Muscle Car English

by

JoAnne Dowd

It's after four o'clock on a Monday afternoon in March and Jay and Brandon are still at school. Of course, they have stayed at school into the late afternoon before, but this time they are not serving detention. Rather they are standing with me in the computer director's office at the high school, learning a new skill that has relevance to both English class and life: how to send a fax. They'll need to write and send lots of faxes if they are going to pass English this semester because Brandon and Jay have opted out of a traditional junior English class and voted to take on an "independent study unit"—planning a muscle car show—as a way to learn English.

Independent study is an option that has evolved as a component of our school's philosophy: every student can learn. Despite our location in an impoverished rural community in southern Maine, our school has the highest graduation standards of any school in the state. We require our heterogeneously-grouped students to pass four years of English in order to graduate. They may retake any classes they have failed until they earn enough credits to graduate. Jay and Brandon were not having an easy time earning these credits.

Brandon, a long-haired, black leather-jacketed junior, challenged me on the first day of 11th grade English class with, "Hi, my name is Brandon and I'm going to fail this class." His buddy Jay, technically a senior, a diehard hunter wearing a red bandanna and a red and black plaid wool jacket, was attempting to make up sophomore, junior and senior English all at once in a last ditch effort to graduate. Both students faced many problems outside of as well as in school, substance abuse among them, and both were considered "at risk" for failing and dropping out.

Before Brandon and Jay came along, taking independent study from me meant "here are my ideas; choose one" rather than "find your own idea." Not to say my units were not thoughtful and challenging. They included books and articles to read, activities to complete, and a culminating activity that included a panel of invited guests to whom the student made a presentation. The topics were varied and ostensibly high interest to students, subjects such as cars, tolerance, and women's rights. However, in previous years Brandon and Jay completed all of my units that held any interest for them. Now they wanted to create their own project.

They wanted to host a muscle car show. Although "muscle car" was not a term I counted as part of my cultural literacy lexicon, I was swept up by their enthusiasm. "Go ahead and try it," I said.

According to the two students, a muscle car was an American-made car, 20 years or older but preferably from the late 60s, and best of all a T-bird or a Mustang. They explained there was an entire culture built up around these cars. They wanted to explore this culture and expose others to it. "Muscle cars were a part of American culture in the sixties, just like disco in the seventies," said Brandon.

Now that I had committed myself to the idea, I was getting a little nervous. How could a car show possibly be a project for English class? I went back and looked at my major skill goals for the junior English curriculum: students will become more engaged,
thoughtful readers, better writers, and more effective communicators. I was not worried about the communication. They would need to negotiate time and space with the principal, arrange for approvals and advertise the event. But I wanted to let them know that they would also need to include sufficient reading and writing to pass the project and the quarter.

They agreed to keep a list of resources they used to find out more about muscle cars and to read a piece of correlated fiction, *Christine* by Stephen King. In addition, Brandon read Lee Iacocca’s autobiography. Both read some short nonfiction pieces about cars that another teacher and I were able to find. I had to do some arm-twisting to make this happen. Both were avid nonreaders and it was hard to convince them of the importance of this reading for their success in this class as well as in life in general. But these readings were nonnegotiable. They accepted this condition, and to my delight they even volunteered to read Chilton’s car manuals as well as several magazines about cars.

They hustled in to class, put down their belongings and within seconds were waving a pass in my face to go measure the parking lot, talk to the assistant principal, hang posters, and call radio stations.

For writing, I insisted they keep a weekly interactive journal with me, describing their progress and learning as well as any reactions to their readings. They would also write press releases, and write a grant application for money to buy trophies for the prizes. I pushed them to write business letters to the big three American car manufacturers and ask for information about these vintage cars. Any information they received from the companies would also become part of their reading. In one of our short daily meetings, they agreed to allow me to proofread for spelling and grammar any posters to advertise the event. I was able to convince them that the more professional their advertising attempts were, the more likely people were to show up. In addition, the boys spoke of creating a car video to music.

I didn’t see much of Jay and Brandon in the next several weeks. This was not because they were cutting class, as probably would have been true first semester. Rather they hustled into class, put down their belongings and within seconds were waving a pass in my face to go measure the parking lot, talk to the assistant principal, hang posters, and call radio stations. Because they were known as two notorious class cutters and hall wanderers, they were stopped often in the first few weeks of the project, but after a while their purpose became apparent and staff members began to trust the two more often. One staff member, the study hall monitor, even sought me out to publicly praise the two for their appropriate behavior and newly developed sense of purpose.

