

Student Success Through Choice & Tech

How can teachers create an improved sense of student agency in their classrooms?

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Introduction

Educators across America are under a great deal of pressure to produce students who are critical thinkers capable of working and thriving in diverse and highly competitive environments, all while applying knowledge of 21st century skills. A major obstacle in achieving this is a lack of student agency, or desire and responsibility of students to take control of their own learning. This study focuses on 9th-10th grade English classes at Calistoga Junior/Senior High School, asking: what can teachers do to promote an increased sense of student agency? It examines the impact of student voice and choice and educational technology in raising the levels of engagement, motivation, and learning. This study incorporates student opinions about their learning and pre/post treatment scores. The findings suggest that when students are allowed to have input into what they study in school, they feel connected and more interested. Additionally, technology integration contributes to personalization and differentiation, which targets students' weak areas.



Background and Need

The need to instill and encourage a sense of student agency in America is necessary not only for the good of the individual student, but for our nation as a whole. If we are to compete in the global market, our citizens must possess the drive and talent to rival our international competitors, whose education systems have surpassed our own. In addition to the networks being created on a national level, states, too, have begun putting together teams of superintendents, educators, business leaders, parents, and community members to draft initiatives aimed at improving student success.

Shortly after national changes began to occur, the California Department of Education announced that State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson launched the creation of a 59-member committee called a Transition Advisory Team, whose goals include building community partnerships to support students and their families, improving teacher education and preparedness, and focusing on standards and curriculum that meet the demands of 21st century learning. The document detailing the initiative is entitled *A Blueprint for Great Schools*, and according to Linda Darling-Hammond, the committee's co-chair, the initiative would accomplish its goals by investing in quality teaching and creating a system that meets the demands of 21st century learning with forward-looking standards, curriculum, and assessments that ensure students are college and career ready (2011). It is clear that leaders in education and policy makers agree that technology is both an integral skill for 21st century learning and engagement piece for students, prompting districts throughout the state to follow suit, implementing their own plans to incorporate and even expand its use in the classroom.

Driving Question



Educators aren't simply looking for students in their classes to merely do the work in order to pass or receive credit, despite the fact that this is the approach many students take in order to become successful. Teachers want their students to *want* to do the work, to foster a desire and longing for knowledge acquisition. What is missing, though, is the sense of desire on the behalf of a great number of students in this country. They lack desire to find these answers, to make new discoveries, and to demonstrate intellectual curiosity, all of which are needed to create a culture of life-long learners that become successful professionals in the workplace. While educators and policy-makers are leery of placing blame on students for their lack of academic success, viewing them more as victims who suffer as a result of broken families, poverty, social inequality, and lack of social services, the truth is that high academic achievement depends greatly on a student's dedication of time and mental energy to academic activities such as homework, independent reading, and questioning (Jackson, 2003). Growth and maturity in academia are no different than they are in real life. They are attained through work, determination, perseverance, and reflection, and the goal of educators is to get their students there, but this will require teachers to ask a question: What classroom practices should teachers put in place in order to cultivate an increased sense of student agency?

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to determine whether incorporating educational technology and student voice and choice into a teacher's lessons would increase student agency, therefore leading to better retention of the material.

