

# **What Do You Want to Write? Creating Opportunities for Student-designed, Standards-based Assignments as a Means to Increasing Student Motivation to Write**

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## **Introduction**

The question of what motivates people is one asked in every workplace, every school, and every home; and the amount research on the subject reflects this pervasiveness. "Incentives" are everywhere, hoping to motivate people to adopt behaviors deemed desirable by those managing organizations and institutions. In schools, these incentives tend to take the form of gold stars, grades, or pizza parties. Several times this past year after a culminating event in a class, the students asked me what they were going to get afterwards. In one class I was asked this after the students held a debate in which both sides did excellent work exploring the arguments for and against limiting civil liberties in times of war. They wanted to know what the prize was going to be. Prize? I tried to explain that I thought the experience and the satisfaction of achievement were the greatest reward, but I was met with a sea of rolling eyes.

When a student does not engage in an activity or assignment, the question for the teacher seems to be "What can I do to get you to do this?" If you ask the student this question directly, she will probably say, "Why do you want me to do it, anyway?" In this action research project, I explored both my own expectations, purposes and ideas about student motivation and those of two students with whom I worked.

## **Background**

Bell Multicultural High School is located in the Columbia Heights neighborhood in northwest Washington, DC, with about 630 students attending in school year 2001-2002. 95 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches. Language minority students make up about 85 percent of the population with roughly 67 percent assessed as non- or limited English proficient. Native languages of students include Amharic, Cantonese, French, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese and other Asian and African languages, with about 60 percent being native speakers of Spanish.

Bell has adopted the America's Choice reform model using the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) performance standards. The curriculum is developed according to these standards and students create and present portfolios as evidence of their abilities to meet each standard. The English standards are organized into the three sections of writing, reading, and speaking/listening/viewing. Teachers have materials that describe the standards and offer examples of work that meets them. My approach was to use a piece of literature as the foundation for each academic quarter and to create assignments directed at various standards based on the text. In this way, students had multiple opportunities to produce work that met the standards by the end of the school year.

The focus of this action research was an 11<sup>th</sup> grade sheltered English III class for students who were assessed as LEP. Among the eleven students in the class, there was one native Mandarin Chinese speaker, two native Amharic speakers, and eight native Spanish speakers. I only began working with these students in the third quarter of the school year when another English teacher was out for health reasons. I worked with them alone until the middle of the fourth quarter, when the original teacher returned; at that point, we co-taught the class for the remainder of the school year.

I had planned the third quarter 9-week plan around the reading of *A Raisin in the Sun*. In preparation for the reading of this play, students read a text about the features of drama and a short radio play in order to increase their understanding of the genre. They also read informational materials on segregation and the US Civil Rights Movement for historical context. While reading *A Raisin in the Sun*, we also watched the movie version, using a graphic organizer to help monitor how the film differed from the play. In the end, the students were asked to write a response to literature essay comparing the two versions.

## The Question

While most of the eleven students were engaged for the pre-reading and reading activities, two students, Javier and Arturo, were not doing the homework or any of the written work for the class. Their portfolios, homework, quiz/test grades, and classwork indicated to me high verbal skills and listening comprehension; but both were reluctant writers. In the case of Javier, he showed higher-order thinking skills in class discussions, and I was not sure if his reluctance to write was due to frustration with academic vocabulary or grammar limitations, or to a general rejection of schoolwork. He had had attendance problems since September and had apparently been in high school for several years. He liked to play the clown as well as the provocateur in class, and he had the sharp wit to play these parts well. At times he resented being asked to participate in classroom activities, yet when he was interested in the topic at hand he tended to monopolize conversations.

Arturo, in contrast, seemed less confident in himself. His verbal skills were definitely stronger than his writing skills and his reading comprehension. When the class read scenes aloud, Walter was able to engage in interpretive and analytical discussions of the text, but his independent reading skills seemed weak. A couple of times Arturo tried to follow Javier's lead in rebellion, but after each time, without fail, he would seek me out after school to express concern about passing the class and making up missed assignments. These conferences ended with his promises to do the assignments and to be more focused. In fact, he would eventually do most of the homework assignments, but he always did them late and never without reminders. Finally, while Javier was able to score among the top of the class on tests without having done any of the homework assignments, Arturo struggled to pass even when he had participated in class activities and done the homework.