Unfortunately, there was little carry-over from this project into these two students’ other classes. Jay made little effort in his other two English classes, and Brandon came to school consistently only for my class. Since our classes met every other day, he wouldn’t even bother coming to school on the days he didn’t have English.

One day as I was teaching ninth grade English, Brandon and Jay came rushing into the room. Speaking over each other, they exclaimed, “You’ll never guess what happened!” “Mr. Drouin saw one of our posters. He came and found us and talked to us about the project. He was really psyched. He used to collect muscle cars! He gave us those trophies he won a few years ago! Aren’t they cool? Now all we have to do is get new plates put on them.” Another “teachable moment” emerged: thanking those who’d gone out of their way to help.

There were, predictably, down times during the preparation — Brandon and Jay were discouraged that students kept tearing their posters off the wall and several “fake” entries were submitted to the show. Experiencing this, the two vowed never to tear another poster off the wall, sign up using a fake name for someone else’s project, or generally disrespect someone else’s hard work.

And they did work hard. However, they weren’t inclined to share their work with the other class members. They had opportunities to use other students in the room for feedback and suggestions, but, as is typical of most students doing independent studies, they chose to not to work, even in a cursory way, with other members of the class.

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After several weeks of preparation, the Saturday of the event dawned cold and windy — April in Maine. I stopped by the show as I had promised the boys I would. They stood alone, Brandon huddled in his black leather jacket and Jay in his usual hunting attire next to their card table full of trophies which had been relabeled for the show with the help of a $42.00 donation from the principal.

As soon as I arrived, the boys rushed over and gave me the receipts for the trophies, as well as their receipts for gas for the judges. They were very proud to have kept track of such small pieces of paper for so long.

Only two cars and a small handful of audience members showed up for the car show. The small group of us gave appropriate attention to the two cars, one a sleek black and the other a sunshine yellow.

As we stood huddled in the wind, Brandon and Jay weren't the least bit discouraged. In fact, they were already plotting ways to put on a second, better show. The two car owners who did show up had attended other shows and advised the boys that they should charge an entrance fee and offered cash prizes. Then people might take their event more seriously. The boys were eager to try again.

I was amazed. I know that if I had planned an event and had worked as hard as these two did, I certainly would have been much more disappointed than they were. A thought occurred to me: these kids had never been "successful" in school. Were they more comfortable with failure than success? Yet perhaps they understood that on another level they had not failed. Who would ever have predicted that these two young men would voluntarily give up a precious Saturday to spend at school?

Armed with a new enthusiasm, Brandon and Jay sent out a new round of press releases. They decided to charge an entrance fee. This time they made more professional-looking posters: bigger, brighter and stenciled. They also managed to get an announcement out onto the local cable channel.

Between the first and second car shows, report cards came up. Both Jay and Brandon had earned an "A" in English, a first for both of them. The "A" came from me, themselves and a panel of "neutral" judges (faculty members) who judged the boys' process as well as their product and talked with them at length about their learning. These panel members felt that the "life" learning the boys were able to articulate went well beyond the curriculum and deserved to be recognized.

Jay went home and shared with his parents his success. He came in the next morning practically in tears. "Ms. Dowd," he said, "I went home and told my parents about my grade."

"Oh yeah — I bet they were proud!" I responded.

"Nah," he said. "First they wouldn't believe me and then they didn't even care."

"Well, you know you did it, and I know you did it, and that's what's important," was all I could think to say.

"Yeah, I guess," he mumbled as he walked away.

The Saturday of the car show: take two came, and only three cars showed up. There were no spectators. This time the two weren't quite as ready to be cheerful about their lack of success. They were frustrated. I didn't know quite how to respond to them. They packed up their things and went home. What was left to say?
We had a talk after the event and the boys, when asked what they had learned from the experience, reeled off a long list of things they had come to know. Brandon said, "I realized that adults are not always the enemy. Before this, I thought all adults were out to get me and make my life miserable. From this I learned that if I treat them with respect, they will treat me the same way back. People were really cool to us and very helpful." Jay chimed in, "I learned that it is OK to ask for help — I never asked for help before."

