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Does Incorporating Student Choice and Creativity Affect Student Motivation and Engagement Within the ELA Classroom?

Stephanie Olson

Department of Education, Lake Forest College

Abstract

The considerable focus on standardized testing and assessments in US education system hardly support the imaginations, interests, and creativity necessary for students to develop meaningful connections with content. Within an ELA high school classroom, students feel little to no connections with their writing, which traditionally follows a specific format. Faced with pressures to teach explicitly to the curriculum, some educators struggle to nurture creativity, agency, and imagination through which students establish meaningful connections within the content and amongst other members of the classroom, promoting academic and social growth. This mixed methods teacher action research explores how promoting creative instruction and learning in the ELA classroom affects student motivation, engagement, and comprehension levels. The findings suggest that students are more engaged, motivated, and perform better when they have more choices and opportunities to incorporate their creativity within the classroom. Considering that creativity is a diverse, complex, and flexible cognitive attribute, this finding, when read along with other relevant research findings, could be extended beyond reading and writing skills in ELA contexts to other subject areas, grade levels, and the learning process more broadly.

Keywords: Creative Instruction, Student Motivation, Comprehension Levels

Introduction

Students need to be able to learn and engage in a classroom in more ways than what is scripted within a curriculum. Promoting a cookie-cutter curriculum leaves hardly any room for students or teachers to bring their own identities, interests, and thoughts to the classroom.

Exploring various ideas or lessons with an open mind, where students are encouraged to express themselves, will result in valuable teaching moments and community-building aspects to the class. The purpose of this teacher action research was to explore how student motivation, engagement, and comprehension levels were affected when creative instruction and learning were encouraged within the classroom. Drawing evidence from extant education research literature and classroom-based instructional practices, including a semester-long student teaching experience, this study sought to demonstrate how integrating brain breaks and creative projects affects aspects of students' learning in an ELA context including motivation and their reading and writing skills. The goal was to help deepen teachers' understanding of the dynamics of creativity as a diverse, complex, and flexible cognitive attribute that can be targeted through simple but strategic instructional decisions not only in the high-school ELA context but other learning and instructional contexts.

Literature Review

Researchers have always been keenly interested in the ways in which various aspects of creativity are expressed or integrated into the classroom and how the culture of standardized testing affects teacher agency in instructional settings. Bloom and VanSlyke-Briggs (2019) addressed the varying issues that recent educational practices and policies raise about the role of imagination or expressiveness in the classroom. They examined what teachers thought about their role as educators in the classroom by analyzing evidence (mostly interviews and journal entries) from teachers at three different stages in their careers (veterans, early career, and pre-service teachers). The study finds that with the push for various standardized tests and standards, students and teachers feel increasingly less able to integrate their thoughts within their work in the classroom. Interview and journal entries revealed interrelated themes of "stagnation" and "approval seeking" (Bloom & VanSlyke-Briggs, 2019, p.100-104), suggesting a link between loss of creative agency and the regulatory impact of consequential standardized testing. Many of the older teachers, who began teaching before standardized tests were so heavily focused on, felt more comfortable and freer in their classes compared to their newer colleagues. The implication is clear: when an education system prioritizes test scores over student motivation and engagement, it leads to problematic outcomes.

When creativity informs what teachers and students do in the classroom, the result can be greater engagement, motivation, and productivity. Banegas and Lowe (2019) conducted a study that involved the connection between second-language writing and a student's motivation. The students were from Argentina and were to engage in creative writing tasks. Researchers were examining how their motivation changed with language once creativity was present in the work. The students were able to explore various writing tasks that linked their language-learning skills and allowed them to reflect on their writing and thought-processing skills. Students were more at the center of these activities. Results displayed how engagement, participation, and motivation levels rose with the implementation of more creativity-based activities.