During the reading of the short radio play at the beginning of the unit, both students were eager to participate when we read the play aloud in class; they were equally engaged in classroom discussions based on the historical background readings. As we began to read *A Raisin in the Sun* they appeared engaged by the story, again eager to read scenes aloud and to discuss the action and themes, but they did little or

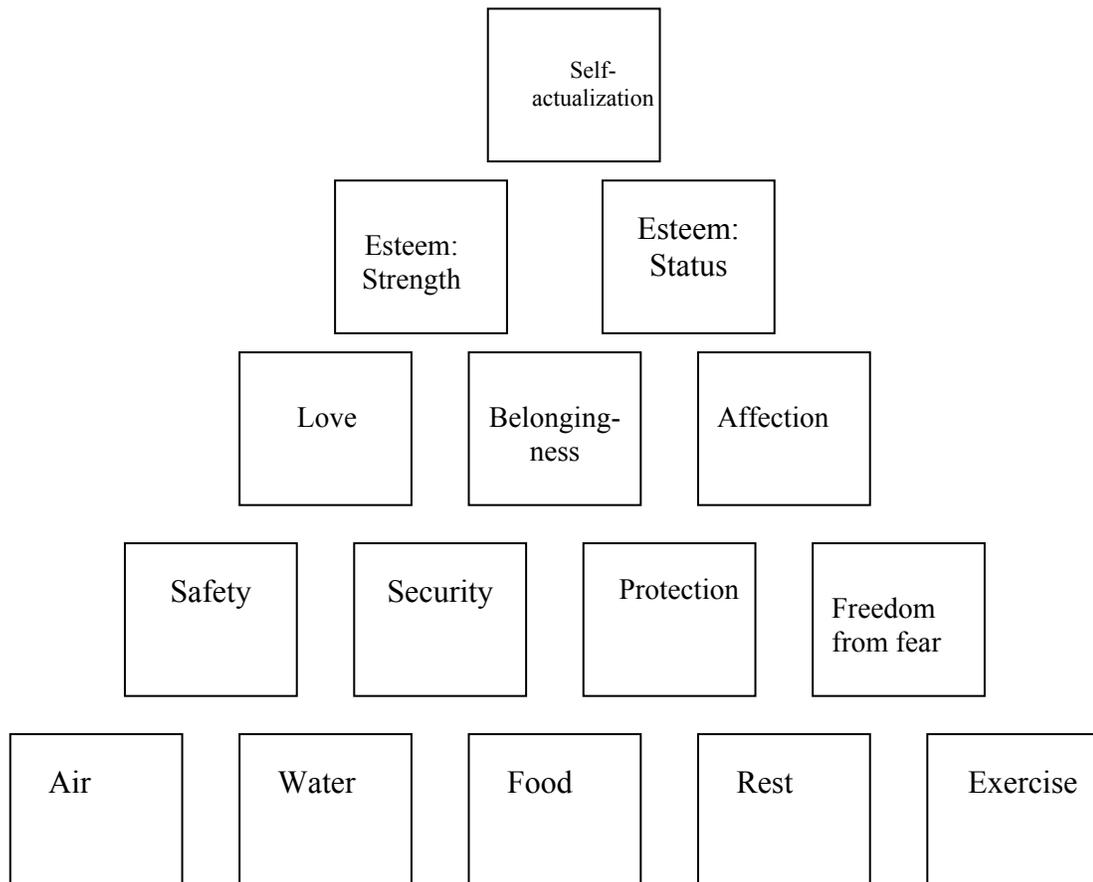
none of the homework assignments such as answering comprehension questions or writing in response journals. As we started the pre-writing stage of the writing process for the response to literature essay, I wondered what I might do to encourage them to do the assignment.

## Literature Review

Motivation theory is generally delineated according to behaviorist and cognitive definitions, the former most commonly associated with the work of B. F. Skinner. A behaviorist definition of motivation rests on the idea that people will “pursue a goal because they perceive a reward for doing so,” thus defining motivation as “the anticipation of reinforcement” of certain behaviors (Brown, 1994, p.34-35). Applied to learning situations, this theory contends that students will work to achieve certain goals in anticipation of external, or extrinsic, rewards. Imagine an English Language Learner whose homework is often undone or incomplete; according to behaviorist theories, punishing this behavior with something like after-school detention will eventually encourage the student to do her homework. Underlying this definition of motivation is the concept that “response = learning,” that is, exhibiting a particular behavior demonstrates knowledge or achievement (Pinar, 1996). Behaviorists thus came to believe that human nature could be changed through the use of stimuli. This theory is evident in practices throughout our education system and in the workplace, from gold stars for perfect scores to bonuses for surpassing sales quotas (Kohn, 1993).

