They Will Choose to Learn: An Alternative to the Lock-Step Classroom

BY JON APPLEY

"I can never read as fast as the people in my English classes, as fast as the people who talk all the time... I don't want to compete with them. Why should I?... We all know who's going to get the highest grades. What's the point?... You just do what the teacher seems to want. You don't really have to read the books."

This quotation is a compilation of comments made by my students at Noble High School about many of their classroom experiences. If you teach at an American high school, you probably know many students like mine who have often been unsuccessful and who, to be blunt, often resist and disrupt classrooms and teachers' best-laid plans.

My job at Noble is to offer students a way to make up English and social studies credits; my mission is to help them to become better learners and return to regular classes with the tools they need to succeed. My experience in this alternative situation gives me, perhaps, a different perspective on what needs to change if these students are to become thriving members of our classrooms and schools. My students teach me daily that I need to learn more about the power and necessity of choice.

In general, my students share several common characteristics. They have a fierce, moody independence, which translates frequently into a lack of trust and disrespect for authority. They hold in common an injured pride which makes many of them unwilling to ask publicly for help and which makes most of them prefer intentional failure to the risk of appearing inadequate before their peers. Most suffer from self-destructiveness — born of years of resisting teachers and learning — which creates a self-defense of excuses for failing to do their work. Finally, many have developed stubborn, hard-and-fast opinions in order to avoid doubtful, dangerous reflection. Many of my students have horrific problems at home, but nearly all will freely tell you that they have been damaged, not only by their home lives, but also by their schools. Three-quarters of my students are male.

Our overcrowded high school serves three sprawling rural towns in Maine. The faculty is moving forward with inclusion and heterogeneity, and the school has "untracked." Using the same philosophy that all students should be treated alike, beginning next year there will be no "alternative" class like mine in which kids who have failed can make up credits.

I believe I have developed one approach to teaching and to learning with these students which may be helpful to teachers struggling with the task of learning to teach heterogeneous or challenging groups. What follows are portraits of a few of my students, and my reflections on my experiences with one method of teaching that provides individualization and choice in a secondary classroom.

Brian

"School is a big part of survival, because you always have problems. Whether you are an A student, or an F student. Whether it be school work, teachers, or classmates. Some people think survival is just going into the woods and setting up camp. To tell you the truth, camping is the easiest form of survival." Brian is a seventeen-year-old senior who dropped out of school last year and returned after a long, difficult summer trying to make a life with his girlfriend. Together he and his girlfriend faced the issue of her pregnancy, and Brian, realizing that he had little future, returned to school ready to do his best.

Teachers who do not know him regard Brian as tough and difficult; Brian admits to stubbornness and has worked hard to control his quick temper. He works every day after school from five to midnight pumping gas. He regularly reports to school, exhausted, a travel mug of coffee in his hand. Habitually late, he is in danger of failing his first-block shop class. When he is late, he gets no credit for the period, and his teacher will not let him make up the missed time.

Brian is exceptionally good with his hands; he builds replica model boats and fixes cars. English has always been very difficult for him, especially writing. He had not read a book in two years, and the books he did read before that had been read out loud in the off-campus alternative class. In the first ten weeks, Brian chose to complete a unit on Hunting, read The Firm and A Handmaid's Tale (with the help of an audiotape), read six short stories, rewrote his paper several times, and led an excellent presentation on the different ways to look at hunting. In the second ten weeks, Brian chose the Survival unit, read Fahrenheit 451 and Hiroshima, and wrote a powerful paper about survival both in the books and in his own life.

"Everyone at some point in life, I don't care who you are, you're going to have to survive the world out there," be concluded.
Often Brian asked two other students to keep the noise down because they were keeping him from his work. One of the students be confronted was one of the angriest students in our school, a person whom many adults avoid challenging. “It's weird,” Brian said to me. “The classes I'm doing well in are the academics. The only class I'm flunking is Movers and Blowers! Would you ever have believed that?”

