

Using Alternatives, Advocacy, and Academic Discourse to Engage Adolescents

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Glazed eyes and vacant stares as heads, mouths slightly ajar, lay propped up on hands and elbows in a feeble attempt to pay attention. Slowly those eyes drift downward as phones are pulled from pockets, placed on laps to not-so-secretly check the series of notifications that have arrived in the past 10 minutes. Ask any teacher and they will agree this is the scene in most secondary classrooms. The struggle to engage adolescents in their own learning is real.

One goal of public education is to prepare youth to become active, engaged citizens who contribute to their communities in a positive manner. While this generation can share thoughts instantaneously and connect with people on a global scale, they remain disengaged with peers less than three feet away and detached from the classroom curriculum (Mikami et al. 2017). Student engagement can decline each year as nearly 60% of high school students find themselves bored, unmotivated, and disconnected from the educational process, especially among marginalized students (Zeldin, Gauley, Barringer & Chapa, 2018). If left to fester, stagnation amid disengaged students can impact academic achievement and educational attainment until it eventually morphs into disengaged adults (Mikami et al., 2017).

Adolescent disengagement results when youth perceive they have no voice in the classroom or coursework is irrelevant to their lives (Williams, Wallace & Sung, 2016). Educators must ensure students are heard and seen and find ways to empower them to take an active role in their own education. The best way to do this is to invite student choice and voice as a natural component of your curriculum.

If it were as simple as that, the problem of student engagement would not continue to plague us, but educators face multiple hurdles – both internal and external – in trying to include student voice in the classroom. One, curriculum standardization leaves little wiggle room for teachers to deviate and allow the students to lead. The focus is on achieving high scores at the end and not on making the curriculum engaging and exciting. Second, while skilled at sharing their opinions via social media, adolescents have limited experience doing so in an academic setting (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2015). Saying something and *actually* having something worthy of saying are two different things that unless it is modeled for them and

practiced in a classroom, adolescents will continue to believe they are the same things. Third, the model of discourse in classrooms still follows a monolithic format, where the teacher's voice is the main one heard and supposed to be followed without contradiction, instead of a dialogical one where the teacher shares authority so the student voices are valued. Finally, a lack of cultural awareness and empathy as most teachers avoid teaching topics out of fear of making a mistake (Palmer, 2007). Fear, from both students and teachers who dread looking foolish in front of one another, can hold back authentic learning opportunities if disconnecting to reduce vulnerability becomes the *modus operandi* in the classroom.

Teachers willing to address these barriers will find weaving student choice into their classroom an easier feat. Finding ways to promote diversity and student voice as a staple of the classroom curriculum will allow students to become more invested in their own learning. One way to do this is by using a “Triple A” approach of offering alternatives, promoting advocacy, and encouraging academic discourse to engage adolescents.

Providing Alternatives

Despite being more than a century old, John Dewey reminds us that inquiry and experience are paramount for quality learning. Yet this will not happen if the only thing students encounter is a cycle of lectures and worksheets. The indefatigable truth is students must be allowed to develop co-responsibility for their own learning (Mameli, Molinari & Passini, 2019). An easy way to do this is to find occasions for student choice by providing alternatives in your classroom.

Student choice can be presented in multiple ways and at multiple levels. Teachers often start off the year by having students collaborate and vote on rules or a classroom creed or they can let students decide if they want to work by themselves or with peers on assignments or projects. While these options do include student choice, it is more to build up student buy-in and less about encouraging students to take ownership over their own learning. To better engage students, especially adolescents, authentic choice needs to be offered.

The most effective unit that involves student choice has to be 20Time projects. Built upon the

principles of autonomy, mastery, and purpose by author Daniel Pink, 20Time asks teachers to give students one day a week in class for a set period to work on a project of their own choice. By giving them a chance to explore their own interests and ideas, teachers are helping them to build up the resiliency needed to set goals and take risks, both in their personal and professional lives, in the future.

In our classroom, students come up with their idea and create a sales pitch to present to their classmates for approval (Randazzo). I have had students attempt to learn new languages, draft a children's book, write poetry, work with 3D modeling, create hip hop beats, improve their bowling scores, try pescetarianism, and even work to increase their Tik Tok followers. Once approved, students develop a tentative 12-week timeline of how they are going to explore their idea, create their product, or learn their new skill.

While I have presented this unit in my classroom of high school juniors for the past four years, I think almost any secondary classroom could find success with this type of activity. Goals and timelines might need to be adjusted as I could easily see middle school students lose focus if the project is longer than a few weeks, but units like 20Time can help to engage students by giving them independence and choice over the path they choose to follow. Personally, I think high school is the sweet spot for this type of unit as we ask those adolescents to focus so much on their future without really giving them the tools to make good choices and prepare for long-term goals. By using a 20Time unit, students will begin to build those skills to set aspirations and understand the sequential steps needed to work toward that desired outcome.

Communication and support are vital with this project as students overseeing their own learning is a foreign feeling for many. Each Friday during our 12-week project, students complete an ELA reflection over their progress and plans for the next week. This way I can quickly gauge if they are on track or need my help. Halfway through the project, students also meet with me one-on-one to discuss their progress and to adjust their timeline accordingly. To close out the unit, the students share their progress by presenting artifacts or showcasing their new skills either live or through the creation of a video or slideshow presentation.

