

Not Your Usual Final Project

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The end of semester was looming and I wanted to finish classes on an exciting note. I didn't want the usual final exam for my advanced level American Studies: Religious Themes in Film content elective and accompanying Applied English class. I didn't think students would enjoy writing another essay either, so I decided to try a different sort of final assessment. This was a multi-level class of Japanese university students with TOEFL scores ranging from 440-500 studying in an intensive English program.

During the sixteen-week semester we watched eight films and discussed topics from many religions, myths, and philosophies. We studied free will in *Pleasantville*, enlightenment in *The Truman Show*, and the yin and yang in *The Matrix Trilogy*.

For the final project, I gave students many options. They could work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to analyze a film. Students needed to discuss a religious, philosophical, or other theme in the film, and make a summary and critique of the story. I also gave them the option of a writing project or a presentation project.

I required students who chose the writing project to produce a magazine-style "publication" consisting of several articles discussing the chosen topic using Microsoft Publisher's newsletter template. I required the students who chose the presentation project to use Microsoft PowerPoint and cover all of the same topics on their film.

Students had to include photos with references from the films either from the Internet or from movie screenshots. They also had to do Internet research at official movie sites and read about film themes in

Wikipedia online encyclopedia articles. I gave out a list of films with religious themes and gave students the option of choosing one of them or selecting a different film.

The students were excited to try out Publisher and PowerPoint and even more excited to learn how to add screenshots into their projects. I had to give them written instructions along with hands-on guidance on how to use Publisher and how to take screenshots from a movie.

Providing choices gave students the freedom to select a type of assignment in which they could excel. For example, students who were independent but shy could choose the individual newsletter writing project. Students who enjoyed speaking and working with others could give a presentation in a group.

The final projects were indeed different from the usual final exam. The results were colorful, and students added their own personal design styles to the work. Students learned new software and technical skills that they could incorporate into future projects as well. The class didn't seem to dread the last project as they might an exam and were motivated to do well. We posted the newsletters and presentation handouts on the bulletin boards for the class to enjoy and for an opportunity to provide peer feedback. Projects were graded for mastery of content for the elective course, and a rubric was used for grading English skills.

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