I wanted to set up a curriculum for my eighty students that would allow wide choice and also hold up high standards. I wanted to individualize, but I also needed some system to guide students who might require or want help with choices, as well as an assessment system which would make logistics manageable.

From Foxfire workshops that I attended, I learned about the notion of “givens.” Givens are the expectations that Foxfire teachers give to their students at the onset of a year, term, or unit. Well-written givens may include a list of readings and activities required by the teacher, as well as the statement of open-ended problems or questions which empower students to make choices about their learning. I think of my givens as maps I hand out to explorers in my classroom. These maps have to be reassuring, motivating, and specific. In an individualized classroom I want my expectations to be very clear.

From a Coalition of Essential Schools workshop on integrated curriculum, I learned to plan curriculum by addressing four areas. Beginning with the Concepts and/or Skills I want to teach, I plan back-wards: I try to phrase a broad, open-ended “Essential Question” that will frame and investigate the concepts I have chosen. The question or questions serve as organizing centers for my thinking. Then I write a Final Assessment, usually a project or multifaceted response which will allow students some choice in how they demonstrate their knowledge of the concepts. Finally, I brainstorm possible Activities that might help teach the subskills, information, or processes I want students to learn. The following diagram illustrates the process:

Although this process was originally designed to give interdisciplinary teams of teachers a tool to organize diverse thinking, I have found the tool works in isolation as well. I use it to compose basic units, which I often offer to friends and colleagues for suggested additions, changes, and criticism.

**Erik**

Erik's handicap is that he is a genuinely inquisitive and reflective person; he is a student of life. Erik takes time to answer direct questions, and he seems benevolent about other people's, especially teachers', impatience with him. He is always carrying a book that no one has assigned. He dresses with his own style of shorts with formal shirts, or baggy pants with abstractly designed tee shirts. He tends to do home-

work last or not at all because it often doesn't interest him as much as other things, such as Marshall McLuhan or a book on Buddhist religious thought.

Erik designed his own unit he called “Film and Seeing.” He read John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, chapters from film textbooks and histories, a book on meditation and another on television and its impact. “Man is in a race by himself. It must be his nature to run and reach for his dreams. . . . Images are created by men who realize their potential to say something,” he wrote in his paper, which was a collection of distilled ideas about how mankind views the world in the attempt to reach a state of peace.

Eric followed this exploration by devising a new unit, “How Some People See the World Differently.” During this ten-week stretch, he read a grab bag of books including notebooks of Salvador Dali and a book on the Bauhaus artists. He did an abstract painting, which he also treated as collage for his assessment, in which he integrated photos of William Burroughs and Bob Dylan, images of sky and landscape that would have made Rene Magritte proud, as well as quotes from Dali.

Although Erik did very well with me, he was called into a meeting with all of his teachers because he was doing poorly in other classes. After Erik listened to several teachers list what he had not done, I spoke enthusiastically about Erik's performance in my class. I asked my colleagues if they had changed the way they were teaching to suit Erik's reflective nature and clearly different way of thinking and learning. My colleagues took offense, and I embarrassed
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Erik somewhat by talking about how shy, reflective, and intelligent he was. Erik wrote in his journal afterwards:

_The meeting forced confrontation with myself. It’s hard to talk with a teacher. It’s like offering myself piece by piece for judgment. I think I try to make an art out of life. I like to keep silent and observant and only communicate in small subtle ways like movements, and talk only when I really feel moved to do so. The presence of a judge causes my thinking to blur. I know that if I had relaxed I could think clearly but if there is pressure it shortens my thinking and I am helpless._

With Erik’s permission, I sent copies of his journal entry to his teachers.

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**The Need for Long-Term Thinking**

I believe that students are not asked to do enough long-term thinking, so I developed ten-week units. I decided that the given for each unit should be presented on one typed page. Because I wanted each unit to involve roughly the same amount of work, I decided that each unit would require the choice and reading of two books; each unit provided suggested book titles and encouraged students to seek their own. I also included a list of short, provocative readings.

