Student choice and assessment in French 10

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December 2005 – le début

Student A: Madame, can we do a final project instead of a final exam?
Teacher: Final project? What would that look like?
Student A: We could do something creative to show all of our learning from the term.
Student B: No Madame! I'm not creative or artistic at all!
Teacher: I'm sure not everyone would want to do a final project.
Student A: Let us choose! People who want could do the project - the others could write the final exam.
Teacher: Hmmm, let me think about it . . .

Thus began my foray into student choice and assessment in French 10. About half the class did portfolios and the other half wrote a traditional exam. I found that most students' test results were lower than their average mark in the class. Some students who had A's actually did quite poorly on the test. This could be due in part to the format of the test. Some students who were able to score well on unit tests throughout the term did not do well when faced with all the grammar and vocabulary integrated into one test. Conversely, the portfolios were excellent representations of what the students had learned during French that term. They had applied their knowledge in innovative and creative ways that surpassed my expectations. One of the girls told me she learned "way more" doing the portfolio than by studying for a final exam. I was so pleased with the results that the following semester I insisted that all of my French 10 students complete a portfolio rather than a final exam. They did not have a choice.

The literature, however, suggests that there is a positive correlation between choice and motivation to learn (Gentry & Springer, 2002; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Douglas, 2004). In fact, the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education's comprehensive document entitled Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind states: "When students feel ownership and have choice in their learning, they are more likely to invest time and energy in it." (WNCP, 19, 2005) Therefore, I decided to research the effects of allowing students in French 10 the choice of doing either a final project or a traditional final exam.

I believe that some of my students will be better able to show their true acquisition of French knowledge through the creation of a final project. Many students suffer from test anxiety and are unable to perform to their full potential during exams. Other students may prefer the idea of a final exam because they may see it as "less work" and are confident that they will do well. McTighe & O'Connor (2005) state: "To make valid inferences about learning, teachers need to allow students to work to their strengths. A standardized approach to classroom assessment may be efficient, but it is not fair because any chosen format will favour some students and penalizes others" (14).

Recent research on assessment indicates that training students to do well on standardized tests will not result in an increase in meaningful learning (Herman, 1992). Furthermore, teaching for social justice means trying to find more authentic assessments that will demonstrate what students have actually learned rather than training them in test-taking. Kelly & Brandes (2005) argue that assessment can be seen as "a set of institutional processes with the potential either to inhibit or nurture the development of young people as well as either to constrain or nurture their capacity for self-determination" (2).

I believe that this research project will not only enhance student learning, but will also create a more socially just classroom environment. Students will hopefully feel empowered through the process because they will have a choice as to how they will be assessed. For those who choose the final project, they will be able to make many choices as to how to best portray what they have learned in French 10. The research project will provide an opportunity for increased reflection about learning on the part of the students and teacher. Students will be given a voice at a time when they are facing the pressures of external standardized assessments in other courses (Math 10, Science 10, English 10).

Research Questions
1. What will be the effects of offering French 10 students a choice on their final assessment?
2. How will students who typically do poorly on traditional tests perform on a self-directed final project?
3. In what ways will grades influence students' choices?
4. How will learning experiences vary for students who engage in final projects vs. final exams?

Methodology

All students in my two French 10 classes participated in all activities since they were designed in such a way as to help students learn the curriculum no matter which method of assessment they choose. All activities occurred during class time or were part of the usual amount of assigned homework. I sent a letter of consent home with students and asked them to return the parental and student consent forms to me in a sealed envelope. The sealed envelopes were stored in a locked filing cabinet until final marks were submitted. Data for the research were collected from all of the students; however, only the data from students with signed consent forms was analyzed to provide insights into teaching and learning. Of those who gave consent, I selected a random sample of 15 students for in-depth analysis. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this document to protect student privacy.

I distributed duo tangs to each student and explained that they would be writing their reflections on the final exam / final project preparation process in a learning log. Students were asked to make a chart of the pros and cons of writing a final exam and creating a final project. They were then told that they were allowed to choose either the final exam or the final project. Students were shown examples of final projects that were created by the previous year's French 10 classes and then wrote a journal entry about how they felt about the project option. Midway through the final exam / final project preparation process, students were asked to write an entry about how they were progressing.

All students were provided with an outline of concepts that had been covered throughout the term. Students could use it as a guide for final exam review or for what needed to be incorporated into the final project. For students who chose the final exam, the last page of the exam had questions and space so they could indicate how accurately they felt the test assessed their knowledge. Did they think it was a fair assessment? Did they wish they had chosen to do a final project? Why or why not? The day after students wrote the final exam or handed in the final project, they made a final entry in their learning log. Now that they had finished, how did they feel about their work? Were they satisfied? Did they feel the final exam / project reflected their best work? Did they wish they had chosen the other method of assessment? What did they learn during this process?

