

Student Choice and Creativity in the Research Process

Abstract

Does student choice increase engagement and motivation? That was the primary question I explored in this project. I conducted action-research in my own classroom by selecting the most time-consuming and important project of the year, student research papers, and allowing students to submit a creative project in place of the paper. I had hoped that students who were not normally engaged in the curriculum, would choose the project and feel further connected to the material because they did so. In the end, I learned more about why students were not interested in the creative project, as only two students elected to do the creative project. The students who did select the creative project, however, submitted high-quality work that was both historically accurate, analytically strong, and creative, proving to me that it is possible to add creativity and student choice without sacrificing the overall quality. But because so few students opted for this option, I was unable to assess whether an open-ended creative project would actually increase student motivation.

Background

The ninth grade world history course is a survey course that focuses on ancient civilizations, world religions and medieval Europe. The classes are heterogeneous and all ninth grade students at SAR study the same content and complete similar assignments, regardless of level. Another major goal of the course is to provide students with analytical writing skills. I, and the other ninth grade history teachers, begin the year by asking students to use readings and classroom notes to find evidence to support assertions. I then move on to teaching thesis statements, and asked students to build an argument in support of their statement. Towards the end of the first semester, students wrote a five-paragraph essay centered around an analytical thesis statement and supported by specific factual and textual evidence.

While students practice writing and analytical skills all year long, I begin to teach research skills in the second semester. I select a general time period; this year's topic was the lives of Jews in medieval Islamic lands. In previous years, students researched ancient Greece and Rome. Within the time period, students are free to select their own topic to explore and research. Students are supposed to choose academic books from the school library, read and take notes on those sources, develop an argument in the form of a thesis statement, and write a five-page paper to support their argument. In past years, I often asked students to take their research and turn it into a creative presentation. Most students presented their research verbally, using the aid of PowerPoint slides, but every year a few students would do very creative projects, such as plays or videos. Two years ago the history department decided to stop requiring students to

present their research to the class. They took too much class time and we were trying to add additional content units. We also felt that we did not have the time to teach creative presentation skills and therefore the presentations lacked creativity and did not often engage the class.

Although I supported removing the creative projects, I was troubled by the lack of both creative projects and student choice in the curriculum. I decided that I would use this professional development project as a chance to explore providing students more choice and creativity in the ninth grade curriculum. I developed the essential question: **Does student choice increase engagement and motivation?** The natural place for adding creative choice seemed to be the research paper. I began by researching alternatives to the traditional research paper in academic journals. Most of the available research seemed to come from library science journals that focused on the importance of research, to the exclusion of writing. These journals often suggested skipping the paper altogether and asking students to present their research in various creative ways. I felt that analytical writing is an integral skill that students must develop, as important as learning how to conduct research. I decided to allow students to do a creative writing project, rather than to allow creative presentations.

Procedure

At the start of the second semester, I assigned students a research paper. The paper began by asking students to read a chapter in their Jewish history textbook, *A Short History of Civilization*, which focused on Jewish life in the medieval Islamic empire. They were then asked to prepare for a Socratic Seminar discussion on the chapter. From that discussion, a few distinct topics emerged as possibilities for the research paper, although students were free to choose other topics as well. Students were then asked to spend the next month researching their topic. This required visiting the school library to select a minimum of two books to read and take notes on their topic.

I decided that I would not mandate a creative project, but would offer it as an option in place of the traditional five-page paper. I decided this after discussing the project with Adina Shoulson, the History Department chair. We were both concerned that the research project would leave weaker students unprepared to write a traditional research paper at the start of tenth grade. In a traditional research paper, the first step after students complete their research is to draft a thesis statement that presents the potential argument that will be proven in the paper. I opted not to tell the students about the creative project until students were a month into their research and about to draft their thesis statement [See Appendix A for deadlines]. I was afraid that students would see the creative project as a chance to avoid serious research. I did not trust that students would conduct serious research if they did not think they would need to write a paper to present that research. I was afraid that some students would focus solely on the creative presentation without spending significant time researching their topic.

