

English Students Complete Cross Curricular PBL Unit

As the first semester of the 2016-2017 school year comes to a close, students in even-numbered English classes are wrapping up a semester of learning that provided opportunities for collaborative learning, analytical thinking, and a great deal of writing.

Eighth grade students recently completed a Project-Based Learning unit that required students to combine their skills in the subjects of English, history, and science to create a country from the ground up. Students spent much of the first half of the fall semester studying the development of the United States government and its Constitution, as well as the National Parks system and the preservation of natural resources. It seemed a natural fit to challenge the students to develop their own “ideal” countries, then.

Students worked in groups of four or five to establish laws and priorities for their countries; research natural resources and make determinations about which they would preserve and which they would utilize; and develop marketing strategies, modes of currency, transportation systems, and other such details for their countries. The project culminated in class presentations in which students had the opportunity to explain their group’s thought processes and convince their peers to “move” to their invented countries.

The project was a challenge for students, as many had difficulties separating the PBL event from the 2016 presidential election. Despite the varied differences of opinion, students buckled down to work together to achieve common goals.

Meanwhile, sophomores penned original creative short stories, a first for many. The students were challenged to share their work in groups of peer critics, in order to examine strengths and weaknesses of one another’s writing. Many students ran with this writing challenge, several composing more than 6 or 7 pages (single spaced). Their stories are still in the draft phase, and students will continue to work on the writing pieces next semester.

Sophomores took a break from short stories to complete a close study of the futuristic novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. Students enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the potential perils of a society inundated (and obsessed) with technology, drawing parallels to today’s culture. Though the text is complex, students became invested in the protagonist’s journey to a better way of living, and the teacher enjoyed listening to the critical analyses and connections learners made throughout the unit.

Seniors devoted the first semester to an extended study of the hero’s journey, beginning with *Beowulf*, one of the oldest surviving texts in the world. Students learned that this archaic text, filled with monsters and kings and mead halls, set the groundwork for every other heroic story that has since been composed. To follow up this study of heroes and legends, students read *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Canterbury Tales*. These timeless tales provide a closer look at medieval customs and the framework upon which our concept of heroism is founded.