These developments are important because the crucial role of creativity in the learning process goes beyond academic achievements (Beghetto & Anderson, 2022). Importantly, the role of positive creativity within an educational setting represents “novel and meaningful actions and outcomes that, in some way, make the world a better place” (Beghetto & Anderson, 2022, p. 2). Applying this principle among students can help students to begin to understand how their creativity is a leading factor in problem-solving. Students and teachers recognize the varying opportunities for creative risk-taking and creative action. As students grasp those aspects and are encouraged to always use their creative abilities, the unintended and intended outcomes will further develop the neurological and contextual capacities for creative expressions for thinking and acting productively in and out of the school walls. It is, therefore, crucial that educators in all areas explore ways to integrate creativity in instructional designs even as they navigate the changing schooling culture of standardization and accountability.

Methodology

This research was conducted in an ELA classroom at a high school within the Midwest region. Participants were 15–18-year-old sophomore and junior students who are mostly of Latinx background. For many of the students, English is not their first language, Spanish is. There were 75 students combined from both grade levels who participated in the semester-long part of the study during student teaching. It used a mixed methods approach to analyze data from student essays written during the previous (fall) semester, open-ended responses from surveys, brain-break activities, creativity-based projects, and a final essay from the second (spring) semester. The surveys include Likert scale items that generated responses on students self-reported attitudes towards reading and writing.

Essay from the first (fall) semester

Following a series of classroom observations during the first (fall) semester preceding student teaching during which I familiarized myself with the classroom context and the students with whom I would be working over the second (spring) semester, I obtained access to past essays from some participants from the first semester. I was able to analyze different parts of the essay and understand the students' skills including areas where they excel and those in need of more improvement. A common area of strength for students was finding evidence for their body paragraphs. Areas where the students could improve upon their skills revolve around their “links,” explanation of evidence, and how they connect to the larger idea of the body paragraphs.

Initial Survey

Students completed a short Google Form questionnaire at the beginning of the second semester, where they answered several items designed to elicit their general attitude to reading and writing. The same survey was given to sophomores and juniors, but there were two copies of the survey, each specific to a grade level. The key items include: “What are your thoughts on writing?”

and “What are your thoughts on reading?” to which students responded on a Likert scale from 1 (“I hate it”) to 5 (“I love it”).

Brain-Break Activities

Every day at the beginning of class, students participated in a particular five-minute, creative, low-stakes activity, which differed each weekday from Miscellaneous Monday, Typing Tuesday, Writing Wednesday, Test Prep Thursday/ Talk About it Thursday, and Fun Friday. These activities were designed to serve many purposes, such as building community, developing content knowledge and social skills, incorporating more student choice, and encouraging creative thinking and designs. Students were able to share their own ideas in multiple formats with little to no limits at play.

The schedule of these brain breaks was introduced early on in the semester. Miscellaneous Mondays consisted of random activities, like downloading apps, discussing upcoming events, or weekend debriefing. Typing Tuesdays focused on improving typing skills while engaging in a competition or conversation. Students either responded to a discussion post or competed against their peers in a typing application game, where a scoreboard was then projected on the whiteboard. Writing Wednesdays involved the students responding to a prompt on paper. Sometimes there were multiple prompts that the students could choose from, or they could create their prompt for the class. Some responses were collected, and other times students had a choice in whether they wanted me to read them or not. Test Prep Thursdays were centered around reviewing content and ideas to prepare for the SAT and PSAT. While we reviewed questions from the SAT practice test, we also utilized these days to discuss test anxiety, test-taking skills, and the larger background to standardized testing and why it exists. Fun Fridays focused on collaborative activities. Students were able to recommend different kinds of activities and were encouraged to share their ideas about each task.

Creativity-Based Projects:

Creativity-based projects were implemented in both courses. Both projects were focused on students incorporating their interests and using their imaginations to better understand a text and the author’s purpose. The sophomore class read “The Veldt” by Ray Bradbury, which is a science fiction short story about a room that comes to life. The students were prompted to create their virtual reality-like room and explain why they chose their room to look that way. The junior class read *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, which is a collection of vignettes about the Vietnam War. The students were prompted to pick one item they would bring to war and explain why they chose that item.