After each class, I made notes on what I observed in my classroom. Students asked me questions about the final exam / final project that informed my inquiry and shaped my research. I noted students' reactions after introducing the choice of the final project. While students were engaged in various activities, I made note of their comments and reactions. I also reflected on my teaching practice in depth.
Key Findings

Students made the comments appearing in Table 1.1 on the day I introduced the concept of choice for their final assessment. At this point, they had not yet seen any examples of projects from the previous year's classes. The initial response was lukewarm as many students were interpreting the project as "too much work".

Table 1.1 Students' initial thoughts about the final project vs. the final exam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FINAL PROJECT</th>
<th>LEARNING STYLE</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>FINAL EXAM</th>
<th>LEARNING STYLE</th>
<th>TIME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROS</strong></td>
<td>Easier (x14)</td>
<td>More time to check for mistakes &amp; correct (x3)</td>
<td>Memorization is easier (x6)</td>
<td>Tests understanding of concepts &amp; vocabulary (x3) – better for seeing what we know</td>
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<td></td>
<td>More fun (x10)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Don't need to be creative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>More creative (x7)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Some people panic on tests but do well on projects (x5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I can learn more (x4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Don't have to memorize (x3)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Able to use book</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CONS</strong></td>
<td>Difficult to show French skills (x4)</td>
<td>Takes more time (x17)</td>
<td>Difficult to memorize everything (x19)</td>
<td>Too much studying (x9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I'm not creative (x2)</td>
<td>More work (x3)</td>
<td>Harder (x4)</td>
<td>Already have 3 provincials to study for (x4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More difficult (x2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown (x3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stressful (x3)</td>
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<td>Boring/not fun (x3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of creativity</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>High risk</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The following day, however, I presented a variety of examples of final projects to my students. Some were hard copies while others were PowerPoint presentations. I was very pleased to see so much enthusiasm and interest in the projects after I had shown the examples. One student commented, "I think it will help me learn more." The room was buzzing with excitement and I was thrilled! I felt validated that offering the students choice
was making them more motivated to learn.

The following are excerpts from students' learning journals, which indicate their initial thoughts and enthusiasm regarding the project and how they saw it as a potentially valuable learning experience:

**Gunther**
*I am going to do the final project instead of the final exam now that I have seen examples. I have a great idea for my final project that will incorporate everything I learned this year. I will make a PowerPoint project from the view of Paris officials trying to get the summer Olympics. An example of how I will incorporate the French I learned this year would be how I use the negative in sentences like "No one can host the Olympics better than Paris" – in French of course. I am very happy now that I have a solid idea for my project.*

**Jacinthe**
*Now that I have seen the criteria I've decided to make a project. I think it's going to be a great way to show what I learned this term in French. I can also portray a more creative side of me. This project can help me to improve and practice all the verb tenses and vocabulary we learned this year. I think doing a final project is a good idea and a great way to end the term.*

**Candide**
*At this point I'm leaning towards doing a project rather than doing an exam because I am bad at doing tests under pressure. I think I actually learn more from doing projects and I am more successful doing projects of that sort rather than cramming for an exam and freezing up when I have to take it. I do think that making a project will take more time and a lot of effort but I think it is worth the work. By not doing an exam it will give you an opportunity to spend more time focusing on the other exams you have, with doing a project you can do it ahead of time and be stress free come exams!*

Based on students' comments, I felt that the large majority was going to choose a project over a final exam. However, after seeing the quality and work of the exemplar projects, some students decided immediately that they would prefer to do a final exam:

**George**
*After seeing the sample projects, I've decided that I would rather do an exam. Not that I don't like doing projects, I do. But I have so many projects from my other teachers before the final that I fear I won't have time to finish it. Last night, I went to bed at 1:00 a.m. and woke up at 7:00 a.m. I'm so tired.*

Other students struggled with choosing an assessment option. They were also concerned about lack of time and the amount of work to do a good job:

**Amelia**
*I am becoming anxious because I still have not come to a final decision about which project/exam I will choose. The project would be a wonderful learning experience but I am deeply afraid I will not be able to put in my full effort because of a lack of time. I am in quite a pickle because in the end I think the project will be the best way to learn instead of just memorizing.*

**Penelope**
*After seeing the projects, I'm still not exactly sure which one to do. I think I'd do well on my*
exam but I'm not sure if I really want to study. The project looks more fun but after seeing the really good examples, it looks like a lot of work.

