

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 5

Issue 1 Focus: *The Teacher-Researcher*

Article 6

1-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Diana (1989) "Student Generated Awards and Integrated English," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1689>

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STUDENT GENERATED AWARDS AND INTEGRATED ENGLISH

Diana Mitchell

Integrated English. These words describe the ideal conception most English teachers have for their classroom. In this vision, students naturally move from intense discussions of a piece of literature, to sorting out their ideas and feelings in writing, to clarifying words and concepts they're unsure of, to writing wonderful pieces which are shared with or performed for the whole class. The English teacher simply goes from one group to the other encouraging, probing, and assisting in this picture-perfect process of TRUE LEARNING. Students are so wrapped up in learning that they are unaware that they are gaining knowledge and experience in literature, language, and composition as well as practicing speaking and listening skills.

The difficulties in transferring this vision of integrated English into the classroom are made apparent when teachers daily face 150 active students instead of the perfect class of their dreams.

It was while dealing with these difficulties that I quite by accident became an action-researcher in my own classroom. The informal research project began with my recognizing a problem and a need: my two classes of tenth-grade American Literature students were stale and very much in need of a new way to organize their responses to a group of short stories they had just completed. I asked myself what I could do to get these students more interested in discussing the stories as well as to make them want to go back into the literature as they discussed it. I didn't want an assignment that would encourage only responses "off the top of their heads." I had already used my "if you were selecting stories for an anthology from the stories we read, which would you select and which would you discard and why" approach. The thought of dragging that one out again bored even me. A change was needed.

So in a fit of desperation I decided to change plans at the last minute and use an idea I had used when I taught junior high. Then I had students create five or six awards for a novel they had read. As part of the assignment they wrote paragraphs explaining why they had given an award such as MOST COURAGEOUS to Mr. Morrison in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor or POOREST SELF CONCEPT to T.J. in the same novel.

Just as all teachers do when they seriously begin to ask "What if?" questions in response to a classroom need, I began to formulate informal research questions, the central one being whether the same personal involvement and commitment to learning would result from this integrated awards approach in a senior high class as it did in a junior high class. Related questions arose as well. What if I used the awards concept but with the short stories? Would students become involved? Would they be stimulated enough to get re-involved in the stories? Or would they think the idea was too corny and beneath them?

Because we were dealing with short stories, I altered the activity slightly and simply gave students the following directions:

In pairs or trios first make a list of the twelve stories we have read and the important characters in each story. Generate twenty award categories that would be appropriate to the stories and the characters. These awards can be positive or negative in nature.

In their groups students began by thinking and talking about their impressions and feelings about characters. Then they brainstormed, still as a group, generating possible award categories. The final list in each group had to be agreed upon by all the group members as feasible types of awards. At the end of the hour students turned in their lists of twenty words or phrases they chose to describe their categories. With the help of a student aide, I went through all the categories, eliminated duplicates and printed on a ditto master the ninety-one categories they had generated. Suggestions included positive human traits such as "most intriguing," "kindest to animals," "most outgoing," "most down-to-earth," "best survivor," "most lovable," and "most adventurous," as well as such negative traits as "most troubled," "most insulting," "most illogical," "biggest brat," "most annoying," "back-stabber," and "most hot-headed." Some students even thought of these stories as possibilities for films and included the categories of hardest

and easiest role to play. Later that day I ran off enough copies so each student could have a complete list.

I knew we had too many categories and they would overlap, so our next step was to whittle down the categories to a manageable number. I instructed students to silently read over all the suggestions and try to narrow the list to forty. I wasn't sure how to proceed next, but I knew I did not want to be stuck with the job of tallying the choices of two classes of students myself. So I decided we would try this as a whole class discussion and eliminate categories together. I first asked students to volunteer their ideas on which categories should be removed and why.

