Independent Learners, Independent Thinkers Creating a Student-Centered Learning Project

Tyler Patrick

Bell Multicultural High School
District of Columbia Public Schools
Submitted June 2003

Introduction

For the last two years, I have been teaching at Bell Multicultural High School in the District of Columbia. Bell Multicultural HS has a total school population of approximately 650 students, 80% of whom are English Language Learners. I teach both English as a Second Language (ESL) and Social Studies. This year, I am teaching a World Geography class of English Language Learners who function at the intermediate level. The majority of the nineteen students in my class have been living in the United States for less than one year.

Purpose of Study

As an ESL teacher, I have become acutely aware of the need for my students to become more independent in their thinking and learning. English language learners thrive on routines, sometimes to the point where their learning becomes rote and mechanical. I often saw my students bored and disengaged from the lesson. Alternatively, some students would rely on their peers to do the work and then simply copy the work onto their own papers. I wanted to give my students the opportunity to perform higher-level thinking, despite their language deficiencies. I saw the need to individualize student work so that students would be interested and excited in learning.

Given this, I created a project for my World Geography class that put the student at the center of their own learning. While I provided my students with the necessary scaffolding and skill set to pursue the project, the students worked to answer the core question independently outside of the classroom. The purpose, therefore, was to provide students with more ownership over their own learning, thereby increasing motivation, learning, and original thought. This paper, therefore, will summarize the project I developed and include observations and feedback as to the level of success my students achieved compared with more teacher-centered learning methods.

Explanation of the Student Project

To complete the project, students had to answer the core question: “How can we use the Five Themes of Geography to explain and report on a country?” In order to create student ownership in the project, I allowed each person to select a country in which they had interest, however it could not be a country in which they have lived. Students would then answer questions related to the five themes of geography: location, place, human-environment interaction,
movement, and regions. Each of these themes would be taught in class, but the students would then be required to apply these concepts to their individual projects. In this way, I was able to assess their understanding of each of the five themes. Students would be required to demonstrate their knowledge in two forms: a written project and an oral presentation. In addition to my evaluation, students’ oral presentations were assessed by their peers. Students were therefore assessed on reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

I provided each student with a project description and syllabus on the first day. In doing this, it required a lot of teacher planning. From the beginning, I had to decide when I would teach each unit and what the homework would be for each day for the entire nine-week period. While this was labor intensive, it set the expectations for the students on the first day of the class. There would be no surprises – the project was laid out before them in entirety.

Before we were able to actually begin the project, I realized that many of my students did not know how to conduct basic research. As a class, we took field trips to the DC Public Library. Each student signed up for a library card and we learned how to look for books that were at the students’ level. In addition to the content support that I provided in my classroom that was related to the project, I also spent a significant amount of time teaching and reemphasizing reading strategies, most notably paraphrasing. I taught the skill and we revisited it several times a week as a warm-up to the daily lesson. In this way, I ensured that my students were not simply copying the information down, but rather processing the information, interpreting it, and then writing it in their own words.

Connection to Literature

Much research has been done on the Constructivist approach to education. Within this approach, the individual actively constructs knowledge, not the teacher. Rather, the teacher facilitates the presentation of information, and provides the student with the opportunity to build upon this information. The teachers play the role of a "midwife in the birth of understanding" as opposed to being "mechanics of knowledge transfer." Their role is not to dispense knowledge but to provide students with opportunities and incentives to build it up (von Glaserfeld, 1996). This method therefore places the student at the center of his or her own learning. Learning for the student becomes a self-regulated process that is both individual and social in nature.

Applying this theory to my students, who often have an adverse academic history, was a whole new challenge. Interrupted schooling, illiteracy in their native language, and a general lack of confidence that comes from being in a new culture, all had created an atmosphere of fear to take risks among my students, which is an essential step in becoming an independent learner.

To combat these difficulties I had to set up a project and a class that walked a fine line between giving the students enough information to get started with, and doing the work for them. To accomplish this I relied on modeling the project. According to the literature:
Modeling can serve the functions of inhibition and disinhibition, response facilitation, and observational learning (Schunk, 1987). [...] disinhibition occurs when a model strengthens or weakens an observer’s behavioral inhibitions. Observing a model performing a feared activity without negative consequences [...] may lead observers to believe there is little to fear and to perform the task themselves (p.37, Guthrie & Wigfield).

One purpose of independent learning is to get students invested in their own education. This leads to intrinsic motivation. Guthrie and Wigfield define intrinsic learning as “total involvement in an activity.” A teacher-centered classroom can “focus too much on learning in school and not enough on promoting children’s continuing motivation to learn outside the school setting.” By setting up an independent learning project I hoped to get my students invested enough to be intrinsically motivated and thus continue learning outside the classroom not only for the project but for life.

