

Helping Students Start Early and Finish Strong: Scaffolding Complex Research Projects

Yuen Shu Min

The Voices Project

AY2022/23 >>>> AY2024/25 >>>> AY2025/26

Driving Question	How can students use research to challenge prejudice and discrimination? (Research-informed)	What do you hope students will remember 3-5 years after the course is over? (CDI)	How can structured scaffolding & iterative feedback support authentic learning? (RITE)
Intervention	The Voices Project (50%)	360imx digital storytelling	Ink-shedding + Presentation Pitch
Challenges/ Insights	Students needed an authentic audience beyond the classroom	Authentic assessment increased complexity & required greater support for integrating research and digital storytelling	Structured feedback needs to be sustainable; students (still) struggling with high workload

Course: Alternative Lives in Contemporary Japan (Japanese Studies, Level 3000 Elective)
Students: 13-30+ (FASS and non-FASS)
Highlights: Weekly case studies (e.g. ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, disaster survivors); qualitative research methods; "The Voices Project"

[NEW!] Ink Shedding
(Wk 2-3, ungraded)
Early idea generation + peer/instructor feedback

Proposal
(Wk 6, 10%)
Outline project topic, approach, and research plan; receive instructor feedback

[NEW!] Presentation Pitch
(Wk 9, 5% guaranteed)
Draft poster layout, clarify aims, significance, and use of 360 space; receive instructor feedback via shared slide deck

Interim Report
(Wk 9, ungraded)
Reflect on progress and next steps; incorporate earlier feedback; receive instructor feedback

Final Report
(Wk 13, 20%)
Academic paper or creative project integrating research, and public-facing storytelling.

360imx Presentation
(Wk 13, 15%)
Public-facing, immersive presentation

Intervention

Additional low-stakes tasks to:

- reduce grade anxiety
- encourage earlier engagement
- develop research and presentation in tandem

Findings

Student Work

- Clear improvement in articulation of project aims and significance from early drafts to final outputs.
- Stronger alignment between research, visual design, and public communication.

My project's core goal is public destigmatization and education. The choice of a newspaper feature article as my creative output is a deliberate methodological intervention designed to address this goal more effectively than a traditional essay

Excerpt from student's final report (Week 13)

Instructor & Librarian Observations

- Higher quality and completeness of slides.
- Fewer last-minute changes/technical issues.
- More confident and creative use of the immersive 360 space.

Next Steps

How to reduce cognitive load while maintaining authentic learning?

- Embed research design instruction throughout the semester to strengthen project planning.
- Replace the post-presentation report with a public-facing exhibition guide that complements the 360imx presentation.

"[the project] humanized the concept of 'Alternative Lives', fostering deep compassion and awareness for marginalized individuals. It gave voice to the people we studied and provided food for thought on how we can support them." (Student feedback AY2025/26)

"I do have a very very rough idea for the presentation's layout (thanks to the draft pitch assignment...), which will be edited based on the feedback I receive (and inspiration I get from other people's presentations)." (Student's interim report)

