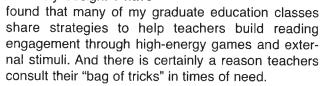
Okay, I will admit it—sometimes I trick my ninth grade students.

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

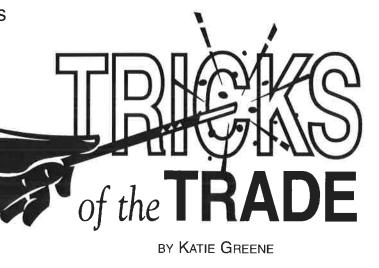


But my students also arrive with their own bags of tricks, although they may not admit it so readily. They pull from these bags when they trick me into believing that they read the whole novel, each and every time. They reach into their bags as they trick me into believing that they studied for days 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 studentfocused, such plans involve more time, more plan-



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 incorporate 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 Burdick, 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

Title Write the title and author of the poem.

Paraphrase 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.

Connotation 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?

Attitude 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.

Shift 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.

Title 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.

Theme 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 TIPCASST 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!

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