Molineaux 10th Grade Modern World History

Differentiation, Negotiation, & Student Choice: a Deconstructed RAFT

*What I was looking for…*

The first essay of the year seemed promising: my students had enjoyed the unit leading up to it, the assignment sounded intriguing, and I had left plenty of time for them to work on it at home and in class. But their products, across the board, were weak: struggling students wrote confused, wandering pieces, and stronger students wrote boring, simplistic essays with no meat to them at all. So I came to the next assignment looking for a change – something that would spark students’ interests, allow them to build their writing skills, and leave them with a product they could be proud of.

*An attempt at a solution…*

In order to attack both the issue of student choice and the need for a clearer audience for their writing, I chose a RAFT model for the assignment. I had students use historical detail from the period we were studying (the French Revolution) to support an argument on a modern issue. To prepare them for a RAFT-style assignment, we started with a short project in which students made advertisements and wrote songs. What I noticed was that they immediately wanted to negotiate what was in the categories, and while I kept them to the pre-chosen ones the first time around, when we got to the essay we had an open negotiation



A student product from the intro RAFT project

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*What happened…*

The negotiation was fun but messy. By the end we had combined “role” and “audience” such that students could pick anything from the list for either category, and some of the crazier ideas tended to dominate and influence the direction of the rest of the class. The original “RAFT” model was largely dismantled, and only bore slight resemblance to the original focused differentiation. But every student was excited about the assignment, and as they worked through the essays towards a final product these were markedly better than anything they’d written before.

I invited a colleague in to the day when we rolled out the essay, and she and I both noticed a really interesting thing happening: as the students began to negotiate the categories, you could see light bulbs going off above their heads one by one. Their “ah-ha” moments were happening through the negotiation itself, and by the end of the exercise the entire class had a clear idea of what they wanted to write.

*Why I learned…*

The most important take-away from this for me was the value of the “light bulb moment” for students. The powerful combination of differentiation through multiple entry points, the freedom of student choice, and the sense of active buy-in that students gained from the negotiation experience made for an electric moment in the classroom and translated to a great learning environment and beautiful final products. My own “light blub” ah-ha was that the original structured RAFT was not a solution in and of itself (as it was essentially unrecognizable by the end, anyway), but was rather a jumping-off point that invited students into the process.

*Where I’m headed…*

For future assessments, I’m committed to finding ways to access that energy in the roll-out of the assignment. I want the roll-out days to have a balance of multiple entry points, student choice, and a sense of active negotiation that allows each student to leave feeling like they’ve chosen the assignment – to as if the assignment has chosen them.