Ironically, from a teacher's point of view, I would say that one of the reasons their project "failed" was that the two wouldn't ask for, or accept, help. They wanted to do it completely on their own and overlooked several steps in the planning process that could have helped their event be more successful: making sure there weren't any other major events in the area on that day (their second show was in competition with an antique auto show the next town over), working harder on getting the word out in the community, and offering folks some way to sign up. However, in their minds, as I learned from our panel discussions, their journal entries and end-of-the-unit evaluations, they had asked for help more on this project than with any other previous work in their education.

Fourth quarter, Brandon and Jay launched a second independent study project: building a three quarter life-size model of a muscle car. About halfway through the model-building, Jay hit the end of the line with school. He left to be a lumberjack in Northern Maine, the official profession of all the male members of his family.

On the day he left, he sought me out to say good-bye. He shook my hand, looked me in the eye and said, "I wanted you to know I learned a lot in your class. It was cool. Thanks." Brandon limped along in my class until the end of the year, halfheartedly working on the model car without Jay. He learned some things about welding and become temporarily enthused about opening an auto shop with some friends after graduation. He has since left school also. I have run into both students since they dropped out. In both cases, the car show was one of the first topics they mentioned. Both are attempting to graduate through night school, and Brandon mentioned trying to get into an excellent alternative school in northern Maine.

As a teacher, I think a lot about success. It's a tenuous concept that slithers out of my grasp each time a new student with individual needs walks through my door.

Maybe in the "old days" it was easier to define success — a certain number of correct answers on multiple choice tests, the successful completion of several courses, and you were out the door, on your way to the real world. Somehow things are so much more complicated now and to use an old-fashioned, standard definition of success seems a grave error. At the same time, it is vitally important to expect a great deal from students. Our challenge as teachers is to allow the real world to intrude, to encourage Brandon and Jay to do their car show, while at the same time holding onto high standards.

When we choose to include real world experiences in our classrooms, the results are rarely predictable and the learning can come from, and go, nearly anywhere.

They did end up with a music video that was done fairly well with shots of muscle cars and car songs in the background. They had researched lyrics of car songs and interviewed "old" staff members (anyone over thirty) about their memories of songs, movies, and television shows featuring cars such as American Graffiti and Starsky and Hutch. Their video ended up consisting of clips of chase scenes from early 70s movies like The French Connection and Bullitt cut with still shots of scale models of muscle cars that Jay's uncle collected. Car songs from the Beach Boys to Van Halen filled the sound track.
both Jay and Brandon still ended up leaving school. What does success in school mean for students — especially ones who are hard to reach? Ones whose experiences have become a pattern of failure? I could have intervened a lot more during the process, requiring more, but that wasn’t how they operated — they wouldn’t have done the requirements I imposed, and it wouldn’t have been their project.

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My experience with Brandon and Jay provoked again my nagging questions about success. Was this project successful? People didn’t come to their car show. Twice.

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I look back on times when I could have given specific suggestions. For instance, their first round of posters looked like a first grader had made them, and I allowed the two to post them anyway. Knowing the stubborn nature of these students, and knowing how poorly they reacted to teacher-directed learning, I kept silent. The shows may have turned out more successfully had they heeded some advice, yet would they have learned as much? Would they have seen the project through to completion?

At the end of this experience, I am left with nagging questions. Did I do my job well as an English teacher? Are these two young men better readers, writers and communicators because of their work with me? By allowing them to remain in a realm where they felt comfortable, did I fail to push them into new ways of thinking or looking at the world? How much learning and what kind of learning counts as success? Was what the students accomplished in this class a jumping off point for future learning? On a good day I can justify our work by convincing myself I tried as hard as I could to reach two very difficult students. On other days I still find myself searching for the magical formula that is going to make every student want to learn what I feel is important for them to know.

This experience also begs questions about schools and how they are structured. There was no true vehicle for these students to work best within their area of interest, expertise and learning style. We made a “force fit” into the English curriculum.

If our school had a different kind of structure, if we weren’t locked into eighty minute blocks days divided into content areas with specific curriculum for each, I could perhaps have worked with Brandon and Jay, using this experience as a “jumping off place” for other kinds of learning: math, science, economics, ecology. But we’re not quite there yet. At this point, I am left frustrated by this “almost success” and wondering, as we all are in schools that are restructuring, what are our next best steps?

JoAnne Dowd is a ninth-grade humanities teacher at Noble High School in Berwick, Me, and a participant in the NH Writing Project.