

Okay, I will admit it—sometimes  
I trick my ninth grade students.

I trick them into reading intimidating texts and  
trick them into facing difficult content head-on.  
I trick them into studying by playing review  
games days in advance of a unit test and  
I trick them into sharing insights about  
novels by focusing on the novelty  
of Socratic seminars.

I spend many sleepless  
nights hoping that my  
hooks will catch all of  
them and that they will  
be fully engaged in the  
content area games I  
tediously design. I have  
found that many of my graduate education classes  
share strategies to help teachers build reading  
engagement through high-energy games and external  
stimuli. And there is certainly a reason teachers  
consult their “bag of tricks” in times of need.

But my students also arrive with their own bags of  
tricks, although they may not admit it so readily. They  
pull from these bags when they trick me into believing  
that they read the whole novel, *each and every*  
time. They reach into their bags as they trick me into  
believing that they studied for days in advance for a  
test and they trick me when they claim, most sincerely,  
that they really *do* love reading about William  
Shakespeare and Homer as much as I do.

### The Worn Out Bag

With all of our bags bulging with familiar tricks and  
tools, I have found it difficult to engage *all* of my  
students *all* of time. This year I decided that I  
needed to add a new trick to my bag. Therefore, I  
began to review research about student choice  
(Atwell, 1989; Graves, 1983) and discovered the  
importance of controlled choice, which allows for  
student choice within a set of standards-based  
parameters. While students are able to choose topics  
and genre, standards and learning goals are still  
paramount. Atwell, in her hallmark text *In the Middle*,  
explains, “Freedom of choice does not undercut  
structure” (p. 15). Confident that this was the trick I  
needed, I chose to incorporate controlled choice into  
various writing activities throughout the year.

However, the use of controlled choice can be  
challenging. Since choice activities are student-  
focused, such plans involve more time, more plan-



BY KATIE GREENE

ning, and more facilitation for the teacher as opposed  
to generic, one-size-fits-all teacher-based writing  
topics. Projects that involve student choice, if not  
implemented well, can also draw attention away from  
the standard that is being taught. With these facts in  
mind, I designed activities that successfully in-  
corporate student choice and that have had positive  
outcomes for my students.

### Strengthening the Seams

#### *Creative Writing*

During our unit on short stories, my ninth grade  
students use *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (1984)  
by Chris Van Allsburg as inspiration for their own  
creative writing pieces. *The Mysteries of Harris Bur-  
dick*, a picture book that contains very little writing,  
includes fourteen illustrations that are left by Harris  
Burdick at the office of Peter Wenders, a gentleman  
who works for children’s book publisher. According to  
the introduction of the book, Harris Burdick drops  
fourteen illustrations off at Mr. Wenders’ office but  
does not include a story with any of the drawings.  
Instead, only a title and caption accompany each  
picture. After asking Mr. Burdick to return the next  
day with the accompanying stories, Mr. Wenders  
anxiously awaits Mr. Burdick’s return. However, Mr.  
Burdick never returns and the mysteries of the  
pictures endure (Van Allsburg, 1984, introduction).

After sharing the story and pictures with my students,  
I invite each student to select a picture. The students  
then draft individual stories that they work with  
throughout the entire unit. As we learn new literary  
devices such as mood, tone, and foreshadowing, the  
students decide whether or not to incorporate the  
literary devices into their creative writing pieces. At  
the conclusion of the unit, my students submit their

final drafts and include a letter that explains why they chose to include certain devices and exclude others. As we examine each device, the students master the concept of author's purpose and the reasons why authors include or exclude certain literary devices.

*The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* activity allows for students to experiment with the controlled choice and "offers the students real choices" (Mendler, 2000, p.45). Since the students are constantly revising and editing their pieces, revision occurs throughout each draft and not just before the final draft is published. Furthermore, I ask my students to revisit the structures of their papers. I ask them to use the accompanying caption as the first line of their papers. Then, I ask them to use the caption as the basis for the climax of their stories. Finally, I encourage my students to use the caption as the concluding line of their creative pieces. At each step, we discuss the impact that such revision has on their papers and purposes. As a result of the activity, my students learn to interact with their writing more authentically and purposefully (Mendler, 2000; Smede, 2000). And, last but not least, the use of controlled choice provides an opportunity for my students to experience ownership.

#### *The "Big Book" Project*

Another assignment that incorporates free choice is titled the "Big Book" project. At the close of each semester, my ninth grade students complete a formal outside reading project. During the spring semester, my students complete the "Big Book", which assesses their understandings of various literary devices. The book is divided into nine sections and students spend time planning each page and organizing their ideas.

#### **"BIG BOOK" CHECKLIST**

##### ***Page One: Title Page***

Create a title page with symbolic elements. Make it unique!