Each unit asked for an interactive journal, which was intended to help students collect ideas toward a final paper. This paper was to attempt an answer to the essential question. The students were finally required to discuss the paper with an invited panel of teachers, administrators, students and volunteers. The system was designed to provide students with choice while allowing no easy way out.

The following are the given for one sample unit. The final two assignments are the assessment, which I hope will not only demonstrate the student’s knowledge but will also help provide practice in connected thinking. The suggested activities are fairly specific for students who want and need detailed direction; all activities and choice of books are “negotiable” if a student has another, better idea.

**Concept:**

NATURE (ten weeks; one quarter)

**Essential Questions:**

Should nature be preserved?
Is nature inherently valuable?
Is nature inherently good?

**Activities:**

Students will read two of the following:
_The Tracker_, by Tom Brown, Jr.
_Black Elk Speaks_, as told to John G. Neihardt
_Education of Little Tree_, by Forest Carter
_Walden_ by Henry David Thoreau
_The Search_ by Tom Brown, Jr.
_The Journals of Lewis and Clark_

Students will:

- become expert in a particular area or domain of the natural world (e.g., whales, track identification, bird identification, sea life, trees) and will demonstrate that knowledge in a manner of their own choosing.
- research Charles Darwin and his theories and present Darwin’s ideas in a manner of their own choosing.
- write a three-page, detailed paper on a problem in the modern world having to do with changes in nature which are brought about by humankind: rain-forest elimination, global warming, ozone, pollution of the air or groundwater, etc.
- photograph or draw at least six different natural objects or places and write a supporting paragraph that explains why objects or places were selected.
- understand the following terms and ideas: natural selection, evolution, aesthetics, habitat, species, survival of the fittest.
- prepare for and perform both sides of a debate on the question “Should nature be preserved?”
- keep a thorough, interactive journal describing their thoughts and discoveries about nature.
- write (using the journal as a resource) and present a paper describing what nature means to them to an invited panel from outside the class.
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This unit draws on biology (Darwin), philosophy (Thoreau), history (Lewis and Clark), and literature (The Education of Little Tree), together providing the student some genuine choices in learning paths.

When students asked about grades, I told them we would use a rubric which would evaluate four areas: their readings, their journals and activities, their presentations, and their papers. No grades would be given before a one-to-one conference at the end of the ten weeks. I did not want to dicker over minor grades; I wanted to debate and emphasize ideas.

Keith

“What’s up?” Keith says to me, sometimes several times a day, when we happen to pass in the halls. Keith is a senior who needs all his credits to graduate. In his freshman year, he was in the off-campus alternative class, and he is the first to admit that he has spent his high school career figuring out how not to do whatever reading and writing was required. He states matter-of-factly that he did not read a book or write a paper during his junior year, and in our building he has been a notorious wanderer in the hallways. I have known Keith since he entered high school, and I have maintained a good, direct relationship with him.

In the first ten weeks, he chose the “Survival” unit, read part of one book, did not write a paper, and did not pass. In the second ten weeks he chose Tolerance, read The Painted Bird and Adrift, wrote and rewrote the first paper of his high school career, faced his panel, and saved his semester. I have heard him recommend The Painted Bird to several other students, and because of his interest in that book, he devised a unit for the third quarter on the Holocaust.

His papers are full of mechanical errors, fragments, and leaps of faith between paragraphs, but for the first time in his school life he is working steadily on his writing.

The Importance of Choice in Reading

From the first day, even the most reluctant students were reading.

Because students read different books, no sense of competition entered their learning, and because I had taken the time to talk to each student in order to find something to recommend, students felt immediately valued and at home. We cultivated a sense of individualism which enhanced their willingness to learn. The short readings I provided were shared in many cases, and I frequently overheard students recommending those stories and essays to each other. I worked hard to find books for the students, and they, in turn, conducted their own book searches, even buying the books themselves and bringing me the receipts for reimbursement.

I had fun every day generating dialogues with students about their readings. Informal dialogue works very well as an assessment tool, and such talk seems to be a definite developmental step necessary for students who lack confidence in their writing. When students offer ideas or make connections in conversation that are sound and excellent, I am able to jump on those moments instantly and reinforce learning.