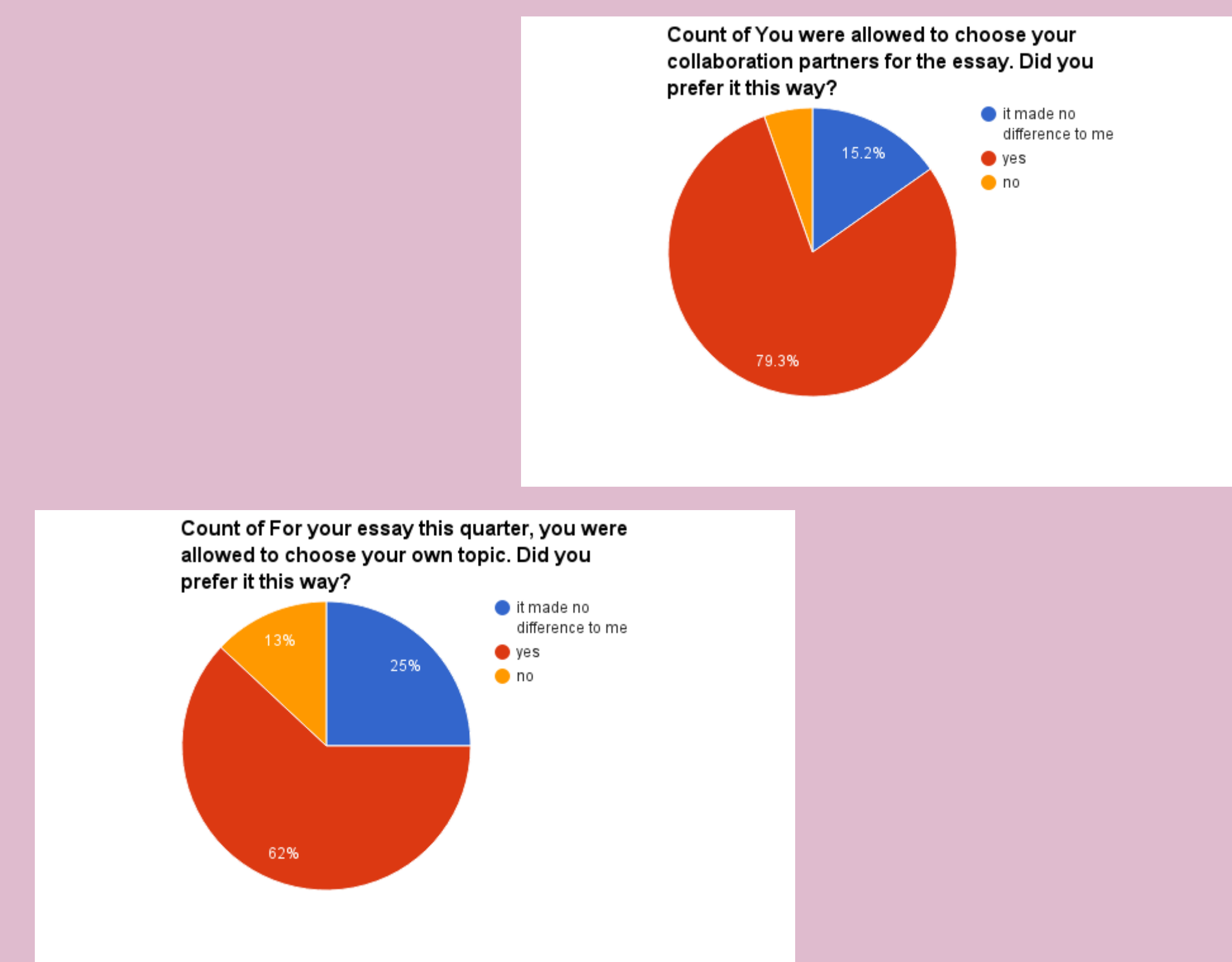
Research Questions

In order to answer the question what can teachers do to create an increased sense of student agency, the following questions were considered:

- By giving students the ability to choose their collaborative partners, will they better retain what they learn?
- By allowing students to decide on a topic for writing, will this promote higher engagement, leading to improved writing?
- By incorporating technology, will students have more active and engaged participation, resulting in mastery of the skills being practiced?