When I did present students with the creative project, I chose to provide some guidance and examples for the creative option. I began by openly discussing the professional development project. I shared with students the fact that this was a new experiment designed to assess the results of providing students with more choice in their work. While my research question was geared to assessing whether student choice increased motivation, I felt it was important that the project not be completely open-ended. I offered options for each content topic that students had chosen. Some of these options included writing a dialogue between historical actors, writing annotated poetry in the medieval style, or creating a documentary [See Appendix B]. Students were also encouraged to develop other ideas for creative projects. All students were asked to meet with me before they began working on their creative project. Students were given one month to work on this creative project. That amounted to roughly the same amount of time that students who chose the traditional paper were given to write the paper, although I was willing to provide an extension to any student who chose the creative project.

To assess my essential question, “**Does student choice increase engagement and motivation?**” I created a survey that all students in the class would be asked to fill out upon completion of the research process. The survey asked about the challenges of the research and writing process and then asked students to explain why they did or did not choose the creative project. My goal was to see whether the students who chose the creative project were more motivated in the process as well as to assess why other students did not select the creative option. {See Appendix C for survey questions.]

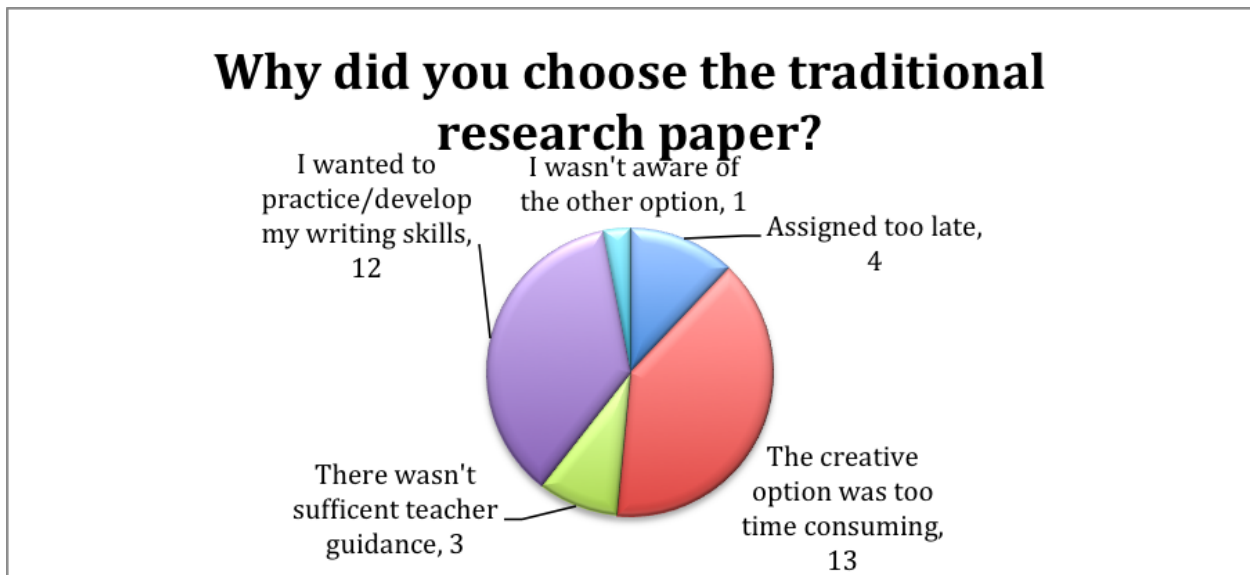
Analysis

The primary problem I encountered in this project was the lack of student interest in the creative option. Only six students expressed real interest in the creative project. Of the six students who met with me, only two followed through with the creative project and actually submitted a final product. Two students dropped the creative project because they felt it would be more work than the traditional paper. One of those student had wanted to create a documentary and began by interviewing a Columbia University professor for her documentary. After her interview, she started to use iMovie to edit the documentary and realized that she lacked the technical skills to do so. She was nervous about the amount of time it would take her to improve her skills and opted to write a research paper instead. Another student wanted to create a publisher’s catalogue describing the books written by the Geonim during this time period. I met with him and encouraged him to add a forward to the catalogue describing the collection of books to make connections between the various Jewish books written under the Islamic Empire. Once he was asked to add that, he felt that it would require less work to write a paper and opted not to pursue the creative project.

