

Contract Grading: Re-imagine the Power Dynamic in your Classroom, Giving Year 9 Boys Increased Responsibility for their Learning

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Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

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Introduction

The main reason for implementing a contract grading system is to shift power in the classroom from teacher to student in order to remove the power imbalance barrier. Once removed, boys can work towards being comfortable to think critically and struggle to answer the “why and how” of what they are studying. This idea was inspired by the works of Reichert and Hawley (2014) in their book, *I Can Learn From You*.

The Research Question

How might contract grading encourage Grade 9 boys to take risks in their historical writing?

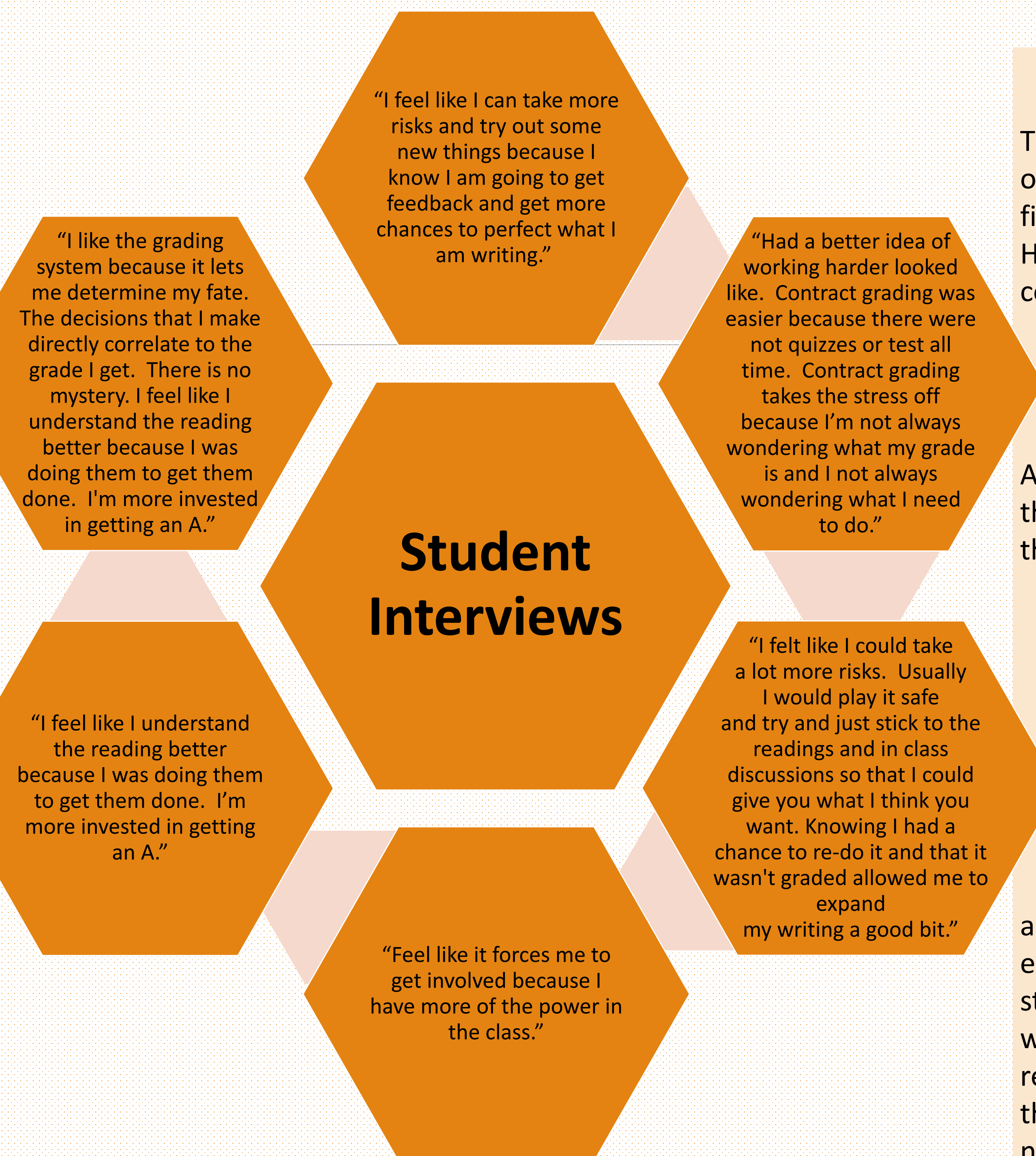
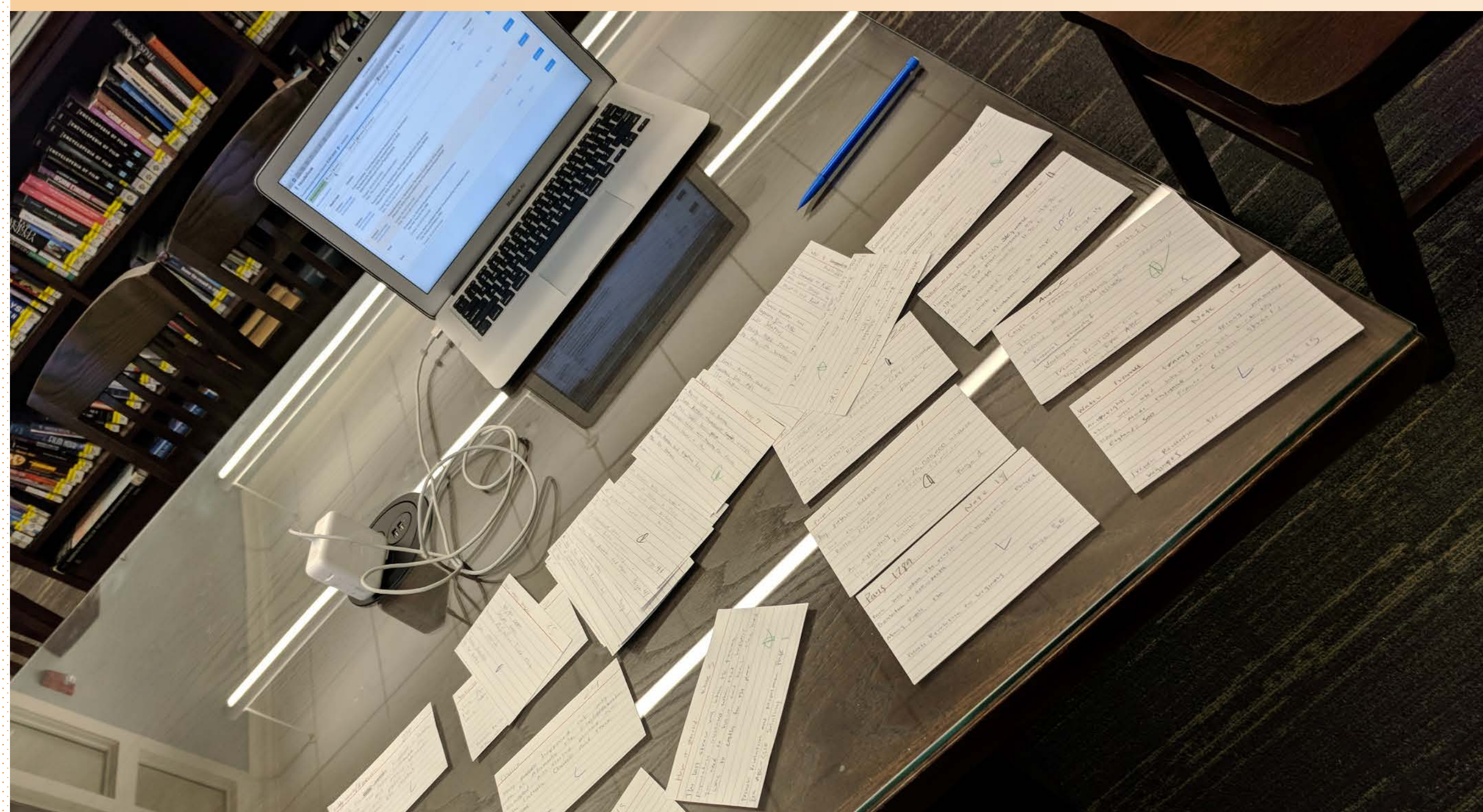
Research Context and Participants

