



Providing Autonomy and Choice to Engage Students in a Journalism History Project

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Abstract

Giving students a choice of assignments can make learning more meaningful in the classroom. The following article highlights a teaching strategy utilized in a *History of American Mass Media* class in which students were provided autonomy and choice in the creation of an artifact for a journalism/mass media history project presentation. In written reflections following the assignment, student expressed a high degree of enjoyment, engagement, and motivation for completing the project.

Introduction

Teachers must continually work to develop lessons that are interesting for students, to enhance motivation and active learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Patall, Cooper, and Wynn (2010) suggested that students who were given a choice of homework assignments found those assignments more enjoyable compared to students who were not given a choice. Providing choice can ultimately make an assignment more meaningful for students or empower students to be more responsible for their own learning (Hanewicz, Platt, & Arendt, 2017; Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015). Additionally, Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, and Barch (2004) noted teachers who supported students' autonomy in the classroom found those students to be more engaged.

The *History of American Mass Media* class is designed to give students a deeper understanding and appreciation for the role journalism and mass media play in our society. The class focuses on journalism

and mass media history from the revolutionary war to modern times. Students taking the class are primarily majoring in journalism, public relations, advertising, and/or graphic design. One class assignment required students to read a book about American journalism or mass communication history, develop a presentation and create an artifact – a physical or digital object or product – that aligned with the book. By allowing autonomy to design any product they wanted as an artifact, the instructor hoped to increase student enjoyment for the project and deepen their appreciation of journalism/mass media history.

Description of Assignments and Artifact Creation

Students drew numbered cards and were paired with students who had corresponding numbers. If they chose to do so, some students worked individually on the project. Each individual or group reviewed a list of 34 books about mass media and journalism and selected a book that aligned with their interests.

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The books covered a wide variety of journalism/mass media topics, including the coverage of the civil rights movement, perspectives on the early days of advertising, television or radio, the historical roots of political cartoons, and the entry of women and minorities into journalism/mass media careers.

Once students read their chosen book, they were required to create a 10- to 15-minute PowerPoint or Keynote presentation that summarized the book, provided a critical analysis of the book's strengths and weaknesses, and offered an assessment of how the book aligned with class discussions about American journalism/mass media history.

As part of the assignment, students were also required to create an artifact that was representative of the information contained in the book. A discussion of the artifact was part of their presentation. Students were encouraged to create an artifact that aligned with their academic majors and/or areas of personal interest. Artifact suggestions included a podcast, video, infographic, blog, public relations/advertising campaign, iBook, board game, or news article; however, students were given the autonomy to create their own product, using whatever format they chose.

Artifact Development

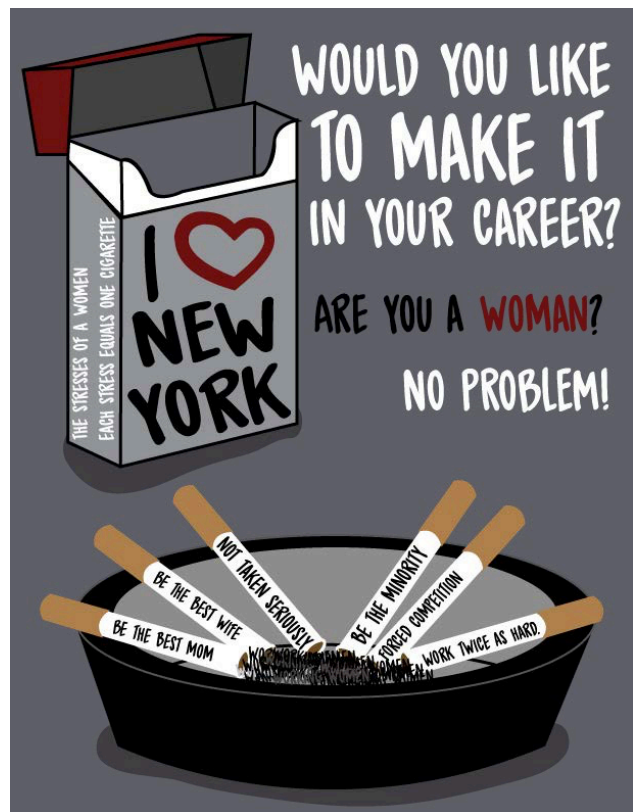
The artifacts students developed were inventive. One student who read a book about the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycotts created a board game patterned off *Monopoly*. Instead of landing on properties such as Park Place or Baltic Avenue, her *Montgomery* board game properties featured historic moments in the civil rights movement, such as Bloody Sunday, the Little Rock Nine, and Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech. Another group who read an account of American journalist Terry Anderson displayed chess pieces wrapped in tin foil, to replicate the tin foil chess pieces Anderson created when he was held hostage. Another student who read a book about political cartoons chose to draw his own political cartoon related to our incessant use of technology.