Two additional students were counseled out of perusing the creative project, because I felt that their project ideas were not based upon sufficient research. When I met with one student, she indicated that she was having a hard time taking notes on the academic books she

needed for the paper. She also stressed that she was not a “good writer” and was having difficulty formulating a thesis statement. Her creative project idea was to create a found poem, which combined lines from medieval Hebrew poetry. I did not feel that this project would present sufficient research or analysis and asked her to write the traditional paper instead. Another student had presented a great idea, exploring the mythic stature that Maimonides has among the modern Jewish community and assessing whether there was actually sufficient understanding of Maimonides’ ideas to support his mythic status among today’s Jewish community. I thought this was a great idea, but the student himself never did sufficient research to make himself knowledgeable about Maimonides’ ideas, a necessary step before testing out his hypothesis. In the end, he ran out of time and needed to complete his paper over Passover break, leaving him with no time to survey the SAR community.

In the end, with such a small sample population, it was near impossible to assess whether the students who selected the creative project were more motivated than they would have been had they chosen the traditional paper. I had been hoping that the creative project would have engaged students who were normally disengaged from historical research and writing. The two students who did choose the creative project were among the most motivated and intellectually curious students in my classes. My feeling was that had I assigned the creative option at the start of the project, I would have had more students interested in choosing it. But survey results indicated that most students who opted not to choose the creative project did so not because it was assigned late but because it was seen as more time consuming than writing a traditional paper. Perhaps the requirement that students meet with me to discuss their plan also deterred some students. Twelve students also indicated that they preferred to practice and perfect their traditional writing skills than engage in creative writing. While the survey was anonymous and open-ended, I cannot help but feel that some students gave that reason because they knew I would be reading the surveys.



While not that much information can be gleaned from a sample size of two, those two projects were perfect examples of how creative projects can express serious historical research. I have to admit my initial bias was that it would be difficult for students to be both creative and historically accurate. I was afraid that students would spend too much time on the creative presentation at the expense of serious historical research. In these two cases, that was not remotely true. One student created a courtroom trial where many historical actors were put on trial for discriminating against their Jewish minority. While such a trial is a-historical in nature, the dialogue between witness and prosecutors allowed the student to explore how two groups, Jews and Muslims, could view the same historical situation from such divergent perspectives, a supremely valuable skill that history students must develop. The other student submitted a short story in which a young Jewish poet reads Arabic poetry and borrows the poetic styles of the Arab poets as he finds his own voice as a poet. Her story was rich in period detail, all of which was footnoted extensively. She even researched details like typical Jewish names at the time to make sure that every detail of her narrative was historically accurate, another important historical skill. These students did note in their surveys that this project was more time consuming than they imagined when they first chose the creative option. Both students were also granted extensions to complete the assignment. This project as taught me that it is possible for students to do creative work that it is also well researched and analytically strong. But it also highlighted the pitfalls that come when the creative option is presented after students had begun working on the assignment. I think that had I presented the option at the start, more students would have selected it, and it would have been an enriching and rewarding experience for both student and teacher.

Appendix

Appendix A

World and Jewish History- 9th Grade Research Project- Jews under Islamic Rule

Due Date	Project Step	Details
2/19	Class Discussion on Source #1	Read Chapter #4 in Scheindlin's <i>A Short History of the Jewish People</i> and prepare for a Socratic Seminar discussion based on the chapter.

2/21	Topic Due	Post the topic (i.e. narrowed focus of your research) on Haiku.
	Library Visit	Please visit the library on your own over the next week to discuss your topic with the librarian and to learn about the library's resources.
	Source Requirements	Use the school or local library to find at least 2 more secondary source books on your topic. We will provide you with a list of suggested resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Source 1: Scheindlin's book ● Source 2 &3: books ● Source 4 &5: primary sources (We will provide a packet with many options to you.) <p>*Note: You may not use Encyclopedia entries or websites for this paper. Of course, you may use additional books and primary sources as well.</p>
	Read and Take Notes	Use Index Cards, a notebook, or your laptop to read and take notes on your sources. An optional guide is posted on Haiku.
On or Before 3/3	Submit Notes and bibliography for Source #2 (not the Scheindlin chapter)	Submit summary/notes for one book that you are using in your presentation. Your notes must include bibliographic information in the Chicago Style format . You must also include 2 possible quotations that you may use in your paper. Note guide and samples are posted on Haiku.
	Notes and Bibliography for ALL Sources	Take notes on at least one additional book, on the Scheindlin chapter, and on at least two primary sources. You do not have to submit these notes, but I am always happy to review them.