In contrast, cognitive definitions of motivation emphasize its sources and the concept of self-reward. One cognitive-based theory of motivation is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory, which frames an understanding of human behavior along a continuum of needs that drive human behavior. The first set of needs consists of those for basic survival: air, water, food, sleep and exercise. Maslow maintained that once those basic needs are met, an individual is then motivated to pursue the next level of needs in the hierarchy. The hierarchy builds on the basic physical needs towards goals of safety, emotional wellbeing, esteem, and finally self-actualization (see figure 1.1). Without meeting the preceding set of needs, an individual will not be motivated to pursue the needs of a higher level (Brown, 1994). Let’s return to the hypothetical English Language Learner who never does her homework, only now we find out that the homework is not complete because she must work every day after school and on the weekends to help support her family. Her exhaustion means she will have trouble pursuing goals of academic achievement, and keeping her after school may only serve to further alienate her from school since it will prevent her from going to work.

**Figure 1.1**  
**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1970)**



Behavior is also often discussed in terms of whether it is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Deci (1975) defined intrinsically motivated activities as those “for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward.” As stated above, behaviorist definitions tend to be linked to extrinsic motivation, cognitive definitions with intrinsic motivation. Research has shown that intrinsically motivated activities more often lead to achievement of goals (Kohn, 1993; Brown, 1994), which has led some educators to advocate for activities that “capitalize on the intrinsic by appealing to learners’ self-determination and autonomy” (Brown, p.42). This encouragement of the intrinsic is coupled with criticism of extrinsic motivators as creating a dependency that “focuses students too exclusively on the material or monetary rewards of an education” and teaches them to “fear failure... and refrain from potentially rewarding risk-taking or innovative behavior” (Brown, p.40). However, Deci’s definition does not take into account the rewards of meeting our needs at all levels of Maslow’s hierarchy. It seems more useful to consider motivation not in terms of whether or not there is a reward beyond the activity itself, but instead according to whether the activity in question meets the needs of the student.

In order to meet the needs of ELLs, thus tapping into their intrinsic motivation, Brown (1994) suggests activities and techniques that engage student self-determination and autonomy. For example, teaching writing as a means to develop ideas, demonstrating how prior knowledge enhances reading comprehension, and generally appealing to student interests, needs and purposes. Offering students choices about activities or topics is also intrinsically motivating because they are more in control of their learning and can act on their needs as they see them instead of how the teacher perceives them (ibid.).

## The Project

To address the question of how to encourage Arturo and Javier to write using the theories of intrinsic motivation and Maslow's hierarchy as a framework, I decided to open up the assignment to them by offering the possibility of designing it themselves. The performance standards for writing a response to literature would provide the guidelines in which they would be free to work. The thinking was that by turning over control of the assignment to them, they would be more deeply invested in producing written work and in theory would then be more intrinsically motivated to complete the assignment. The first step meant revisiting the standards for responses to literature and determining how to present them to the students as guidelines that would be clear and focused yet open to interpretation. The key feature of the standard seems to be that the student advances an interpretive, evaluative or analytic judgment and supports that judgment with references to the text. This judgment could involve a discussion of themes, a comparison of the text with its media version (the assignment the rest of the class was undertaking), or an analysis of the significance of the play.

In class, I distributed the graphic organizers I had created to guide the students through the writing process for a five-paragraph essay comparing the play and the film. In presenting the assignment I reviewed the standards for response to literature and talked about how the essay would meet those standards. The class then began the pre-writing step of the process in pairs or groups of three. Javier and Arturo made no moves to work with each other or with their classmates, nor did they read the handouts in front of them. I talked with each of them individually to propose the alternative assignment, using a copy of the standards for response to literature as a reference. We talked about what each standard was saying in "plain English" and what examples of each might look like. I told them that what was most important was that they showed they could analyze the text and support their judgments with quotes from the play or, if they wanted to make a comparison, descriptions of scenes from the movie.

