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Valuable Voices: Involving Students in Planning and Increasing Student Buy In

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“You know it’s just the same thing: read the text, answer the questions, and keep doing that until you die,” he said as he rolled his eyes and put his head down. I approached him and braced myself to deal with the confrontation. “Blake” (a pseudonym) was the only one in my first period class I could not get to find value in his work or even do the work for the grade. He refused to do anything that was not important to him and, to me, it seemed like nothing was important to him except for videos on his phone and talking to friends.

“Well, I hear where you’re coming from, but the district states we have to do these things first before we can get to the fun stuff,” I stated with all the patience I could muster.

“Well, I’m not doing this. Sorry, but it doesn’t matter to me.” He blurted back this answer and put his head down. I walked away defeated because he was right; this way of learning does not matter to him and is not really of importance.

Why should just reading the story and answering questions matter to a student? Yes, it does cover the standards, but it also just shows that students can regurgitate information and spit out what the teacher wants to see as an analysis without really gaining any retention or understanding of the standards. As Blake said that to me, I realized that we are doing students a disservice when we have them read the text and answer questions. It can be a check for understanding. It can allow us to see where students are sitting at with their progress, but it really does nothing for the students. The

best way to teach students in a way that they will value their education and continue to make gains is by listening to them and seeing what they like.

Giving students some ownership of how the class is taught will increase buy in for them and will, in turn, help with behavior and engagement in the classroom. According to Parker et al., “Giving students real choices in the classroom—having to do with the material they study, the assignments they complete, the peers with whom they work, and so on—can boost their engagement and motivation, allow them to capitalize on their strengths, and enable them to meet their individual learning needs” (1). All of this allows for students to have a more positive outlook on what is being learned and the class in general.

Choice does not have to be something hard for a teacher to do; he or she does not have to write one hundred different rubrics to allow students a say in the lesson plan. Giving students a choice can be as simple as letting them pick who they work in a group with on an assignment. One technique that gives teachers control and students a choice is to “poll them to see the four students they would most want to work with and then give them the guarantee that at least one of those students will be working with them,” (Wolpert-Gawron 1). This is just one activity that is easy to do that allows students to have a buy in to their education.

Allowing students to have a buy in to their own education will allow them to actually enjoy the learning they are doing. As teachers, we can easily make the change

to allow the new voice of the students to be present in our lesson planning and still teach what we need to accomplish. When students have choice, empowerment will be created, and when schools do this to allow student input, “schools saw the change process as a means of solving problems long with them,” (Short et. al. 44). Often, the problems in our classroom (behavioral or academic) can be solved if we work as a team with students to solve them. Giving students choice creates teamwork; when the teacher is the facilitator of the knowledge, and the student is the selector of the lesson type, this creates a team-like sense of shared engagement.

When I think about my own classes and lessons and the projects resulted in the best success, they were lessons where I gave students a choice on topic or style of knowledge presentation. I have recently begun making my class much more open on the assignments. My rubrics have been generalized to allow students the freedom to interpret directions how they want to or need to so they are able to learn best. My students have recently had more buy in, and I am still able to do my job as an English teacher.

One of my favorite examples of using student voice and choice in my own classroom that I have done was a project that took about six weeks to complete. Because of the length of the project, I knew that the students had to be passionate about what they were doing or else it would be a miserable time for everyone involved and the students would not produce their best work. This assignment was for AP Language and Composition and was a multigenre research paper. Students picked their topic, which was intended to be a somewhat controversial topic that would raise different viewpoints they were to analyze and interpret.

Giving students the choice on their topics and creative freedom on all aspects of this project created beautiful results. While

every student still had to complete a research paper, blackout poem, documentary review, presentation of a history lesson, article analysis, and personal reflection; the results that came in were so much more meaningful because of their desire to express their chosen topics in the most accurate and eloquent manner. No two projects looked the same, and students thoroughly enjoyed completing the work to the point where they would even work ahead in their free time just because they were enjoying it so much. This warmed my heart, and it was as easy as giving them topic freedom, as well as some wiggle room on creativity in the completion of the projects. In turn, this has become one of my favorite projects I have ever done because of how engaged my students were and how excellent their work was.

As I progress in my career as an ELA teacher, I am always looking for ways to improve my practice. However, my students’ success is just as important as my success as a teacher, and those two directly correlate together. I aim for my students to feel empowered every day in my classroom, and I want them to feel as though they matter. Giving them voice and choice in the classroom allows them to own their education and make the decision on what way they learn best to be successful and retain the knowledge. Opening the door to student voices in the classroom has helped improve my practice and has helped me come up with new ideas about how to make lessons and engage students in learning. My students now know that if they tell me they enjoy a lesson, I will make sure it appears again throughout the year. They also know that they have a safe space to ask to learn in certain ways and suggest activities. While the activities may not happen the next day, they trust that they will see the lesson soon. As the teaching of ELA changes, so do the voices that need to be included. Giving

students a choice in their education eliminates the feeling of disengagement and allows students to feel as important to us as we think they are.

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