3/21	Thesis statement	Submit your thesis statements for your paper on Haiku.
3/28	Revised thesis statement and topic sentences due.	Submit a revised thesis statement with topic sentences for each subsection of your paper. Make sure your topic sentences assert the argument you will make in that specific section of your paper.
4/10	Paper Due	Your paper must be 3-5 pages . More details on the paper requirements to follow.

In class we will explore every step of this process. We will learn how to search and take notes, cite sources, how to create a bibliography, and how to write topic sentences. You will be given a VERY LIMITED amount of class time to work on this project but I am always available to meet with you. It will be a demanding but rewarding process!

PLAGIARIZED PROJECTS WILL AUTOMATICALLY RECEIVE A FAILING GRADE.

Appendix B

9th Grade- Ms. Taub Alternative Research Paper Assignment

What is the purpose of a research paper?

The purpose is threefold. One goal is to have you read scholarly texts and sift through the information presented in these texts to uncover both the author's argument as well as supporting evidence that the author marshals in support of that argument. A second goal is to have you organize your research notes to create your own argument based on the evidence you gathered. A third goal is to perfect your writing skills, by working on crafting paragraphs in the **ATE** format (**A**ssert your thesis, provide **T**extual Evidence, **E**xplain a connection between your thesis and the evidence.)

The first two goals can be accomplished regardless of whether your final product is a paper. The purpose of the paper is mostly to work on the last goal. This year, I am experimenting with allowing students to find alternative argument and supporting evidence in alternatives to writing the standard body paragraphs.

Alternative Options to the Research Paper Assignment

Here are some ideas:

- Create a dialogue for a debate between two groups (ex: Karaites vs. Geonim)
- Publish a newspaper with various content pieces (news, interviews, editorial) on life in a particular city (EX: Granada Times)
- Create a “History Channel” documentary (using visual images and interviews) to present your topic
- Annotated Timeline (using Prezi) create a timeline of events where you explain how each event proves your thesis argument.
- Create the product about which you are researching i.e. write poetry or a philosophic treatise, or some shealot u'teshuvot in the style of the times, and annotate those texts to explain the literary devices, philosophic underpinnings....used at the time.

Regardless of whether you choose to present your research in a paper or in an alternative format, your product much demonstrate the following:

- A thesis argument
- An understanding of the time period
- A use of factual information to prove your thesis statement
- A connection made between the time period, your research and your argument (i.e. how does the information you have gathered reflect the ideas and values of the Golden Age of Islam?)

Appendix C

Research Paper Survey

1. Please describe the challenges you faced with each part of the project.

Selecting a Topic:

Finding Resources:

Reading and taking notes on the sources:

Crafting a thesis statement:

Writing the Paper:

Revising and editing the paper:

2. What skills did you learn from each stage of the process?

Selecting a Topic:

Finding Resources:

Reading and taking notes on the sources:

Crafting a thesis statement:

Writing the Paper:

Revising and editing the paper:

3. What improvements could I make to the process of writing this paper?

For those who DID NOT choose a creative project, answer the following questions:

1. Why didn't you choose to do a creative project?
2. What changes could I have made to interest you in a creative project?

Please share any other thoughts here.

For those who chose the creative project, please answer the following questions:

1. Why did you choose the creative project?
2. What were the challenges of the creative project?
3. What benefits do you feel you gained by choosing the creative project?
4. What changes could I institute to improve the creative project option?
5. Did the creative project also help you improve your writing skills? In what ways?

Please share any other thoughts here.

Appendix D

Why did you choose the traditional research paper?