Data Collection
My process of data collection included a variety of methods. These methods included during- and post-Project surveys, student interviews, teacher observations, anecdotal records, and collaborative teacher meetings. Since the project was ongoing for a nine-week period, I relied heavily on student feedback to guide my daily instruction and clarification of the project in the classroom. This often took the form of informal class discussion. Another large portion of my data was gathered by observing students at work in the computer lab and library before school and after school. Finally, my data came from the projects and presentations themselves.

Measures of Success
I viewed successful completion of the project as a student who met or exceeded the expectations as set forth by the rubric that students were given at the beginning of the term. By meeting these expectations, students not only had all of the necessary components of the project, but also they displayed the information in their own words and in a visually appealing manner. My goal was to have at least 80% of my students meet or exceed expectations, which would be approximately 15 out of my 19 students. This goal was based on prior student work, attendance rates, and overall student motivation. The goal of 80% was approximately 10% higher than past performance rates in my class by this same group of students.

Findings
After completion of the project, I found that the overall structure and high expectations of the project had a profoundly positive effect on all of my students
and their ability to succeed. 100% of my students turned in a project and 90% of their projects either met or exceeded the standard (17 of the 19 students). The biggest surprise came from two students who had consistently failed to turn in a single assignment throughout the term. Not only did they both complete the project, but they met the standard.

One of the most essential components in creating a successful independent project is the degree of scaffolding that is provided to the students. As students were completing the project in class, I saw the need to set up a conferencing time with them. Therefore, halfway through the nine-week time period, I instituted one-on-one student-teacher conferences once a week. These conferences lasted only about five minutes, however they proved invaluable to the students’ experience with the project. During this time, we discussed how much of the project they had completed, addressed problems and concerns, and identified possible trouble areas in their writing. I think that conferencing was one of the major reasons why so many of my students either met or exceeded the standard. In conferencing, I ensured accountability so that students would not wait until the last minute to complete the project. Instead, students were able to consistently revisit and revise both their own work and that of their peers.

Students were so energized by the project that they incorporated strategies, techniques, and skills from other classes into their projects. Each ninth grade student at Bell takes a computer class during their first year. Students therefore learned how to use Power Point. Many students asked if they could use this tool to aid them in the oral presentation. Not only did I agree, I began to work with the computer teacher to ensure that students could receive credit in her class for the Power Point work they were completing in my class. While the use of Power Point was not an original requirement of the project, the fact that so many of their peers were implementing Power Point caused the entire class to want to use it.

Therefore, the students became a motivating factor for each other. I often observed students helping each other in the library or computer labs. They edited each others’ papers and gave each other suggestions for their work. Paradoxically, the “individual” project encouraged significant group interaction. I owe some of this cooperation to work we had completed in stations earlier in the year. Still, I think that the structure of the project allowed for this kind of collaboration and peer feedback and support.

Reflections

In implementing this project, I took on a significant amount of risk. Not only was I pushing my students outside of their comfort level, but also myself. In creating an independent project, I had to maintain a delicate balance of support and freedom. I wanted my students to feel comfortable, without being sheltered. Based on the feedback and reflections that my students gave, I feel that this was a successful outcome of the project. While all of my students would admit to being challenged, they also all agreed that they learned a lot, not only about the
country on which they reported, but on how to research, paraphrase, organize, edit, publish, and reflect on their work.

I was amazed at the degree to which my students raised the bar for themselves. While the original project required eight pages of text, maps, and bibliography, most students’ projects exceeded twelve pages. Additionally, students required several graphics, illustrations, tables, and graphs to demonstrate information. In this way, students incorporated skills that they had learned in the class, even if they were not a requirement for the project at the onset.

Despite what I already deemed to be high expectations, in doing this project, I learned that I can, and should, raise the bar even higher for my students in the future. Instead of shying away from things I think might be too advanced for them, I need to challenge them even further. Looking ahead, I might generate a list of other topics and ideas that students can incorporate into their projects. In this way, students who are ready for more of a challenge can seize that opportunity.

I discovered that the project I created for my World Geography class can serve as a model for other projects I might create for different content areas. Independent learning projects, I have found, really do create independent thinkers. My students have emerged from this process more confident in the classroom and in their community. They can now assertively enter the library and conduct research. They can apply their skills of organization and revision to school-related assignments and those they might encounter in the workplace.

References


Appendix A: Project guide and rubric

World Geography
Extended Work Project

CORE QUESTION:

How can we use the Five Themes of Geography to explain and report on a country?

choice. Your project will explain certain facts and details about the selected country based on the following five themes:

1. Location
2. Place
3. Human-Environment Interaction
4. Regions
5. Movement

LOCATION:
On this page, you will explain your country’s location in the world. You will need to tell me four major pieces of information for this page:

a. On what continent is your country located?
b. What is the latitude and longitude of your country?
c. In what hemispheres is your country located?
d. On what bodies of water is your country located?