It was at this point that my action research question began to be answered in an affirmative way that astounded me. Talk about integrated English! It happened before my eyes. Students asked about differences between words. "How are stubborn and persistent different?" "Devious and sneaky?" "Bravest and most courageous?" Once we established differences by discussion and by using the dictionary, they decided which word was best suited to the characters in the stories. They also asked such questions as "Can a person be heartless without being hated and if so do we still want to use both categories?" and "How can we give an award for most intelligent person when there are so many kinds of intelligence shown in the stories?" and "Do we need both conceited and obnoxious?"

Through the process of offering up categories that could be dropped and reasons to drop them, the students not only got more deeply into word meaning but also much more deeply into the stories. Words were discussed in context. Students asked if "most prepared" meant being mentally prepared or physically prepared, as Mr. Ernest was for the hunt in "Race at Morning" by William Faulkner.

We also discarded categories that students felt only fit one person, such as "most eloquent speaker." They all agreed no one came close to Daniel Webster in "The Devil and Daniel Webster." Since we wanted categories there would be competition for, we quickly dropped the "most eloquent" category. Some suggestions students felt were too subjective, such as "most popular character." This was eliminated too. Every time students suggested striking a word they referred to stories and characters to strengthen their arguments. When we had several opinions about which of two words to drop, I simply took a hand vote, and the majority ruled.

Each of my two classes decided on slightly different categories, but mainly rejected those they thought were too frivolous, such as “most popular animal or insect,” and categories that seemed close in meaning. Most of the categories that remained were categories that required a subjective judgment based on students’ interpretation of characters. Thus categories such as “kindest,” “most determined,” “most stubborn,” “performer of the meanest action,” and “best family” remained. Categories that seemed based solely on facts, such as “in the worst health,” or only could apply to one character, such as “best businessman,” were deleted.

For homework students had to name one character as a possible recipient of each of the forty remaining award categories. The next day in class I assigned each student one or two categories to tally results for. As papers were passed around the room, students kept their tallies on separate sheets, so by the end of class each category had thirty-five votes for a range of characters.

Homework that night included tallying the votes in their one or two categories and declaring the winner to be the character with the most votes. Then each student wrote up a few paragraphs explaining why this character won the award, using the actions, words, and thoughts of the character in the story to justify the choice. For example, students spoke strongly of why Nick in “Big Two-Hearted River” was the “most disturbed” character. As indication of his deteriorated mental health, they offered reasons such as his inability to deal with anyone but himself, the necessity of keeping a precise order in his camp, and his refusal to think about painful thoughts. If students felt the award went to the wrong character, they could also write up a dissenting view and explain why the character they picked was more worthy of the award than the one elected by the class. In one instance, some students argued that even though the actual winner of the “Best Survivor” award—Pepe in Steinbeck’s “Flight”—did a good job of surviving for a short period of time, the award should have gone to Granny in Katherine Porter’s “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” because she survived a jilting, the death of her husband, raising her children alone, and running a farm.

During the last day we spent on this activity, students revealed the winners of their category and read their paragraphs. Even though we had spent many days on these awards, lively discussions still resulted with many students expressing strong feelings in favor of or against the award winners. Students had thought deeply about the characters, made judgments about

them, and used evidence from the stories to explain their decisions. They had compared one character to another, noticed when they didn't have enough information from the author to make a judgment, and gotten reinvolved in the stories.

So my informal classroom research question was answered affirmatively: using this integrated awards approach in a senior high class did indeed result in the same involvement and commitment to learning as it had in my junior high class. After such stimulating days in the classroom I spent time evaluating these results in depth, trying to understand why this activity and approach worked. First, I believe students responded so positively because they were the seekers of answers to questions they had formulated. They weren't trying to second guess the answers they thought the teacher would want. Second, they could see that their input was important and would be valued. Third, they had a real reason to do this activity, could easily see its purpose, and didn't view it as unimportant busy work. Fourth, it was a new way to respond to short stories and this newness got their attention. Fifth, students were actively involved, instead of being passive learners. They discussed, formulated, refined, questioned, clarified and drew conclusions.

The result of this action-research project led me to consider further projects in which I could observe and evaluate my students response to other activities, both oral and written, that they could do once they had started thinking about their likes and dislikes of characters. What if, I asked myself, I had them:

– Choose a character from one story to interview characters from another story on such a topic as how they came to hold the views they do. This could be done orally in front of the class or as a written newspaper or magazine article.