##### ***Page Two: Table of Contents***

Create your own table of contents. Make sure it "fits" with the book you make. Please incorporate symbols and thematic elements.

##### ***Page Three: Major Character***

Please find your major character at his/her most emotional moment and cast a person for the part. The person must be either famous or a major figure at our school. Take a picture of the person. Your page needs to briefly (3-5 sentences) explain why the character is a good representative of the major character from the novel.

##### ***Page Four: Irony***

Artistically recreate a scene where the reader knows something the main character does not know. You must somehow represent the reader and what the reader knows using creative elements (collage, different mediums, etc...).

##### ***Page Five: Minor Character***

Create an award for a minor character highlighting his/her purpose in the novel.

##### ***Page Six: Mood Shift***

Take a photograph that shows you exaggerating the most intense mood that is established in the novel.

##### ***Page Seven: Major Conflict***

Identify the major conflict in the novel (must include the major character from Page Three) and create a visual representation of the conflict. Place the element or individuals in conflict in some type of competitive arena.

##### ***Page Eight: Narrator***

Do you trust the narrator? Create a page that indicated what type of narration is in the book (the point of view). Identify the actual narrator and the level of reliability of the narrator.

##### ***Page Nine: Theme Link***

Write a well-developed paragraph and link the title of the book to a major theme in the book. Make sure that your paragraph flows logically.

Throughout this activity, students must plan and organize each page so that the pages are linked by mediums or ideas. Furthermore, each page requires that students think critically and carefully about their choices. When the books are complete, the students share their "Big Books" with the class. The fluidity of the project and the creativity that students incorporate into their Big Books allows for constant planning, revising, and publishing.

#### *The TIPCASTT Activity*

The TIPCASTT activity involves student choice and poetry. The TIPCASTT project allows my students to explore poetry in meaningful ways and helps students identify a poem's Title, Connotation, Attitude, Shift, and Tone (hence the acronym as the project title). Furthermore, The TIPCASTT system encourages the beginning student of poetry to integrate the literal and figurative meanings conveyed by a poem into a coherent summary. The activity focuses on an understanding of the literary devices that helped the author to convey the poem's purpose.

---

### TIPCASTT Activity

<b>Title</b>	Write the title and author of the poem.
<b>Paraphrase</b>	Silently read the poem. Then, listen to it read aloud by someone else. Finally, restate its literal meaning in your own words. Try to write at least one sentence for each stanza of the poem, capturing all of its literal ideas.
<b>Connotation</b>	Read the poem and state its point of view. Then, look for especially significant or unusual words in the poem. Why were they included? What meaning do they convey?
<b>Attitude</b>	Reread the poem, looking for diction, images, and details that hint at or suggest the poet's attitude to the poem's subject. Note these examples below.
<b>Shift</b>	Reread the poem, marking the places in it where the speaker's feelings shift or change. Watch for changes in line length, sound, diction, and punctuation, and pay special attention to the conclusion.
<b>Title</b>	Reread the poem's title again and your initial explanation for it. Now that you've reread the poem several times and analyzed its features, explain the title of the poem in light of its meaning again.
<b>Theme</b>	First, identify the literal subject(s) of the poem. Then, identify the abstract or figurative subject of the poem. Finally, write the theme of the poem in a complete sentence.

---

After completing the TIPCASTT activity, I invite my students to create a book of poetry based on the lyrics of their favorite song. Each student selects five poems from their textbook and connects them to the song that they selected. The easiest way to connect the poems with the original song is through the theme, title, or rhyme scheme. However, with a sense of ownership and an interest in the subject, I have found that the students often choose to connect the poems to the original song through the use of hyperbole, figurative language, and/or other poetic devices. Through the application of choice, students can relate to poetry in unique and authentic ways.

#### Cleaning Out the Bag

By incorporating controlled choice into classroom activities, educators can tap into the learning styles and interests of each student and help each student create meaning from a variety of learning experiences (Beers, 2006; Fogarty & Pete, 2003). In addition, the idea of controlled choice encourages student ownership and accountability. The suggestion of incorporating student choice allows for students to interact with their own learning more meaningfully. And, by adding this new trick to your bag, you can get rid of all of your rusted tools—but only if you choose!

#### References

- Atwell, N. (1989). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Beers, B. (2006). *Learning-driven schools: A practical guide for teachers and principals*.
- Forgarty, R., & Pete, B. (2003). *Nine "best practices" that make the difference*. Chicago, IL: Robin Fogarty & Associates, Ltd.
- Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Mendler, A. N. (2000). *Motivating students who don't care*. Bloomington, IN: Solution, Tree.
- Rief, L. (1992). *Seeking diversity: Language arts with adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Sattes, B.D., & Walsh, J.A. (2005). *Quality questioning: Research-based practice to engage every learner*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Van Allsburg, C. (1994). *The mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.