I recognized that I must not push students to choose a final project just because I think it is better. The Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education echo McTighe and O'Connor (2005) with respect to allowing students to work to their strengths: "If teachers are to have a good understanding of an individual student's learning, they need to allow that student to demonstrate his or her competence in a manner that suits his or her individual strengths." (WNCP, 21, 2006)

Therefore, I must keep in mind that not all students will excel at a final project. Not all students are creative. Many excel at traditional tests and are comfortable with that format. I also recognized that many students want to please the teacher and will look to me for cues as to which option they should choose. This was particularly true in the case of Karl, who wrote, "Today, Mme Ferrer explained more about how the final project is supposed to look like with content and creativity. I still can't decide what to pick. I'm hoping that Madame could give me some of her opinions based on it." Karl had the highest mark in the class and was a perfectionist. Every previous project he had completed went beyond the criteria and exceeded my expectations. I really wanted to see what kind of a project he would do because I knew it would be excellent! However, Karl came to see me the next day after school and asked, "What should I do?" I replied that he should choose whichever option suited him best. I realized that Karl would have done the project if I had said that it was "the best choice." However, as a student who typically got 98% or higher on tests, why should he do a project when a final exam would be easier and less time-consuming for him? At this point, I started to ask myself whether students were more motivated to learn or to earn the highest possible grade. In the end, Karl chose the final exam and got 98%.

Although 36 out of 51 students initially planned to do a final project, only 12 actually completed one while the rest opted for the final exam. Of those 12 projects, five were excellent, five were very good and two did not meet expectations. Among the 24 students who changed their minds about creating a final project, 20 performed poorly on the final exam. By poorly I mean that each of those students obtained a mark of either one or more letter grades below their previous average. The majority of students who opted for the final project were satisfied with their choice and the overall learning experience. The high achievers who opted for the final exam were also happy with their choice. The group that was the most disappointed consisted of those students who had initially opted for the project but then changed their minds and opted for the final exam. Table 1.2 details their comments.

Table 1.2 Students' thoughts after the final project / final exam
Data analysis

From the data, I have found some preliminary answers to my research questions. How will students who typically do poorly on traditional tests perform on a self-directed final project?

I expected to be able to say, "much better" in response to this question. I had seen such success with the previous year's students that I never imagined that students would do poorly on a self-directed final project. However, I had two students do projects that were completely unrelated to the criteria. They both obviously plagiarized, since the French was perfect and at a university level. I do not know what they were thinking, and unfortunately I never had a chance to ask them, since they handed in their projects on the last day of classes and I have not seen them since. These students typically failed every test and would surely have failed the final exam. However, instead of rising to the occasion and creating something unique, they simply cut and pasted text from various French sites and called it a final project. I was very disappointed.

On the other hand, I did have four major success stories. These students were all very close to an A, despite tending to do poorly on tests. They excelled on the final project, and consequently achieved an A for a final grade.

In what ways will grades influence students' choices?

Students who were high achievers and were successful at writing tests, chose to write the final exam. Students who typically scored poorly on traditional tests initially opted for the project.

How will learning experiences vary for students who engage in final projects vs. final exams?

This question is a bit more difficult to answer. The two students who plagiarized extensively in their final projects did not engage in a meaningful learning experience. Two
other students' projects were quite creative, but there were many grammatical errors. This was a concern because it showed the students in question had not gained a deeper understanding of the curriculum—they were still making the same kinds of errors they made on tests. I wondered how this was possible when they had access to their notes and textbooks and were permitted to ask me questions. These students focused too much on the creative aspect of the project and not enough on the content. Perhaps this could have been prevented if we had created an assessment rubric together. However, the other eight projects were fantastic. The students were very creative and demonstrated a deeper understanding of the curriculum. I believe that these students will remember the French they used longer than the students who studied for the test, although at this point, I cannot measure that outcome.

**Unexpected outcomes – les surprises**

I did not anticipate that so many students would change their minds and opt for the final exam. The students who could have benefited the most ended up procrastinating and choosing the final exam. Student journals indicated that time constraints, procrastination, feeling overwhelmed, as well as a demand for end of term projects for other classes were all factors that influenced students' decisions to switch to the final exam:

**Penelope**
*I've decided to do a final exam. I haven't really studied yet but right now we're learning pronouns with lui & leur so that will be fresh on my mind. I'll start my français studying this weekend.*

**Lola**
*I would have liked to do the final project but I just don't have time now because my Socials and Planning teachers just assigned big projects, which are due in 10 days. I don't have time to do a French project too. I do well on tests so I'll just study for the exam.*