– Imagine that several characters from different stories moved into the same neighborhood. Who would live next door to whom? Who would associate with whom? Who would be ignored? They could create a story or write a script to be performed focusing on a neighborhood incident and how all these characters react to it (a minority family move in, a house is painted bright yellow, a family decides to let their lawn "go natural," etc.)

– Select three characters from different selections and examine how they react to adversity. Which characters handle problems better? Students could write a letter of advice to one character telling him how he could have handled the situation better or write and deliver the lecture they would like the the character to hear.

– Imagine that the Secondary Character Union met to discuss their reaction to the seemingly insignificant role they played in the story they appeared in. In attendance were four characters from four different stories. Students could write up the minutes of this meeting or present the discussion the characters had. Students might include characters' complaints about the way they were treated as well as suggestions on how they would like to be portrayed and any other discussion that ensued.

So this small-scale action research project provided me with plenty of ideas for future classes. These are for the future, however. For the moment, I am just pleased that I almost inadvertently stumbled upon one activity that not only integrated many aspects of English but that also keenly interested my tenth grade American Literature students. Needless to say, they weren't magically transformed into pursuers of learning for its own sake. But for several days I did feel that these students were so involved that learning took place effortlessly.

Diana Mitchell teaches English at Sexton High School in Lansing.

Award Categories

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Most Courageous ✓ | 14. Most Depressed ✓ |
| 2. Best Outdoorsman | 15. Most Determined Person ✓ |
| 3. Most Eloquent Speaker | 16. Most Scruples |
| 4. Most Devious ✓ | 17. Most Offensive Comment |
| 5. Worst Speaker | 18. Most Miserable |
| 6. Coolest | 19. Most Sophisticated |
| 7. Most Snobbish ✓ | 20. The Most Spoiled Child |
| 8. Most Prepared | 21. Meanest |
| 9. Soundest Mind | 22. Most Foolish |
| 10. Worst Health ✓ | 23. Bravest ✓ |
| 11. Most Athletic ✓ | 24. Most Obnoxious |
| 12. The Most Humble ✓ | 25. Most Likely to Exist in the |
| 13. Meanest Person ✓ | World Today ✓ |

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26. Most Popular Animal or Insects
27. Most Pitiful Character
28. Best All-Around Character
29. Most Irresponsible ✓
30. Most Ignorant Person
31. Most Intelligent Person ✓
32. Most Heartless
33. Most Likely to Succeed
34. Most Insane
35. Most Likely to Give up on Life
36. Most Selfish
37. The Most Giving
38. The Most Caring ✓
39. Most Stubbornness
40. Most Conceited
41. Most Obnoxious
42. Most Frightening
43. Most Imaginative
44. Most Mysterious
45. Most Confused
46. Most Hypocritical
47. Hardest Role to Play ✓
48. Easiest Role to Play ✓
49. Smartest Animal
50. Dumbest Animal
51. Most Hot-headed
52. Most Naive
53. Most Down-to-earth
54. Most Mature
55. Most Unsuccessful
56. A Back-stabber
57. Weirdest
58. Most Hated
59. Most Ambitious
60. Most Confusing
61. Worst Businessman
62. Unluckiest Person
63. Worst Parent(s) ✓ *Best*
64. Best Leading Character
65. Funniest
66. Loneliest
67. Best Survivor
68. Most Annoying
69. Most Lovable
70. Most Dramatic
71. Best Killer
72. Biggest Brat
73. Most Adventurous ✓
74. Most Pleasant
75. Happiest
76. Most Evil
77. Most Illogical
78. Most Insulting
79. Most Active
80. Most Outgoing
81. Biggest Troublemaker
82. Best Family
83. Most Angry
84. Most Unfortunate
85. Person Who Put Up With The Most
86. Kindest to Animals
87. Best Name ✓
88. Most Dangerous ✓
89. Most Trouble
90. Most Intriguing
91. Most Persistent. ✓