The best way to engage students in this project is for teachers to participate in their own 20Time project. Over the years I have learned to make a basketball layup (well, I got it to go in the hoop a

few times), brushed up on my Spanish (enough to order in a restaurant without the waiter wincing ... too much) and last year, I built an elevated garden bed and planted some vegetables that I, thankfully, did not kill and plan to expand next spring. This year's focus: learn a dance with our high school dance team, which could either be amazing or be a complete disaster. Either way, it is destined to be a good example of taking risks and trying something new. Weekly reflections and videos showcase progress synchronously with students so they can view my successes and failure, as I had several weeks that were considerably harder than others. If students see their teacher is willing to attempt the same work that he or she is asking of them, they are more likely to try themselves.

While 20Time has worked successfully in my English classroom, this is a project that could be successful in almost any subject matter if done right. Teachers can find more information at www.20time.org or at www.laurarandazzo.com.

Igniting Advocacy

In just a few short years, high school students will be adults. Paying adult bills, making adult decisions, and recovering from adult mistakes. Most states have courses like personal financial literacy classes and CPR training as a high school requirement ("State law," 2014), yet, there is still tremendous pressure to protect students from the hard knocks of life while forgetting that being a well-informed citizen starts by being aware of the events of the world. Studies suggest that engaging in civic activities during adolescence is associated with greater academic achievement, social and emotional adjustment, and civic development (Chan, Ou & Reynolds, 2014). Therefore, a strong civics strand in schools is needed to develop self-advocacy and advocacy on behalf of others.

Global diversity and current events are standard in most history classrooms, but English classrooms provide the opportunity to teach history through the lens of literature. While reading Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's words from a jail in Birmingham are important, helping students see the enduring relevance of his prose is better. To which I have adolescents identify an injustice they see in the world and apply his four-step approach to develop their own means to nonviolently address their injustice. Students use their research skills to prove the injustice exists and come up with ways to address the issue, including who to ask for help and the concessions and compromises they would be

willing to make, all of which happen before a protest is even thought about. This unit allows adolescents to shed light on an issue that is important to them but gives them a path to peacefully advocate on its behalf.

A focus on advocacy also opens the doors to read fiction from a variety of perspectives, because while students like to read about characters like themselves, they also report a desire to read about others (Stewart, Walker & Revelle, 2018). Many of the classics in American literature come from white, male authors, so I developed an American Voices unit where we read texts from a variety of different perspectives and viewpoints. As such, the goal with the unit is twofold: to allow students to have at least one thing read in class that mirrors their reality and the hope that looking at life from the viewpoint of others will help to create awareness and empathy for others (Bishop, 1990). I include short stories, poetry, personal narratives, and novel excerpts from Asian-American, Latinx, Native American, African American, biracial, immigrant, feminist, and LGBTQ authors in this unit. In a post-September 11th world, theorist Judith Butler claims people reclaim ethics when they dare to realize they still have much to learn about others and this unit helps adolescents to start down that path.

Encouraging Academic Discourse

As stated before, students are well versed in dialogue using technology, but when asked to share something in person, they act as though it is a heinous crime. While they have their uses, cell phones are slowly eroding the academic attention span of this generation who know distractions are “always just a click or Tweet away” (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2015). And I get it – how could my lesson on the cultural implications of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* possibly compete with the latest Snapchat story? Yet, adolescents must remember that until life is lived in a digital reality, people must know how to have face-to-face conversations. Classrooms are a great place to practice this skill so that they can see it is not just about getting a grade or receiving credit, but for a bigger purpose.

Using Socratic Seminars is a great way to help develop academic discourse skills in any classroom setting. A Socratic Seminar is a formal discussion lesson where students read the same piece of text and come ready with open-ended questions to pose their peers for discussion while also answering their peers’ questions. Using this format, students develop critical thinking skills and learn how to work

together to analyze a subject and discuss it intelligently and civilly. Facing History and Ourselves breaks down the steps for a Socratic Seminar into easy-to-follow steps (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar>), but there are multiple other resources to help start a seminar novice.

Another way to help develop academic discourse and create better-informed students includes opening their eyes not just to the events of the past but the history we are creating today. One way to do this is by including Kelly Gallagher’s Article of Week (<http://www.kellygallagher.org/article-of-the-week>). Designed to help build prior knowledge and background on certain issues, each week students are given a current event article to read, annotate, and write about. This can help students learn to develop opinions based on facts and research and not just gut reactions and personal preferences. Not only are students building up their critical reading and writing skills, but the exposure to the world around them can help students develop the civic-mindedness we are looking for with advocacy as well.

However, with a lesson like these, they are not ones that educators can simply implement one day. Teachers will want to make sure their students are well-prepared and feel comfortable and confident in the classroom. Students know how to “play school.” They are good at parroting back what they think the teacher wants them to say instead of learning to speak for themselves while also showing deference and respect for those who do not agree with them. They need to have the respectful give and take of ideas modeled for them to better help garner their attention, give them a roadmap of how to proceed, and increase their motivation in their own academic learning.

Final Thoughts

Empowering students to find their own voice should not “just be a luxury for the most fortunate, but a necessity for all” (Zeldin, Gauley, Barringer & Chapa, 2018). Giving students control over themselves, their choices, and their learning can help them feel powerful and less likely to rebel against educators or learning in general.

By seeking ways to include alternatives, spark student advocacy, and expand academic discourse, we are not only “more effective in engaging students, but we send the message that their voices matter. Essentially, we are

telling them that *they* matter” (Stewart et al., 2018). Schools, where students perceive principals, teachers, and other staff value their contributions, provide genuine opportunities for collaboration, cooperation, and communication.

Student voice, once realized, can become a powerful weapon in fighting injustice and

ignorance in the world, but they will struggle to pick up that armament if they are taught their voices are not welcome. Educators who take the time to create this form of learning environment will find not only do their students come to class eager and ready to learn but so will they.

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Sunflowers (Photo credit: Michelle Waters, 2021)