Why Do Students Pick Teacher A or Teacher B? Who Would You Pick?

by Alan November of November Learning | NovemberLearning.com

What if we asked our students about the type of work they would prefer to do while in class? It may reveal a lot about what choices they would make for assignments and activities and why they make these choices.

These days, when I meet with students across the country, I challenge them to choose between two very different assignment designs for the same subject, Romeo and Juliet. Both assignments use Powerpoint. Students in each classroom have access to a device. Each teacher has the same goals, an interpretation of the text.

When asked, students offer fascinating reasons to explain their first choice. You may want to design a series of choices (Teacher A-Z) to present to your own students to understand what motivates them to work. You can imagine one of the most popular choices has to do with not being bored, although there are students who do want to be spoon fed.

The goal is to have students become the learning architects of at least some of their work, similar to that being promoted by #geniushour. It is possible we have grossly underestimated their ability to understand their own learning styles and how to take increased responsibility for becoming learning designers. As students have explained to me in the past, a change in the design of work can lead to an increase in student learning and focus. For example, simply allowing students to use Minecraft to design one of the historic California missions can lead to much more research, critical thinking, and presentation detail then designing the same church grounds with sugar

cubes.

On to Teacher A and Teacher B

Teacher A presents a slide presentation on Romeo and Juliet that she designed before class, (perhaps even the year before). Each student has a laptop and is taking notes during class. Every now and then, Teacher A asks if anyone in class can answer a specific question about the character development or how to interpret a quote from the play. Raising your hand is optional. Homework is studying your notes for a quiz on Friday.

Teacher B researched slide presentations about Romeo and Juliet from the U.K. and around the world by using an advanced search (Filetype:ppt site:ac.uk (edu) Romeo and Juliet (simply replace ac.uk with the extensions of various countries). Teacher B selected six presentations she believes represent different cultural interpretations of Romeo and Juliet and with varied emphases on character development and themes. Students are organized in teams of 3-5 in class and challenged to review the slides of all six slide presentations from the six different countries. Each team is responsible for selecting ten slides from approximately 80 combined slides to create a remix team slide presentation. The teacher works with the students to develop a rubric which makes clear what the rationale is for choosing the slides, such as differences in cultural interpretations. Each team also has to write a defense of why they selected their slides and post their finished remix to the class blog. Homework is to review another team's slide presentation and to offer comments that compare to your team's choices. This class will also have a quiz on Friday.

What I do not mention to the students is I believe there is a significant difference between the learning of the two teachers. Teacher A is not learning very much about her students. Her mode of sharing her slide presentation does not offer her much

opportunity to interact with students and understand how each student is interpreting the lesson. Teacher B has almost limitless opportunity to learn how her students learn. As she walks around the room she can observe her students remixing and she can listen to the logic of their debate about which slides to pick. She may even have someone audio record the conversations at the table for her further review. She can also see who is more involved in the work.

Teacher A leaves class to get another slide presentation ready for chapter 2. Teacher B leaves class looking forward to reading (and/or listening to) student comments about each teams' work on the class blog. She will also look for patterns of interpretation across the remix Powerpoints and the written explanations each team submitted.

Now comes the intriguing part. When I ask students which teacher they prefer, I get both Teacher A and Teacher B. Here are the explanations of why they make their choice.

Students explain their preferences

The first time I ran this experiment, I asked approximately twenty middle and high school students what they thought. The first student who answered wanted Teacher B. She explained her attention span was only ten minutes long and she could not stay focused on a longer slide presentation by a teacher. She also thought she would learn more by looking at six presentations from around the world and she felt she would be interested in the different cultural interpretations. This student also shared her willingness to talk with classmates about creating their own remix slide presentation. She felt Teacher B's remixing lesson would give her a better chance of staying focused for the whole class and it would be more engaging than taking notes. She also felt she would remember the material longer because she was actively discussing the material and creating something.

The next student clearly did not like Teacher B and picked Teacher A. When I asked her why, she summed it up, "I am lazy. I do not want to do all of that work required by Teacher B." She also explained that her own teacher did provide slide presentations and she liked them because she just wanted to know what was going to be on the test. Since her teacher was the only one who knew what was to be on the test, she only wanted to listen to her teacher. She also explained she has to write things down to help her remember what was being taught and she liked taking her own notes. When I asked her to compare the two teachers' approaches in terms of how long she might remember the material, she agreed she would probably forget most of the content after the quiz with Teacher A. But that did not matter to her. Her goal was to get the highest possible grade, not to remember the material the longest. She knew that Teacher A gave her the best chance. "All those other slide presentations from other countries would be too confusing and most of the material would not be on the test."

Obviously there are a limitless number of creative options to designing assignments in the digital age, including following the hashtag #shakespeare to learn how people around the world apply quotes from a guy who has been dead for 400 years to everyday events. And, sometimes it makes sense to be Teacher A, other times Teacher B's approach will work best, and at other times it will be the approach of Teachers C-Z. There is no right style all the time.

What concerns me is we often do not explicitly provide our teachers with the permission and skill-support to be Teacher B. Too many of our workshops do a great job of explaining the technical bits without hitting on the myriad design opportunities. As a follow-up on my article on the 6 questions to determine if you're technology rich/information poor, Teacher B's class has at least three: making thinking visible, new lines of enquiry, and student as contributor.

Ever since I began my work as a teacher with technology in the early 1980s, I have

highly valued that students think of designing work with new tools in ways which I would never imagine. For example, I recently asked a combined group of about 150 teachers and fifteen students to redesign the classic lesson of learning the 50 state capitals.

The only group to design a video game with increasing layers of difficulty of understanding each state was a group of seven students who knew Scratch. All they had to do was to go to the Scratch website and to a search on "state capitals" to find many examples of video games. (Now we have Teacher C.) As one teacher later tweeted about watching her students think about how they could design a traditional assignment, she tweeted out, "#Notfair. The students selected a state capital video game that was too engaging to stop! I do not think that way!" (This is a fourth design feature of the Transformative 6—use of best examples in the world.) Many of our students are waiting for us to help design assignments that will support the way they learn.

As one of my friends, Phil Stubbs from Verso in Australia, recently shared in a tweet in support of my recent book, "Who Owns the Learning," "Spoon-feeding will not bring back awe and wonder". Even when students want the answer to be spoon-fed, as the girl who picked Teacher A did, we should try to make our students work harder for their discovery of "the awe and wonder". Or, to paraphrase the Great Bard, "They have been at a great feast of learning, and stolen the scraps."