Post-Survey:

The students completed a Google Form questionnaire where they responded to the two same questions as the initial survey: “What are your thoughts on writing?” and “What are your thoughts on reading?” Students’ response options remained the same as well, with Likert scale options

ranging from 1 (“I hate it”) to 5 (“I love it”), The same survey was given to sophomores and juniors in the two versions adapted to each grade level. Survey results are integrated into the results/findings section. Students also answered an additional question on the questionnaire about their thoughts on all of the brain-break activities for each day (Typing Tuesday, Writing Wednesday, Test Prep/ Talk About it Thursday, Fun Friday). This reflective item on the brain-break activities asked: “In what ways did these activities help you? (personally, emotionally, mentally, physically, academically, etc.)”

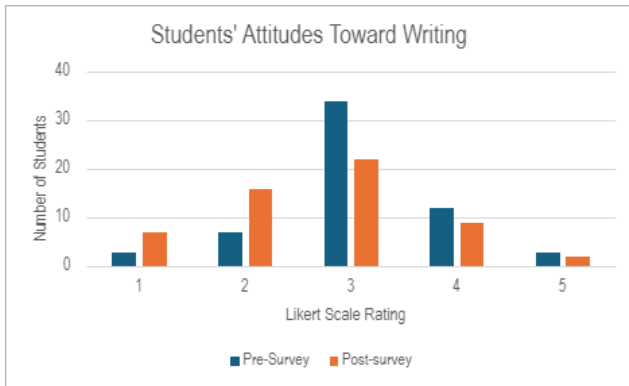
Essay from the end of the second semester: Students turned in their last essay of the semester, which was centered around a specific research topic: book banning, lowering the voting age, or whether protests should be peaceful. This was a synthesis essay, which is a form of argumentative writing. The paper consisted of five paragraphs and the students had about two weeks of class time to complete it. Students’ essays from the first semester were compared to these essays to evaluate growth and areas for continued improvement. The brain-break activities last for 13 weeks, starting from the fourth week of January until the fourth week of April. Students enjoyed the activities overall, as they participated every day and looked forward to specific days each week, based on the types of activities associated with that specific day.

Results

Existing educational research evidence clearly demonstrates that instructional practices that foster creative expression are positively associated with improved student and teacher motivation, engagement, academic achievement, and overall wellbeing (see Gregory, Hardiman, Yarmolinskaya, Rinne, & Limb, 2013). As noted above, these benefits can be undermined by a test-driven culture, with the increased pressures and perverse incentives for teachers to disregard their own and their students’ creativity in favor of meeting standardized curricular expectations. Because this teacher action research project was designed to explore the impact of integrating simple creativity-based practices, the goal was to see if there is corroborating evidence—even from a single semester—for these well-established findings in scholarly literature.

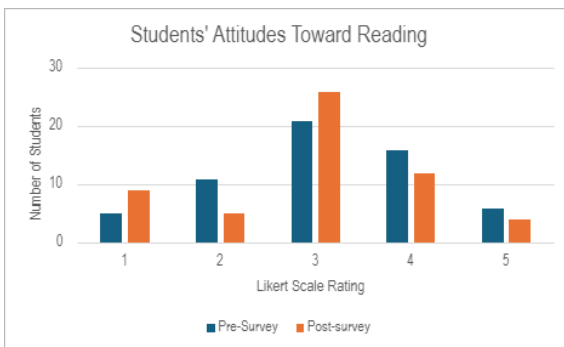
The findings from this research indicate that by implementing brain-break activities every day, students are more likely to be engaged and productive throughout the rest of the period. Based on anecdotal observations, students viewed these activities as part of a routine for the whole class. The brain break was similar to that of an attention grabber. Inviting students to begin class in a way that does not directly connect to content right away gained the students’ attention. Results from the first two questions on the surveys showed that there was a mixed response. English 3 students rated their thoughts on writing lower than what they did at the beginning of the semester, with 25.4 percent of students reporting either liking (20.3 percent) or loving (5.1 percent) writing on the initial survey and only 19.7 percent reporting liking (16.1 percent) or loving (3.6 percent) writing on the post-survey at the end of the interventions (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

English 3 pre-survey and post-survey results from about attitudes to writing

Their reports on their attitudes to reading were similar, with 37.3 percent reporting liking (27.1 percent) or loving (10.3 percent) reading on the initial survey as against 28.5 percent reporting liking (21.4 percent) or loving (7.1 percent) reading on the post survey (see Fig. 2). When the data is interpreted from the perspective of the students who reported disliking reading, especially if we include those who reported having a rather neutral view, the percentage of English 3 students reporting more negative attitudes to reading (not necessarily to writing) saw a drop from the initial survey to the post survey. These mixed responses may partly result from a slight decline in response rate, which was not accounted for in the analysis.