Results of the Research



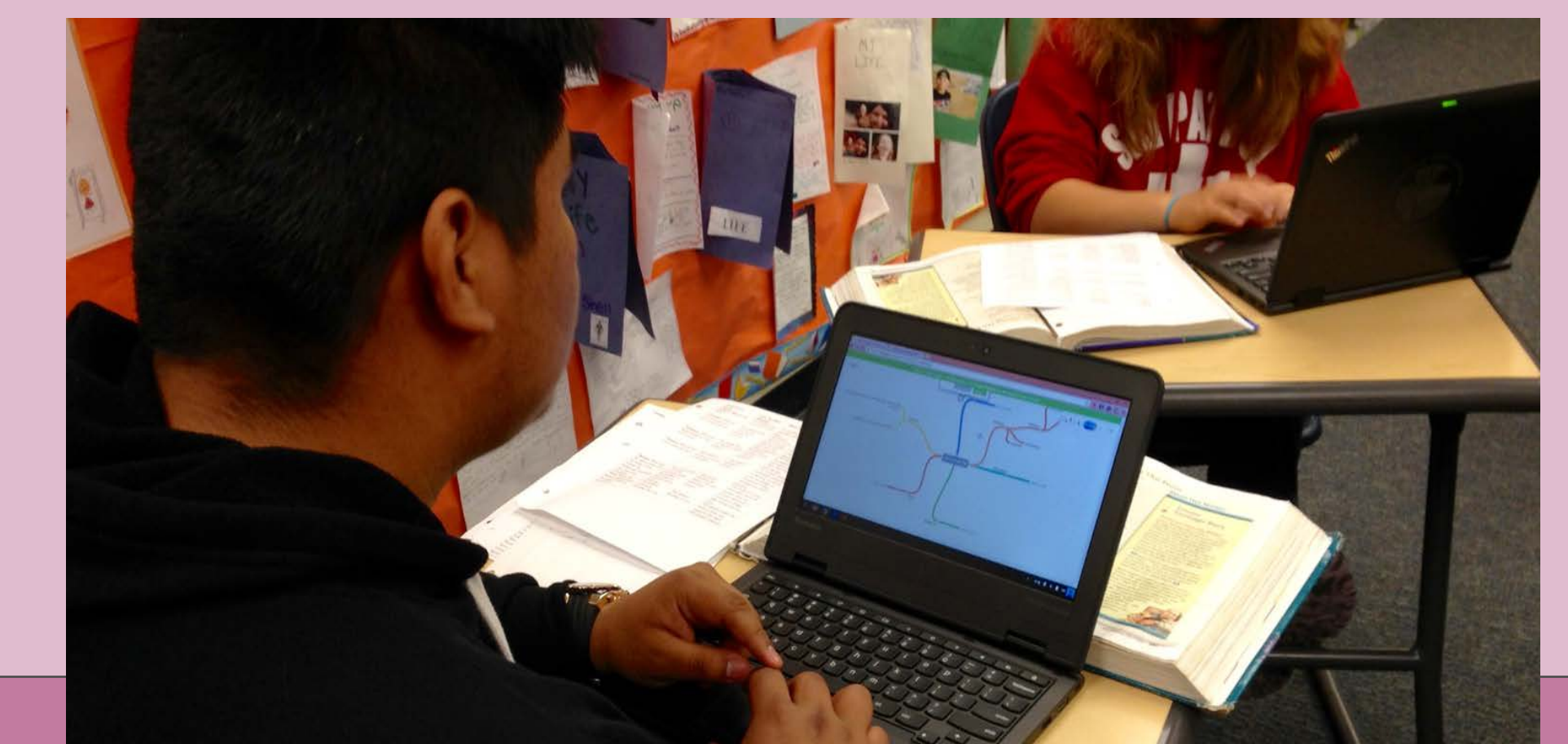
Methodology

In this quantitative study, lessons in five sections of an English 9/10 combination class were implemented in an attempt to determine whether the use of technology and allowing student voice and choice would lead to an increased sense of student agency and improved learning outcomes. A pre and post-treatment design was used to collect data. The two assignments used in this study were a collaborative essay presentation and a spelling/vocabulary quiz. For the first essay, pre-treatment, the teacher determined student groups, based on class performance, and gave them a choice of three topics on which to write an essay relating to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Group members used note cards to present their essays to the class. The second essay assignment allowed students to select their own groups and to develop a topic around the novel *Things Fall Apart* on which they wanted to write. Instead of note cards, groups created digital storyboards to guide them through their essay content. The objective was to determine whether choosing their own partners and topics and integrating technology into their second essay would lead to increased participation, interest, and ultimately agency.



Conclusions

Based on students' own reflections and the improvement shown in raw scores of the assignments used in this study, the practice of encouraging and allowing student input should continue. With a 1:1 device to student ratio at Calistoga Junior/Senior High School, teachers should continue to explore online resources and programs that encourage students to explore, engage, and improve their skills, leading to life-long confident, competent thinkers.



Literature Cited

- Jackson, D. B. (2003). Education reform as if student agency mattered: academic microcultures and student identity. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(8), 579-585.
- Torlakson, T. (2011, August). A blueprint for great schools. Retrieved from California Department of Education website: <http://cde.ca.gov>

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For Further Information...

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More information on this and related projects can be obtained at www.tilmet.org