**Candide**
*Last night I tried to start the project but I totally mind blanked and gave up because I had no idea what to do. I tried. I'm sorry Madame, but I have decided to take the exam.*

I was surprised that Candide was "sorry," and asked her why she said that. She replied that doing the project would have been better and she felt that she was letting me down. Clearly, my attempt at appearing neutral concerning the choice of the final project was not entirely effective. I didn't count on the students' expertise at reading between the lines and picking up on body language. In the future, I would engage in a frank discussion with the class regarding the advantages and challenges associated with each choice. I would not attempt to appear neutral, particularly as one of the aspects of our school vision is to encourage educational risk-taking. I would encourage those who were comfortable writing traditional tests to try the project option, explaining my educational beliefs that the project would be a more beneficial learning experience.

It seems that the students who could have most benefited from engaging in a final project were unable to do so due to poor work habits and poor organizational skills. These same students also had difficulty completing other class projects throughout the term. As I had such great results with the previous year, I wondered what the difference was this year. Two major factors came immediately to mind. The first is time. Due to a teacher strike in the fall, the first semester was shortened by one week. This created a crunch in all classes with many teachers scrambling to 'get through' the curriculum. Students complained of
getting many assignments piled on them at the end of the term. I found that I was not able to devote as much class time to work on the projects as I had done the previous year. If I had not lost that week of time, the students would have been able to work on their projects in class. As it was, I was only able to give two full days of class time to either review for the exam or work on the project.

The second factor is choice. The previous year, I did not allow students the choice of doing a final exam or a final project in the second semester. I was convinced that doing a final project would be a more meaningful learning experience so I insisted that everyone do one. Consequently, everyone put his or her best effort forth. This time around, students had the 'fall back option' of choosing the final exam if they weren't able to get going on their project. I feel that this contributed to so many students being ill prepared for the final exam, because initially, they planned on doing the project and did not start reviewing or studying for the final exam until the last minute.

Implications
The solution to this problem is not to remove choice, but rather to create some support structures that will enable students to be successful in achieving their goals. Clearly, more class time is needed to give students a chance to work on their ideas and consult with the teacher. Some students may also benefit from the project being broken down into more manageable chunks, thus alleviating the feeling of being overwhelmed and not knowing where to start. A timeline could be created so that students would have specific dates set to accomplish certain portions of their project. This could eliminate the last minute panic and subsequent switch to the final exam option, which left so many of my low to middle achievers ill prepared for the final.

Why did so many of my high achievers opt for the final exam? It is true that, for many of them, studying for a final was easier than creating something new. However, a major influence was the fact that these students had to study for provincial exams in Math 10, Science 10, and/or English 10. Some students actually had to study for three provincial exams. They saw working on a French project as taking away from valuable study time for these provincial exams. Penelope mentioned that if she had done the final project, she would "suck at Math." I consider myself fortunate to be able to offer my students choice in assessment because there is no provincial exam in French until grade 12. However, the recent imposition of provincial exams at the grade 10 level has influenced students' perceptions as to what kind of learning is important. I often have students working on Math, Science or English homework during my French 10 classes. Hall et al. (2004) note in their research the impact of SATs in Britain: "the curricular areas that are setted say what is deemed of value" (812).

Math, Science and English are seen to be "more important" than the other curricular areas at the grade 10 level because they have external exams. Is it any wonder then, that when provided choice, high achievers will decide how to best partition their time to get the best results? Students like Penelope, Lola, and Jacinthe knew that they could achieve an A on the final exam with less effort than it would take to create a final project. Thus, it made sense for them to change their minds about doing a final project and opt for the final exam instead. Students like Karl and George decided early on to opt for the final exam. Here were their thoughts a week before the final exam.

Karl
The final exam is next week. I'm a bit nervous, because provincials are also coming.
Teachers are piling me up with so many assignments and so much homework. They're rushing since the first semester is ending. I also have a big project for Planning. I really want to do well on the exam. I will try my very best. I'm not going to do the project since I know that my time is limited and I think memorizing is much easier for me.

George
I haven't really reviewed much French yet. I might start on the weekend. It's just so busy. The other teachers want us to study for their tests too and I have two provincial exams to worry about.

Conclusion – la fin (mais pas vraiment)
After marking all the exams and projects, I was left feeling somewhat disappointed. The students who I thought would have done the best job on the final project chose a final exam. Some students who had A's did so poorly on the final exam that their letter grade dropped to a B. I felt they would have definitely gotten an A if they had chosen the final project. However, it was a matter of priorities and time management. Perhaps I should have let them sink to a B, but they had been solid A students all term . . . was this one test truly indicative of their French knowledge? Many students were suffering from colds and flu during exam week so I took that into account. Since the percentage was only one or two percent off from an A and they had maintained an A all term, I felt justified in bumping up their grades to 86%. However, it did make me questions the relevance of the final exam.