Graham

Graham is a junior who hangs out in a group of boys who are all frequently suspended. During the first semester, he happened to be in one of my sections with two of his friends, and he socialized more than he read. First he chose Survival and read next to nothing. Graham and I never developed any rapport. I repeatedly asked the group to be quiet so that others could work; one of his friends stormed out of the class twice. At times I asked Graham to clean up his language or to stop pounding his fist on the desk. During the second quarter, I went to guidance, looked at the schedules of the three friends, and decided with the guidance counselor that Graham could be in another section of mine without having to make any major changes in any schedules. When I informed Graham of the change, he became very angry. As we walked into guidance together, he threw his folder in the air, and his papers fluttered dramatically to the ground. I asked him if he felt better, which I regret. My remark only made it harder for us to talk. Graham dropped my class.

Midway through the third quarter, after a meeting with the vice principal and guidance, Graham returned to my class. He has shown up twice. Usually he leaves school without permission at lunch, before our class begins. There are no penalties that will keep him in school.

No Easy Answers

Not every student engaged in every writing activity. While almost everyone was reading consistently, many students balked at journal-keeping and, in so doing, made the
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writing of the final paper a very difficult task. Many of the students who did not work in any of their classes did little or no work for me, either. Some students had difficulty with the freedom of not being graded until the end, and when students fell behind it was my policy to remind without nagging. But for the most part, even students who did not complete all my requirements respected my classroom, and they did more in my class than they did anywhere else.

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Matt

Matt, a junior, has long brown hair, piercing eyes, and — to use his words — “too many fathers.” He admits to past drug use and complains that he can’t stay still for ninety-minute periods. Saddled with a severe learning disability, Matt has always disliked English. Here he describes his first feelings about living in the country. “The first week was hell for me. I couldn’t sleep with the sound of owls and ax, and I thought that went Bo in the night. But I lored not to dispiys the sound of nacher but to imbras it and my love for nacher was born.” Matt and I agreed that I had as much trouble reading his language as he had reading mine, and he agreed to use audio tapes to assist his reading.

Matt is extremely verbal: what he hears, he remembers. He listened to The Fellowship of the Rings and liked it so much he bought the tapes from me. A special education teacher types his papers for him, but I insist on seeing the longhand copies because they help me to learn his language better. In the second quarter, he read I Ching, The Art of Peace, and Siddhartha; his presentation and paper about meditation were excellent. For the first time in his life, Matt received an “A” in English.

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Failure rates in my class were initially very high: 47 percent failed in the first quarter. That figure, combined with a lack of free periods and my own personal problems, started me on an emotional tailspin. I wondered if I set my standards too high, or if I was doing students, who continued to do poorly in other classes, any favor by offering this alternative structure. The teachers who volunteered for our panels were the teachers who seemed to be successful with my students anyway, and my hope that I could connect students back to a broad cross-section of the faculty did not come to pass.

I wonder now if that time of deeply felt failure wasn’t perhaps necessary somehow. Maybe I needed to feel that sense of failure that I know my students have felt. In any case, I learned powerfully that the healthy functioning of a teacher is as personal as the well-being of the students. It’s a defect in me that, impatient, I always expect success to be immediate. I went back to work more determined than ever.

In the second quarter, 41 percent failed. Too many students, accustomed to just getting by, aimed at the minimum and miscalculated. Many students believed I would cave in and pass them without a paper or presentation. I worried that I had not provided sufficient models of good and excellent student work. I had at least a dozen students who had done the necessary reading but refused to write, to face panels, or to invent other means of assessment. Increasingly, I have been able to coax more students to write and present, but the process of persuasion, which depends on deepening trust, is slow. I am confident I have begun a process that will breed more and more success — that habits of mind are at least beginning to be formed.

More and more students have been writing their first high school papers, relating personal experiences to ideas and events in readings, making convincing use of research, and doing impressive amounts of reading. If reading needs to precede the thinking and reflection necessary for good writing, then we were on the right track.

