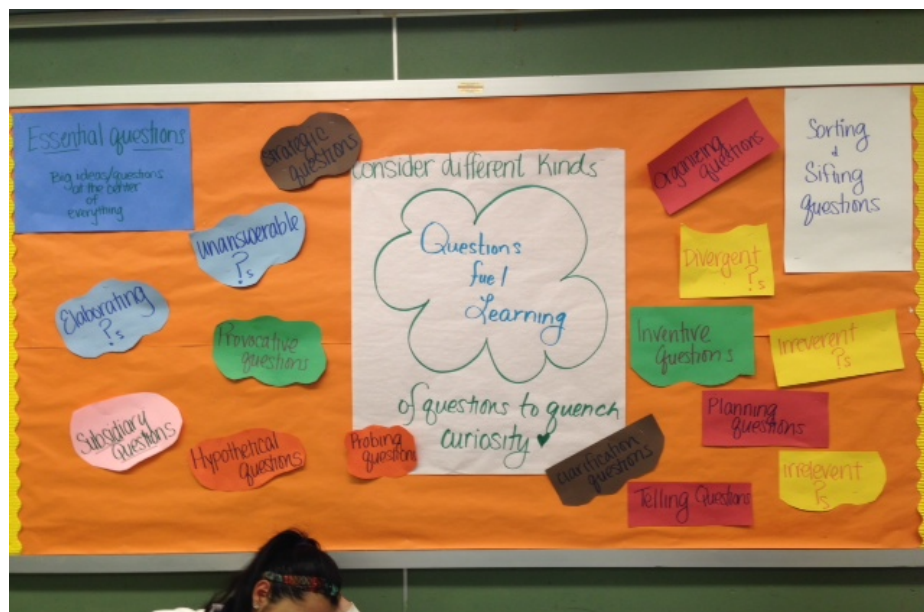
...As I knew it would be since I've been developing curricula for 12 years prior to this first experiment.

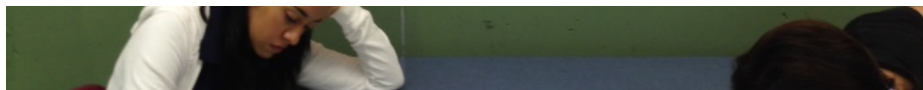
Undeterred, I pressed on, walking students through a process to help them develop their ideas. First, we brainstormed topics we felt related to what "publications finance" might mean; they did this in their notebooks with a partner. Then we generated a web that each student placed ideas on as a class. (See the picture above.)

Once the chart was developed and all students made sure to have each of the ideas recorded, they needed to create essential questions to go with each topic and follow up questions for learning throughout the unit.

Conferring with students as they **developed their questions**, we discussed as a class the many kinds of questions that exist. Using the prepared bulletin board, students categorized their questions and made sure that they varied the kinds of questions they asked in their units.

In addition to questions, students were asked to review the technology, media, and business **Common Core standards** through the website using their phones and determine which ones were appropriate for the scope of our class. They later applied these standards to the specific assessments they developed for the units.





To ensure completion of the curriculum, we needed to sequence the units and make sure there were assessment choices provided that allowed students to **show what they know**. Asking kids to think about projects and papers they have done over their careers, they had to come up with one independent project and one group or pair project that addressed the standards and learning goals for each unit.

Overall, **student buy-in** to the class was really good considering it was a first-period senior elective that definitely needed a better focus. Allowing students to take part in the meaningful development of what they learned forced them to assume responsibility for engagement throughout.

Solidifying their work as a class and considering the potential gaps in their ideas, moving forward, I took their framework and offered choice as we moved through the year. Kids were allowed to choose from the projects that they came up with and develop a means for assessing and reflecting that I followed.

Although there were times I still felt an innate urge to impose my control on how the class ran, I took the opportunity to step back and help support the students in their vision rather than force mine. It was a work in progress all the way to the end, but the rewards of their involvement were seen in what they were able to take away from the experience. The more I loosened the reins on my classes, the more choice I provided students, the more authentic the experience and the more valuable the learning.

Steps for developing student-designed curriculum:

1. Ask students to brainstorm as a group to develop topics associated with the class—this can be done individually first and/or in small groups and then opened up into a whole group discussion.
2. Once the class has determined a set of topics, ask them to rank them in order of interest.
3. Ask pairs to generate a list of essential questions associated with each topic.
4. Explicitly teach standards and work with students to unpack necessary skills and standards that work with each question developed.
5. In pairs ask students to develop project ideas that cover a variety of standards—one independent project and one group or pair assignment.
6. Combine the work of all the students and flush out with appropriate lessons based on their ideas.
7. Provide students a with a working draft of the curriculum for revision.
8. When each unit presents itself, offer students the opportunity to further develop project ideas and choose from what their classmates developed.
9. Teach and allow students to create their own means of assessment as well.
10. Always require students to reflect on all processes based on the standards.

Implications of student-generated curriculum:

- Students are more engaged in topics they selected; let's face it, we all are more invested in our own ideas.
- Inquiry-designed curriculum focused on the interests of students while covering the necessary standards and topics.
- We can still connect ideas that students wouldn't have known about through a lens they chose.
- Promotes a culture of success and interest.
- Engages students in meaningful learning and questioning.
- Forces students to be in the driver's seat and allows them to be accountable for their own learning.

Thoughts

In this current culture of shifted teacher evaluation and the inherent anxiety of our own assessment, teachers are almost forced to control their environments for what appears to be optimal output. Conflicting messages from the administration and current pedagogical trends add to the challenges of creating meaningful learning for our students. Although tradition has always had the teacher in charge, the times are no longer as they were; students should be the masters of their own learning.

3/23/2018

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As the world becomes more globally connected and the information is to be gathered from a multitude of places, teachers shouldn't have to compete with these other formats to help students learn. Teachers should be engaging students with the tools they are already using, expanding their use and knowledge of the formats and letting kids choose their own adventures. The new role of the teacher is as the facilitator of learning, collaborator, and resource to the students who often have different knowledge that can help inform teaching.

If we can relinquish old ideas of what "teacher" means, perhaps we can open ourselves up to embracing new technologies and generating excitement about learning. Start small, enlist the help of students to design their next project.

How can you start shifting control in your space? Please share.

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