Becoming the "Guide on the Side"

Negotiating curriculum means custom-building classes every day to fit the individuals who attend. The process isn't easy, but the results are impressive.

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"What is your idea of a perfect class?" My team-teaching partner, Ralph Feese, and I asked our 11th grade American Studies students this question on the first day of the 1992–93 school year. Little did they know, as they sat at their desks looking puzzled and intrigued, that we were at least as puzzled and intrigued as they were by the role shifts that question was calling us all to face.

Ralph and I teach social studies and English respectively at Addison Trail High School, a 9–12 comprehensive high school of approximately 1,700 students located in a suburb of Chicago. We believe that the course we teach—a cooperative, interdisciplinary study of American culture focusing on history and literature—is an effective way to prepare students to become citizens in a pluralistic, democratic society. We also enjoy the flexibility of the arrangement: we see roughly 45 students of heterogeneous abilities for two-period time blocks, during which we can structure the time as we choose.

During the five years we have taught together, we have done more and more to integrate our disciplines; to add enrichment activities that tie in music, architecture, and the visual and performing arts; to team teach rather than parallel teach; and to involve our students in group processes. Still, several questions have recurred in our planning and teaching: Should we restructure the course to take a thematic rather than a chronological approach? How can we best engage all of our students in becoming a community of learners? How can we help our students live the democratic process?

Students Plan the Curriculum

Ralph and I decided to rethink the design of our course after hearing about student-negotiated curriculum. In 1991 I had listened to James Beane speak about a program he piloted in Madison, Wisconsin, that let students in a junior-high humanities course help design their curriculum. Then, in July 1992, I met John Ingram, a British educator, who, like Beane, holds that the negotiated, student-centered classroom offers better opportunities for development of internal motivation, planning skills, goal setting, and perseverance than does the traditional teacher-directed model (Ingram 1992, Ingram and Worrall 1987).
With some trepidation, Ralph and I began to introduce negotiated curriculum into our American Studies class, for while the literature provides a rationale for student participation, few practical ideas exist for operating a secondary classroom in this way. Many questions flooded our minds: What would happen to our role in the classroom when we stepped to the side? If we moved thematically while the rest of the school’s U.S. history and English classes moved chronologically, what would happen to our students come test time? More practically, what should we do on the first day of class?

Several shared beliefs provided the foundation for our planning. First, we believe that because students want to learn, their own questions will be at least as in-depth as those that teachers pose to them.

Second, because planning their own learning is outside the experience of most of our students, we must proceed in a way that stretches their abilities while maintaining a comfort level.

Third, the power of the group greatly determines the success or failure of a given course in a given situation. If group norms are positive, the course will succeed.

Next, we need to look beyond our written curriculum to life-based outcomes, shaping the former based on the latter.

Finally, if students are actively engaged in thinking and problem solving, we believe that they will be able to meet the challenge of any state-, local-, or school-generated test.

**The Teachers Step Aside**

So what *did* happen when we asked our students to design the perfect class? They began by suggesting ideas independently. Next, they shared their thoughts in small groups, writing them on large sheets of butcher paper we had hung around the room. Finally, four elected representatives led a discussion of the ideas and organized them into a draft of a class constitution, including guidelines for group-work, late work, and day-to-day life in the classroom.

Ralph and I participated strictly as group members in this process, directing students' work only when essential. The result was a document we were all comfortable with, one that emphasized mutual respect, good communication, and shared responsibility.

The biggest obstacle was the students' disbelief that we really were going to live by the policy. Five days into the year, a student stopped at my desk and asked, "Are you guys really going to use these policies, or did we do this just as an exercise to see what it’s like to make up rules?"

I don't know whether I was more surprised that he felt the need to ask, or whether he was more surprised that the answer was "Yes!"

Moving into issues of curriculum, we presented the first topic for study: immigration and the American identity. Although we chose the first semester's themes ourselves, we moved to student-chosen topics by midyear—once the kids were comfortable with planning units. Our decision to begin with immigration was based on our belief that those who understand why people have come to the United States throughout its history have a deep understanding of the
American identity on which to build an understanding of history, literature, and other aspects of culture.

We asked our students to write journal entries about what they already knew about immigration. This exercise helped us to begin a K-W-L process (what I already Know, what I Want to know, and what I Learned). Next, we brought the full group together to write on index cards the questions they felt needed to be answered. The students worked with teammates first, and then the teams came together to group the questions and propose ways to answer them.

