

Made to Order

Student Choice in the Project-Based Classroom

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“I’ll have a grande iced doppio espresso with two pumps white mocha and one pump raspberry.”

This is my summertime drink at the coffee shop I frequent. It’s sort of a poor man’s iced raspberry mocha. I order all of the ingredients I want in a manner that serves my taste buds and my wallet best. In a society that has become increasingly sensitive to the needs of individuals within the collective, options and preferences have become a necessary component of many successful systems. This is no different in education.

Last year, toward the end of our study of Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*, my students and I discussed what a final assignment might look like, and we quickly realized how different we really are. From twenty-seven minds came twenty-seven opinions; all were of equal value and impressive focus.

We started that class with a journal entry titled, “Show me what you got! If you could show your learning in any way, what would it be?” The students wrote about methods they wished I used and reminded themselves of the tools their past teachers had employed that worked well for them. After the students were done writing, we rearranged the classroom

to facilitate a round-table discussion, somewhat like a Socratic seminar, and we began to focus and forge all of our ideas into a plan.



Students explore the novel through a board game one of their classmates created.

One student shared, “I have always wanted to make a puzzle. Each piece would represent a different project or part of a project.” She held up a sketch of what her puzzle project would look like. It was impressive. Another student said, “I like to watch movies and then discuss them. Maybe we could make our own movie and then have a discussion group about it.” Other ideas emerged: a dice game, a slide show, a drawing, a personal legend. I could sense that they were starting to understand the purpose of the activity and the pending assignment.

The students decided that many of their ideas were excellent, but that they needed my advice and approval before beginning their project. They also found that they were often conflicted between avenues of expression that they enjoyed and those that best reflected their understanding. We decided to allow one hour for writing project proposals and then two days for the products to be created and exhibited. The time allotted for project proposals replaced a

final quiz that would have covered the novel's content. Instead of receiving a test/quiz grade for an assessment that I created, they earned the same points for a project proposal that they designed. This made the planning and development of their idea at least as important as the product itself.

When students returned to school the next day they were noticeably more enthusiastic about working on their projects than they had been for previous blocks of project time. Most students were ready to work with supplies they had brought from home and others were focused on completing the content outline for their project before they started constructing. I felt that the day was a success and students seemed to share my sentiment.

One student told me, "I can't remember ever getting to choose my own project before. It's kind of a lot of pressure." Echoes of rigor reverberated in my eardrums. Another asked, "If we are going to create our own project, shouldn't we get to create our own due dates?" Nice try. They were starting to have fun with it.

The second and final day of in-class work proved to be an adventure. Some students completed products and were asked to critique each other's work and revise. A few students showed obvious signs of the pressure that comes with working outside of a group. Others were focused on finishing their work on time. The ethic was as good or better than in most projects I design entirely on my own. I realized that the instructor alone couldn't design an inclusive classroom, but that the instructor must incorporate the ideas and needs of the learner into the curriculum. The rigor, focus and calendar don't have to change, but options must be available.

As a final assessment, students compared their final product to the proposals they created on the first day and gave themselves a final grade. Each student wrote a reflection about his or her design, implementation, successes and challenges; they focused on areas of their work that turned out differently than they had planned. We spent the next day sharing work and discussing how similar student options could be worked into larger projects. In the end, I concluded that a well-differentiated assignment or project is like a great cup of coffee. Each one may look, taste and smell a little different, but they all share some ingredient that wakes us up in the morning and makes us love what we do.

To learn more about Mike Strong's on-going work and research, visit his digital portfolio on the HTH GSE website at [//gse.hightechhigh.org/](http://gse.hightechhigh.org/)