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Rationale for Curriculum Component Choices

In my readings this summer outside of my CMStep coursework, I've repeatedly come across books and articles that advocate research-backed, effective teaching practices *not* overtly labeled as "Montessori" but long established as aspects of Montessori pedagogy. Beth Hawkins, journalist for the education news website *The 74 Million*, interviewed Jal Metha and Sarah Fine about their recently published book *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School*. As a Harvard sociology professor, Metha stands at the forefront of progressive education and defines deeper learning as educational experiences that combine three elements:

There's an element of **mastery**, which in some ways is the most traditional of the pieces... Then there is a really important element of **identity**. What we mean by that is that kids who are learning deeply are gradually coming to see themselves as producers in the field that they're working. They're beginning to see themselves as connected to that field in some way.... The last piece is **creativity**..., but we're not thinking of creativity just as doing something interesting. More that students are moving from receiving knowledge in a given domain to producing knowledge — even if it's not mind-breaking, edge-of-the-field-type knowledge — but actually trying to use what they know in ways that allow them to create something new. (1)¹

The staples of Montessori pedagogy--checklists, projects, rubrics, and seminar--facilitate and nurture all three of these elements in the classroom.

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The use of checklists and choice for adolescents and an explanation /justification of your format in particular.

The flexible and various purposes of a checklist encourage adolescents to develop an increasing sense of ownership when it comes to their education. Angeline Stoll Lillard writes in the preface to her book *Montessori: The Science Behind the Genius*, "In essence, Montessori places a child in a special environment created to correspond to human needs" (xii) and checklists in particular suit the developmental needs of adolescents. As a more comprehensive tool, checklists not only organize concepts, breaking large ideas into smaller, more manageable lessons and opportunities for comprehension, but they also allowing students the agency to control their time management, their planning, and their learning. Additionally, checklists can serve as interactive measures of progress. All of these elements support teenagers in their need for agency and choice, assisting them in their journey towards discovering their own identities as learners.

When I developed a checklist for my particular group of freshmen and sophomores, I had to strongly consider both differentiation and choice. My Clark students comprise the most diverse classes

¹ Boldface added by me for emphasis

I've ever taught, racially, culturally, economically, and academically. My students who are natural writers thirst for a challenge, and I appreciated categories in the sample checklists we viewed in class that addressed the needs of advanced learners; at the other end of the spectrum, many of my students feel anxiety in connection to writing and avoid reading whenever possible. My primary goal for these students is to mitigate their insecurities, allowing them manageable options that will build confidence and provide them with opportunities for reteaching. My checklist was also formed to be as visually simple and verbally succinct as possible because whenever I've passed out directions that are more than one page long, my sizeable population of struggling readers and writers shuts down in panic. The overall goals of my particular checklist were to reduce anxiety and enable comfortable degrees of success; I tried to create a soothing checklist template for repeated use.

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The value of projects to guide instruction in general and the choices you made in devising your project in particular.

The students and professors within any university education department in the country will find the acronym PBL familiar and for good reason: PBL (or project-based learning) has revolutionized the American education system over the past two decades. The roots of this trend date back to Maria Montessori's methods and the pedagogical philosophies of her contemporaries, including John Dewey. Metha and Fine discuss John Dewey's early approach to what is now referred to as project-based learning in his essay "School and Society": "The teacher's role in [the context of project-based learning] would be to serve as a guide, posing questions and suggestions to ensure that the activities children chose to undertake served as a platform for deep inquiry rather than digressing into more 'utilitarian' exercises" (56). Although the chapter neglects a discussion of Montessori approaches, her methods align with Dewey's suggestions perfectly, encouraging project-based learning in the classroom with special accommodations and emphases to better suit each individual child; the overall goals are to learn by doing and to learn through creative choice. When a pedagogical approach remains relevant and effective for over a century, it is worth exploring.

In planning a project for my classroom, I took into account two particular needs of the adolescent and two academic needs. The Foundations Project should, hopefully, prompt high levels of student joy, and acknowledge both the individual student's identity and the class's collective identity. Adolescents require time to process questions about their identity, their goals, their friends, their family, etc, so the prompts in this project mirror these questions: where are you from, how do you fit in, and whose shoulders are you standing on? The project sends the message to the student that this journey is important and matters to the school community. Academically, the project seeks to provide an overview of different kinds of academic writing in order to build the foundations (this quarter's theme) of ELA mastery: poetry, narratives, essays, interviews, and summaries. The project also provides a manageable avenue for simple writing practice in a low risk, low stakes environment with readily available teacher and peer support.

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The use of rubrics in the Montessori adolescent classroom in general and an explanation/justification of your rubric in particular.