Javier's initial response was skepticism and he asked several questions to clarify what I was proposing. He wanted to know what the assignment was, what exactly were my expectations. I repeated that as long as he advanced a judgment and cited the text to support the judgment, the writing could take any form. He asked if that meant he could write a rap song, and again I told him that what was important was that he met the standards for response to literature. Javier appeared very excited at the prospect of a rap response. He began taking notes and trying out rhymes that discussed the significance of the scenes about Beneatha's hair and the effect of not having those scenes in the movie. He worked on it for the rest of the class period.

With Arturo, we spent more time talking about the standards and what they meant. He would appear to understand one aspect of the standards, but then reveal in a later comment that he had not understood it well. We ran out of time that first day before he could get started on the pre-writing step, and as he walked out of the room I was left with a strong sense that we would have to start all over again the next day, which proved correct.

Arturo eventually came for extra help after school, telling me he didn't want to fail and asking me to help him. At no point did he talk to me about responding to the play in some alternative form. He came with the handouts I had given to the class and together we went through each step. In the end, Arturo wrote an essay according to the guidelines I had initially given. Though he did make a judgment and include quotes from the text, the essay lacked explanations of how the references to the text supported the judgment. While he had been able to discuss these connections in conversation, he did not include them in his writing. When asked about it he claimed to have forgotten, but he did not take the opportunity to re-write the essay.

Javier, who began the assignment with enthusiasm, did not come to school for nearly two weeks. When he finally returned, he said he had lost the work he had done on that first day. The end of the quarter was coming, but he said he no longer wanted to write the rap. We met at lunch to discuss what happened, why he was no longer motivated to write about what he clearly had strong ideas about, but he did not seem to want to reflect on or share this with me. At one point he claimed it was because to really express himself he would need to use foul language, and that since this was not allowed he had no interest in doing it at all. In fact, I had anticipated this and was prepared to suggest that he write two versions, one that was "his" and one that was school-appropriate, but I never had the opportunity to discuss this possibility with him. He also said that his language is a mixture of Spanish and English and that I would have insisted on English only, which we also never discussed. When asked why he would make those assumptions without trying to see what I really thought, he had no answer. Eventually, Javier stopped coming to school.

## Findings, Implications and Further Questions

While on the surface the experiment of offering students the opportunity to design an assignment in order to increase their motivation seems to have failed its objective, the experience brought some valuable lessons and insights. Considering the motivation (or lack thereof) of Arturo and Javier in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs offers possibilities for future classes.

In effect, I assumed that both Javier's and Arturo's needs were at Maslow's esteem level in the pyramid of needs. Placing control of their academic work in their hands would thus seem an appropriate way to meet these needs. In the case of Arturo, that he came for extra help and never even considered designing the assignment in a personal way, made it apparent that his motivation to do the work was not simply a question of self-esteem. With the response to literature essay, and with all the assignments for the class, he seemed to be more motivated by communal needs to belong. His weaker academic skills separated him from his classmates, yet neither did he share Javier's complete rejection of school. The extra help after school and in class provided a sense of place and acceptance for his motivation and his abilities.

As for Javier, the alternative assignment probably was appropriate to his needs in terms of the hierarchy, but perhaps the prospect of one assignment where he had control was not enough to contend with outside pressures and needs. Perhaps it was too little, too late. When Javier first stopped coming to class I met with his counselor and learned of some of the reasons why he was not attending school. While I will not go into those details here, it seems that he would have benefited from more such opportunities earlier on in his schooling. On the other hand, one must also consider that in Javier's life outside of the classroom, many of his needs for community and esteem were already being met, albeit according to criteria different from those in the school. This is not to imply that the attempt to engage him in writing was pointless, but it is a reminder of a teacher's limitations.

Heath and Nielsen (1974) wrote that "There is no established relationship between teacher behavior and student achievement." Perhaps one of the most valuable lessons in this first year of teaching and in this action research, has been recognizing all the many ways that teachers can offer possibilities to students, and to come to terms with the ways in which they can do no more than that. For next year, I plan to discuss more explicitly with students what their needs are from the beginning of the school year and to periodically check in to see how they feel the class is meeting those needs. Offering opportunities for student-designed work will also be part of my lessons, though I will offer these opportunities to every student rather than to just one or two. That there is no "established" relationship between teacher behavior and student achievement tells me that there are so many factors beyond my influence, but it also implies how I might open the classroom to recognize those factors.

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