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Cameron

Cameron is a ward of the state. Soft-spoken, he lives with an aunt who comes to school to participate in his grading conferences. Cam is learning disabled, and reading is difficult for him. In the first semester, doing the Nature unit, he became an expert on polar bears, read White Wolf, painted a large landscape on a classroom wall, and wrote a college essay about a canoe trip he took last summer as a guide. He wrote:

The more I have learned in and out of the classroom about Nature, the more questions I have... Whether in my back woods or hundreds of miles away, on top of a mountain on a clear day or on a river through the woods, the feeling of harmony is what keeps me coming back, longing for the time to get out. For me I do not have to be in nature physically but yet, in my dreams, in my drifting moments, and in my heart...
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During the second semester, Cam studied Mexico and the Aztecs in preparation for a Teen Adventure trip to the Yucatan that he was to take in February with eight other students. One of my colleagues who heard his presentation said his research was the most complete, including comparisons of various theories, that she has ever heard from a high school student. Cam went to Mexico and on his return gave an open presentation about his trip in the library. He has been accepted at Unity College in their Outdoor Leadership Program, which trains students to be Maine Guides.

Grades: The Non-Motivator
I have been surprised and amused to see how little grades motivate my students. The extrinsic reward of a good number is largely ignored, perhaps because most of our students have long since given up the idea of attaining the A in favor of just passing. My high standards meant that even those who aimed at the minimum still completed a lot of work. Also, I found that students held no grudges when I failed them; they seemed to respect the fact that we stuck to high standards that allowed them to fail, if that was what they chose to do. We had remarkable success with many students in the second quarter, when they realized what they had not done and what they needed to do.

Looking at the Learner as a Person
Even the students who did not buy into the given respect the rights of the other students in my classroom, and the students who fail have done far more reading than they would have in a conventional, let's-all-read-the-same-book setting. My dialogues with those reluctant students are very personal and direct about their anger and negative choices. I try not to tell them what to do; I try to get them to see what their choices are. In this environment, I am able to move from student to student to do this kind of counseling. I always let the student know that he/she has the ultimate right to make the negative, self-destructive choice: to fail.

Josh
Josh comes to class early to get the easy chair he likes. Josh's father runs the bus garage for the school district, and Josh and his friend Craig, who is in the same section, run their own small engine repair business in a neighboring town. I carry Josh's business card in my wallet. While Josh is happy and talented with mechanical things, the language of English classes has been difficult for him. He is a concrete thinker who sees how things work. He chose the Automobile unit, wrote a description of a gasoline engine complete with a diagram of all the systems in an engine, interviewed several mechanics, read Christine and Driving Passion, and wrote a paper, with difficulty. The difficulty was his friend Craig, who hates school and sees no reason to work in classes of any kind. I saw Josh trying to separate himself from his friend, who wanted to claim half of Josh's work, and I saw Josh's discomfort. I approached him, told him I saw his dilemma, and that I admired the way he was searching for a way to save the integrity of his work without hurting his friend.

At the end of the term, when Josh passed, and when I told Craig that I knew Josh had done the work, Josh and Craig had a falling out. Josh held his ground. He has begun to write and show me short fiction, and he has signed up for my writing seminar second semester, an extra English class. I have approached Craig a half dozen times to talk about why he can't seem to care about anything, even something he can choose, but so far Craig won't talk, at least not to me. He smiles, Sphinx-like, sits quietly, and reads perhaps a fifth of the class time. I like to believe that he is thinking about his choices.

The Next Step
I know that I no longer believe that having twenty-five students read the same novel at the same time is fair or motivating for all students. If learning can be individualized with the kids who haven't succeeded, with the class-cutters and the disaffected, I am certain the same tools can bring out the best in truly heterogeneous settings. Many of my colleagues believe that I work with the most difficult students, but I don't find them difficult at all. In one way they are easier to teach than most students because they are painfully honest about themselves and their learning. What these students need is what I believe all students need and want: choice and a genuine sense of personal responsibility for the decision-making in their learning.

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