All of these activities took several class periods to accomplish. At times, we thought about stepping in and taking over, for the process was not swift and clean. It was difficult to let the kids struggle when we could have so easily organized the process for them.

However, we could not deny what we were seeing: our students were excited about what they were doing. They engaged in lively debates about what the important questions were and what they would have to learn to answer them. They suggested stories to read and movies to see about the lives of immigrants. They also invited friends to come to class to share their immigration experiences. For some of the things they wanted to know, they even recognized that we, their teachers, would probably be their best resources.

After collating all the information our students produced, we came up with a solid unit outline. A colleague who read the plan felt that it called for deeper thinking than the outline the other social studies teachers had formulated for the traditional classes.

Of course, empowering students didn't mean that we took a passive role in the classroom. We instructed students on writing journals, taking notes, conducting research, and summarizing material. We also brought in resource materials, contacted speakers, and arranged time in the library for student research. However, most of our time was spent discussing the students' ideas for class content and structure.

At times, our role did seem to have shifted from "disseminator of information" to "collator of note cards." More than once we questioned whether we were on the right track, and there were times when we inwardly agreed with the student who said that "it would be a lot easier if you two just taught and we just obeyed and learned!" Easier, probably. Better? We thought not.

**The Question of Assessment**

As the first semester progressed, patterns developed within our classroom. From the original topic of immigration, we branched out to three units under the "umbrella" theme of change: change through the time of the American Revolution, change through the Civil War, and change through the struggle for Civil Rights. Each unit began with a K-W-L, and we planned activities based on the questions generated. The students worked in the large group, in small cooperative groups, and independently.

We assessed their learning through papers, projects, and presentations. One of the more memorable "tests" occurred when we asked the class how they would like to share their knowledge of the Revolutionary War. One group asked to take a traditional test, one created a
mural, and two groups did skits. One skit depicted the war as a boxing match, with Bad Boy Britain fighting Yankee Doodle for the hand of Fair Lady Liberty; the ebb and flow of the fight matched the key battles of the war, and the ringside commentator shouted out statistical comparisons as the match progressed.

For the next unit, the class produced a textbook, with different groups researching and writing about various aspects of life and culture before, during, and after the Civil War. Parts of this text were later used by another American history class. As semester exam time drew closer, the fact that we had given few traditional paper-and-pencil tests began to give us pause.

In our school, departmental, criterion-referenced, content-driven exams count for half of each student's semester final exam grade. We also administer local and state assessments in writing, reading, and language arts. I knew that we had not "covered" all of the content on my department's criterion-referenced semester test. In addition, all of our assessments had been interdisciplinary in nature; we had not given separate English and history tests all semester.

The final result? On each of the local and departmental exams, our classes' averages were virtually identical to those of traditionally taught classes for both the first and second semesters. As of this writing, the state results are not yet in.

Why shift roles if test results are not going to change? Why is negotiating curriculum better than dictating it? For one thing, traditional tests do not yet assess the kinds of thinking and problem-solving skills that our students developed throughout this year. They became questioners, who know how to go after the answers they seek. They also read and wrote extensively, with less moaning and groaning than we heard in the past—after all, it was their own questions they were reading and writing about.

Some of the outstanding student-initiated projects we saw addressed topics ranging from the history of cartooning in America—with accompanying political cartoons as well as a segment from the pop favorite, Ren and Stimpy—to an analysis of Gandhi's influence, with reference to Thoreau, on Martin Luther King, Jr.; and from the development of the American musical to the impact of the Vietnam War.

At the end of the first semester, we asked our students to consider what they had learned about life in America and about themselves. Rick wrote:

I particularly enjoyed the interaction between "teacher" and "student." These terms to me are artificial in that nobody stops learning in their life, and everyone is a teacher of someone else.

**Democracy in the Classroom**

Once we began negotiating curriculum with our students, we noticed the conspicuous absence of stereotypical classroom habits. Day by day, the classes were built to fit the people who attended. Through the hardships of creating our classes, we experienced democracy in all its complexity.

Rick's comments, and those of other students, affirmed that the kids' view of classroom roles
had shifted. Through negotiating curriculum, the students came to accept more responsibility for their learning.

For Ralph and me, the process has affirmed the validity of our basic beliefs about our students. The students have shown us that they really can solve problems—if we just let them. Although we have stepped to the side, we have not become dispensable. Shifting roles has required that we all experience growth, and it has been a compelling experience.

References


Ingram, J. (July 1992). Personal interview.