Woodberry Forest School is located in central Virginia on a pastoral, 1200-acre tract of land that was once owned by the brother of the fourth president of the United States, James Madison. Since its inception in 1889, the school has prided itself on its ability to grow boys of moral character who are buttressed with self confidence and humility.

The school is currently home to 395 boys and 1 faculty daughter who attend classes six days a week, participate in required afternoon activities, attend seated dinner three times a week, and attend chapel on Mondays.

The Research Action

First off, I created a document where the boys could identify what they thought were the key elements of the class and what they thought it took to get an A, B, and C in each of these elements (participation, homework, and assessment). Once completed, I created three separate contracts for the boys to choose from. Each boy chose their grade for the marking period and I did my best to hold them accountable to that standard. If a student turned in a piece of work or acted in manner outside of their chosen contract, I would call them on it or have them re-do the assignment. The boys and I sat down one-on-one at the end of the term for a final contract negotiation where the grade was set.



Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout the action research process, I used qualitative data collection methods in the form of pre- and post-student questionnaires, direct observation, and analysis of student work, field notes, and student interviews. Upon completion of the action, I used the Google Highlighter tool and coded the data in order to identify any major themes. Additionally, I compared the pre- and post-data via an anonymous student questionnaire.

Key Findings and Discussion

As I analyzed the data that was captured during the eight-week contract grading period, four themes emerged. Although not all of these themes were expected, it was clear from the data that this growth did happen and, in many cases, it happened in a significant way.

1. An increase in the boys' intellectual thoroughness
2. An increase in the boys' pride in their writing assignments
3. An increase in the boys' confidence and willingness to take risks during in-class discussions
4. An increase in the boys' willingness to take risks in historical writing.

Conclusions

Most of the students I teach have a very hard time communicating their own unique thoughts and perspective in written form. They are afraid to take risks and I had not built a system that encouraged risk-taking. From the beginning, there was a palpable change in the attitude of my students and classroom climate. The power shift was immediate and yet it required yeoman's work on my part throughout. At the beginning, the boys loved the novelty of it all. They reveled in the chance to tell the teacher what it meant to get an A, B, or C and the fact that they got to fix the standards for in-class participation, daily homework, and assessments. This novelty, however, waned as the rubber hit the road. The boys became nervous about what their grade was and how they were stacking up against their peers. They would often beg me to tell them where they stood and even if I could not give them a concrete grade just a guess would do. This reality laid open what I saw as a huge problem in my past practice and my students' educational upbringing. My students lacked confidence. Their worth as a student was inextricably tied to my daily and weekly judgement of their value and ability as shown by a letter. This was causing a calcification of thought and a paralytic caution in their classwork. Their lack of risk-taking was deeper than just my pedagogical skill; it was systemic in my day to day judging and assessing.

Key Readings

- Davidson, C. (2015, August 16). Getting started 6: Contract grading and peer review. Retrieved from <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/2015/08/16/getting-started-6-contract-grading-and-peer-review>
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