PLACE:
On this page, you will discuss both the physical and cultural aspects of your country that make it different from other places on earth. You will need to tell me four pieces of information for this page:

a. What landforms are present in your country (mountains, plateaus, etc.)?
b. To which biome or vegetation region does your country belong?
c. What are the major languages spoken in your country?
d. What are the major religions practiced in your country?
HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION:
On this page, you will discuss how people use and work with the place. How have people changed the place? You will need to tell me the following pieces of information:
   a. What types of jobs do people have that are connected to the physical land?
   b. What natural resources are present here that are used by humans?
   c. How have humans changed the environment (what have they built?)
   d. What environmental problems does the country have, if any?

MOVEMENT:
On this page, you will discuss how people, goods, and ideas move from place to place. You will need to answer the following questions:
   a. What does your country import and export (e.g. what do they trade?)
   b. Who does your country trade with?
   c. What cultural elements has your country “borrowed” from other countries?

REGION:
On this page, you will explain the different ways that your country is divided; these can be physical divisions or political divisions.
   a. What sort of physical regions are present in your country?
   b. What sort of political regions are present in your country (i.e. government regions, etc.)

Your project will include eight pages: one page for each of the five themes, a title page, a map page, and a bibliography.
***You are welcome to use more than one page for each theme, especially if you would like to include pictures and other graphics for extra credit!***

***You must also include at least one graph (line, bar, or circle). You can include this graph for any of the five themes.***

**How do I create a Bibliography?**
A bibliography is a list of the books you used to complete your project. The following is a description of how to do this.

**Basic Form:**
1. last name first of author, alphabetized by first letter.
2. first (and, if possible, middle) initial followed by a period.
3. double space, then date of publication in parentheses, then period and double space
4. complete title and subtitle underlined, with only the first letter or each part capitalized
5. title and subtitle separated by colon and one space
6. period and double space after title
7. place of publication, colon, one space, name of publisher
8. period

**Book Example:**

**Encyclopedia Example:**

**Webpage Example:**
Author(if any). Title of Site. URL(accessed date), other identifying information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Exceeds the Standard</th>
<th>Meets the Standard</th>
<th>Does Not Meet the Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Report contains all five themes (#s 1-5: Geography Standards)</td>
<td>All five themes are fully explained and answer all of the questions in the project description.</td>
<td>All five themes are explained and answer the questions contained in the project description.</td>
<td>One or more of the five themes is missing and/or inaccurate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report contains two maps: political and physical (Geo Stan #1: World in Spatial Terms)</td>
<td>Map is detailed, accurate, colorful, and contains a compass, legend, and scale.</td>
<td>Map is accurate and contains a compass, legend, and scale.</td>
<td>Map may be inaccurate and/or missing a compass, legend, or scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report contains a Bibliography</td>
<td>Bibliography contains at least four sources and is complete and properly formatted.</td>
<td>Bibliography contains at least three sources and is properly formatted.</td>
<td>Bibliography is missing or contains less than three sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report contains appropriate facts and details (E2a)</td>
<td>Facts are correct and supported by a text source.</td>
<td>Facts are accurate and supported by a text source.</td>
<td>One fact or more may be inaccurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report excludes extraneous and inappropriate information (E2a)</td>
<td>Report is clear and concise and contains only relevant information.</td>
<td>Report contains only relevant information.</td>
<td>Report may contain one or more piece of irrelevant information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report contains an organizing structure appropriate to purpose, audience, and context (E2a)</td>
<td>Report is thoughtfully and logically organized and contains page numbers.</td>
<td>Report is logically organized and contains page numbers.</td>
<td>Report lacks organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report explains the benefits or limitations of a particular content component (E2a)</td>
<td>Report not only mentions the facts, but also analyzes them to consider their strengths and weaknesses with regard to the country.</td>
<td>Report analyzes the facts to consider their strengths and weaknesses with regard to the country.</td>
<td>Report fails to consider the benefits and/or limitations of the content components.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student demonstrates control of</td>
<td>Report is free of distracting mechanical errors.</td>
<td>Report has only minor mechanical errors that do not</td>
<td>Report contains several major mechanical errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar, paragraph structure, punctuation, sentence construction, and spelling (E4a)</td>
<td>Detract from reader understanding.</td>
<td>That inhibit meaning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report is written in student’s own words; that is, the student appropriately paraphrases textual sources without copying them.</td>
<td>Student has appropriately paraphrased all information in original language; there is no evidence of copying.</td>
<td>Student may “borrow” or use direct phrases from a textual source; there is no evidence of paraphrasing by the student.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report is typed</td>
<td>Report is typed</td>
<td>Report is typed</td>
<td>Report is not typed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report is neatly assembled</td>
<td>Report is visually appealing and neatly assembled.</td>
<td>Report is neatly assembled.</td>
<td>Report is not assembled in an orderly fashion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>