One of the problems with my final exam / project is that it is a year-end, summative assessment. Students do not get feedback on how to improve - they just get a final mark. Based on Gusky's (2003) research regarding formative assessment, I am considering ways
in which I can design a project similar to the final one, but initiate it mid-way through the semester, giving students more time, guidance and feedback in order for it to be a meaningful learning experience. If I do decide to give the final project / final exam option in the future, I will give the criteria outline at least one month in advance. Too many students had great project ideas but simply did not have the time to do a good job so they opted for the final exam – for which, clearly, many of them did not study sufficiently.

In the meantime, I was left wondering how to reconcile the initial enthusiasm displayed in the first week of introducing the option of the final project with the results. I found a partial answer in the article, Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment by Black & Wiliam (1998):

> When the classroom culture focuses on rewards, "gold stars," grades or class ranking, then pupils look for ways to obtain the best marks rather than to improve their learning. One reported consequence is that, when they have any choice, pupils avoid difficult tasks. (7)

This quote helps to explain why all of my high achievers ultimately chose the final exam. They knew they could get the highest mark with the least amount of effort by writing a test, thus saving time and energy to devote to other subjects. My goal in offering choice was to provide students with more enriching learning experiences, not the path of least resistance. What could be done to avoid this in the future? Clearly, one classroom teacher working in isolation can do little to change institutional practices and external pressures. However, a group of like-minded teachers can indeed effect positive change and fortunately, I work in a school that has a keen group of educators collaborating on authentic and alternative assessment strategies. I am optimistic that we can make significant gains by creating a school culture that focuses on learning rather than on marks.

I had hoped that offering students choice in how they will be assessed would create a more socially just classroom environment. However, I have learned that I need to do more than simply offer choice. I need to involve students in the pedagogical process. I plan to implement the following strategies put forth by Kelly & Brandes (2005) by:

- Having students participate in deciding how to assess what and how they learn
- Involving students in setting criteria for assessment
- Having students help decide upon weighting of various components of assignments
- Encouraging student self-assessment (17)

Perhaps if I had done these things then I would not have had two instances of plagiarism and two projects that were high in creativity but low in content. Furthermore, if I'm to involve students in the creation of an assessment rubric for the final project, then why not involve them in the creation of the final exam as well? Gusky (2003) states:

> Many teachers still mistakenly believe that they must keep their assessments secret. As a result, students come to regard assessments as guessing games . . . They view success as dependent on how well they can guess what their teachers will ask on quizzes, tests, and what other assessments are (7).

My current research design offers the most choice and opportunity for self-determination to students who create final projects. In order to create a more socially just classroom environment, I need to allow students who choose the final exam option more input into its creation and design so that all voices may be heard.
Post-script

Conducting research in my own classroom has made me a much more reflective practitioner and has permeated all aspects of my teaching. Assuming two roles—teacher and researcher—sometimes felt like having a split personality. I would teach, but parts of my thought processes were focused on observing and analyzing students' behaviours in light of my research questions. It was much more intense than "just teaching."

Now, almost a year later, I find that I am still "obsessed" with the idea of choice and assessment. I am teaching French 12 for the first time and I feel terribly constrained by the provincial exam, which will count for 40% of the students' mark. Ironically, students can choose not to write the provincial exam—as long as they don't need it for university entrance. Meanwhile, I feel pressured to prepare all students for the exam because many have not yet made a choice. Unfortunately, this has resulted in my offering students fewer choices as to how they will be assessed. I am unhappy with this and am looking for ways to integrate more project-based learning, choice and flexibility into the program.

I am not teaching French 10 at all this year, but I am teaching French 11. Several students have already asked if I will offer the final project option again. I plan on implementing the changes outlined in my paper to make this year's learning experiences more meaningful ones.

References


Montreal.


**About the Author**

Melody Ferrer has a Bachelor of Science degree (Biology) from McGill University, as well as several degrees from UBC: Bachelor of Education (Secondary), Diploma in Teacher-Librarianship and Master of Education (Curriculum Studies). A language enthusiast, Melody has also studied French and Italian extensively at the university level and learned Japanese during her two years of teaching English in Japan. She has been teaching in SD43 for twelve years and during that time has taught a wide variety of courses including French Immersion Science, French Immersion Language, FSL, Japanese, ESL, and Science. She has been the Team Leader for Modern Languages at her school for the past five years and the head teacher-librarian for the past two years. She is currently on maternity leave.