Most academic rubrics create a framework for instilling fairness, as much as possible, into the arbitrary, subjective practice of assessment, but Montessori rubrics provide much more; they encourage student self-reflection, improve independent reading practices, guide the teacher in observations of students and environment, prime students for completion of “successful” work (whatever that word means to them), and provide deep and detailed, meaningful feedback. The *Montessori Assessment Playbook*, published by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, stresses that although guidelines exist for the creation of effective rubrics, “each school’s path towards full implementation is unique, and frequently characterized by factors beyond the control of the school organization” (88). In other words, each class’s rubrics will often be as distinctive as the individual students as well as the culture of the school and/or district.

In crafting the particular rubric I created for curriculum development, I sought to address two needs specific to my individual students: joy and transcendence, especially in the area of reading. For someone like me who grew up a natural reader with encouraging parents, reading six assigned novels a year posed no problems. Many of my students have a wildly different experience. They feel bored or defeated. They argue that chosen, assigned novels don’t speak to them. They doubt it is possible to find joy in a book. In her 2016 article for *The Atlantic*, “What If High School Were More Like Kindergarten?” teacher Ashley Lamb-Sinclair writes, “I worry that years of driving toward academic achievement will morph them into tear-filled teenagers who have forgotten how to play. In fact, according to a separate Gallup survey, 79 percent of elementary-aged children feel engaged in school, while only 43 percent of high-schoolers do. This breaks my heart” (2); play should include reading for enjoyment. Because Clark has no library, student choice concerning reading material has been severely limited in the past. My colleagues and I have tried to remedy this problem by building our personal classroom collections of independent reading novels; now we have to guide students in navigating the process of becoming fluid, joyful readers. The rubric I crafted will serve as a tool during that journey.

The rubric is a self-assessment that addresses four simple components: focus and engagement, community, preparedness, and annotating or notebook work. I specifically crafted the language to be light, non-judgmental, and geared towards growth rather than criticism. Emoticons line the top in an attempt at age appropriate humor, numeric scores are absent, and all rubric choices that reflect struggle encourage a check-in with the teacher.

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The seminar as a teaching technique and the choice of your chosen piece in particular.

My familiarity with Socratic seminar comes primarily from personal experience with addressing difficult topics in the classroom: racism, prejudice, poverty, sexism, ageism, etc. Students naturally gravitate towards taking over these lessons and conversations, asking new questions, relating new concepts to big ideas, and ending their discussions without the need for concrete answers, even if this frustrates them. My students’ natural inclinations are affirmed by several important educational organizations in the United States. Facing History and Ourselves, the excellent nonprofit dedicated to helping educators tackle human rights issues in the classroom, advocates for Socratic seminar as a way of ethically processing difficult and painful conversations: “[students] shouldn’t use the discussion to assert their opinions or prove an argument. Through this type of discussion, students practice how to listen to one another, make meaning, and find common ground while participating in a conversation” (“Socratic Seminar”). Following the long-establish lead of Maria Montessori, who lived through political

and social tumult herself, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The Southern Poverty Law Center's *Teaching Tolerance* website, and even *The New York Times* among countless other organizations suggest using seminars in the classrooms in order to create more compassionate and productive communication. Montessori is by no means alone in her advocacy of this approach.

Scientific studies also offer evidence backing up the efficacy of Socratic seminar. Professors Vernon C. Polite and Arlin H. Adams from the Catholic University of America studied the effects of Socratic seminars in an urban Paideia school, Lookout Valley Middle School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Based on student interviews conducted afterwards, "The findings of the study indicated that the use of Socratic seminars was strongly associated with students' conflict resolution skills" (265). Students also engaged in higher order thinking skills during at least 80% of the seminar process (266). Most teachers who have conscientiously used seminars in their classrooms can offer anecdotal evidence that aligns with these findings, and I am no exception.

Seminar in my classroom is more often than not linked to difficult, complex topics that inherently resist both conclusions and the application of oversimplified binary labels: violence, prejudice, politics, religion, ethics, etc. The seminar I wrote for this course should function to ease students into more charged conversations later on in the year. We will think deeply in this seminar about the search for meaning and purpose. I chose the topic of "names" to extend the quarter's theme but also because that topic applies to all of my students, many of whom have unique African American names that are frequently mispronounced, especially by white teachers. The questions should provoke wider, broader thinking into how our names function as symbols of personal identity, culture, belonging, or even estrangement; by extension, students should consider how they label one another and construct divisions based on names.

Throughout my years as a traditional teacher in private and public schools, I questioned and challenged the necessity to conform in the classroom. Maria Montessori in *The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to Child Education in the "Children's Houses"* argues passionately that "In [most traditional schools] the children, like butterflies mounted on pins, are fastened each to his place, the desk, spreading the useless wings of barren and meaningless knowledge which they have acquired" (14). I hope that as I humbly learn from her method, making mistakes and growing along the way, my students will feel liberated, free to fully realize the people they want to become.

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