At the start of 2004, staff writer Valerie Strauss asked some students and teachers around the country to take a look back and tell us about the most interesting or effective assignment they have had this school year. Following are the answers:

Ben Kraftchick
7th grader
Gulliver Academy, Miami

I would say a Halloween debate assigned by Mr. [Mark] Zipse (speech and debate) is my favorite. This debate was going to determine the greatest of the three classic movie monsters: Frankenstein's monster, Dracula, and the Werewolf. I represented Frankenstein. In support of my contention that Frankenstein was the most powerful, I pointed out: (1) His powers are not limited to specific times; Dracula is powerful only at night and the Werewolf only on the full moon. (2) If Frankenstein were actually attacked and bitten by one of the others, he would gain their powers in addition to his own. (3) Frankenstein is repairable. Even if he is severely injured and even killed, all you need is a mad scientist (of which there are plenty in the movies) to repair him. If you were representing Dracula, you might point out that he has the power of hypnotism with which to control the other two monsters as well as immortality (absent a wooden stake of course) and the ability to create other vampires. With enough vampires you could overcome Frankenstein. If you were representing the Werewolf; you might point out his superior strength and ability to turn others into werewolves. Again, with his strength and fellow werewolves, he could overcome Frankenstein.

I enjoyed this assignment because it gave me a chance to work with my friends as a team in a non-physical sport (most of which I am terrible at) and to focus my argumentative nature toward something other than aggravating my parents. I can’t speak for every kid, but I can say I know a lot who argue with their parent’s just to aggravate them or because they feel they must argue about a sends topic or a dead issue. This assignment helps kids not only to have fun understanding material; it also helps their home life.

The idea of a debate can also be put to use in other subjects like math and science.

Ben’s father, Lee:

Ben really took this project to heart. He prepared charts comparing the three monsters’ strengths and weaknesses, then practiced by taking each of the monsters positions. By the time he was done, he was prepared to argue in favor of any one of the monsters, not just the one he was assigned. If you think about it, it makes for a lively debate. Frankenstein is stronger than the other two, Dracula is smarter, and the werewolf is the most vicious.

Claire Lowenstein
7th-8th grade teacher
Ella Baker School, New York City

The project that pops into my mind as the most effective one that I have introduced so far this year has been designing a newspaper based on the events leading up to and during The American Revolution. The students chose one of the following sections to create and eventually publish. They were: Headlines, comics, political cartoons/editorial, obituaries/classifieds, fashion/cooking/entertainment. This project was extremely successful because each student was able to read and learn about the historical events, but then each student interpreted it and explained it in a way that was interesting and specific to their particular hook into learning. The students enjoyed having the opportunity to work in groups and to make constant decisions About what events were worthy of writing about in an article and how they were going to design them.

Looking back, I am now able to view this part of history and my students differently because the newspapers that my two classes designed: The Amazing New York Journal and Liberty Changes show a perspective through their eyes which makes that time in history current again.