Fig. 2

English 3 pre-survey and post-survey results about student attitudes toward reading

English 2 students, however, rated their thoughts on writing and reading higher overall than they did at the beginning of the semester. As Fig. 3 and 4 show, 26.7 percent report that they either like (20 percent) or love (6.7 percent) writing and only 6.7 percent loved reading on the initial survey compared to 50 percent liking writing and 18.8 percent liking reading on the post survey. These findings are somewhat inconclusive, especially considering the relatively smaller number of participants in English 2 compared to English 3.

Fig. 3

English 2 pre-survey and post-survey results from about attitudes to writing

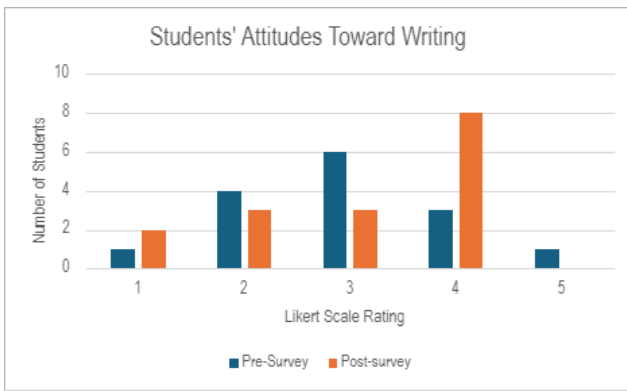


Fig. 4

English 2 pre-survey and post-survey results about student attitudes toward reading



The qualitative results from the open-ended questions on the post-survey show that incorporating brain-break activities each day benefited students academically, emotionally, and socially. From both courses, students highlighted benefits like improvement in writing and typing, freedom to express themselves and cope with struggles, preparation in class, relief from stress, participation in fun activities, connecting with their classmates, and thinking differently about various topics. This qualitative evidence suggests that the survey data, rather than capture discrepancies in student's reported benefits from the creativity-based brain breaks, was likely not a valid tool for assessing students' attitude to reading and writing in this context. Additionally, by comparing essays from the first semester to the end of the second semester, students improved their skills in making connections and composing explanations in their writing. Their "links" for their pieces of evidence had become less robotic, in the sense that they were able to explain how the evidence supported their claim without using simple sentence starters. Instead, their voices were visible in these sections of their essays and further propelled their argument all together. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from classroom observation showed that when asking basic questions like "why" or "how" during class, students did not hesitate to respond as they felt more comfortable and confident in their explanation skills and language. The presence of more creative, open-ended prompts in brain-break activities seemed to have allowed students to become more successful and confident in their writing voices. This was also visible in their introduction paragraphs and links.

Discussion/Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore how student motivation, engagement, and comprehension levels might be altered positively when creative instruction and learning were encouraged within the classroom. Throughout the study, student attendance rate changed often and might have impacted the results both by lower response rates and potential interruptions of students' benefits from the creativity-based brain breaks. Since this study covered various days with different activities, it was difficult to draw direct conclusions as to which activities had the most beneficial impact since the participation was not linear each day.

Additionally, participation in each activity each day was not always consistent. Some students struggled with following instructions in class and, therefore, did not always complete the task before them or only completed part of it. Going forward, incorporating creative lessons and activities should be present in my classroom and I would recommend it to all classrooms, especially those where students lack engagement and motivation. Gathering the evidence over a longer period might also clarify what benefits accrue. We must find ways to weave student choice and low-stake activities that build classroom community and develop academic and non-academic skills in the classroom. This will grant students and teachers more creative freedom within the classroom and allow others to view teaching with a more open mind.

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