Another group, presenting information about African-American broadcast journalist Belva Davis, created a podcast and video, highlighting the significant achievements in her life. Still another group created an infographic with individual cigarettes representing the early challenges to women in the advertising industry. At the conclusion of the presentations, students voted on their favorite artifact project; the winning team was awarded a small prize.

Artifact Examples



Artifact created by Danny Carraher



Artifact created by Dannah Shurling and Emily McKenna

Student Reflections

Following the completion of their presentations, students were asked to write a reflection about the assignment, including a reflection about the development and creation of their artifact. During multiple semesters in which this project had been assigned,

students' responses were consistently positive and indicated a high level of interest in the assignment, particularly in the creation of the artifact. The following highlights some of the feedback:

I thought the book project was a great way to gain a focused understanding of a specific journalistic skill, time period, or entity.

I like the book we chose, and I honestly had some fun with the making of the artifact.

In terms of the artifact, that was probably my favorite part of the assignment. I love thinking outside the box and challenging myself...

This project allowed us as students to learn more about the perspectives of individuals in the news industry. I like that the artifacts were open ended in nature, it gave people the freedom to express themselves.

Hearing other presentations as well served as a great insight into how journalism is so versatile and a part of our everyday lives.

Adding the artifact was a fun component. Having to think outside of the box and getting the eyes off the screen, at least for a little bit, generated space for creativity and personal input.

I thought this book project was actually a lot of fun and it gave us a lot of creative freedom... Hearing about some other books makes me wish I would have read one of them.

I thought that our artifact was excellent and perhaps the best part of our book project.

Assignment Objectives

The assignment had multiple objectives. One objective was to provide students a focused look at specific people, places, and events in American journalism/mass media history. By reading these books and offering their insights, students gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of certain individuals, historical events, or time periods. Through their presentations, they also were able to offer information to pique the interest of other students. This objective was apparent in the reflections students offered.

Another assignment objective was to develop the oral communication skills of students. A portion of the assignment rubric offered points for the students' organization of ideas, presentation style and develop-

ment of a PowerPoint or Keynote.

Conclusion

Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested, "satisfaction accrues in part from engaging in interesting activities" (p. 57). Given that the class is required for certain department majors, providing unique assignments made the class more accessible and enjoyable for all students, even those without a specific interest in American journalism history.

The journalism/mass media history project and the creation of the accompanying artifact allowed students to read a book of their choosing and provided them the flexibility to design an artifact that aligned with their interests or expertise. In follow-up reflections, students indicated they enjoyed the creative aspects of the project. By promoting autonomy, the instructor generated satisfaction for the assignment. This led to a high degree of engagement, particularly in the development of the artifacts. The project aligns well with the literature related to motivation, engagement, and relevance (Lee et al., 2015; Patell et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Overall, the journalism history book presentations allowed for substantive follow-up class discussion. It helped to extend conversations about journalism/media history, and provided students an opportunity to delve more deeply into a specific topic related to this history.

Note: The author presented this teaching strategy during the GIFT (Great Ideas for Teachers) session on August 9, 2017, at the AEJMC conference in Chicago, IL. Reflections/artifacts shared with student permission.

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