

The Classic City High School Experience

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LLED 3461s Spring 2016 4:40 Dr. Smagorinsky

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When I first walked through the doors of Classic City High School, I expected to find an institution similar to the one from which I graduated. The school I graduated from—Elkhart Memorial High School—is located in a both racially and socioeconomically diverse town that is similar to Athens, Georgia. After signing the documents that allowed me to tutor Classic City students, I made my way through the campus and into a classroom, passing noticeably late students and an expressionless policeman. I was introduced to the teacher of the class, and he set me up to work alongside a student who will be referred to as “Jasper.” Jasper was in the middle his latest assigned Chaucer poem, so, feeling a little flustered, I tried to piece together the things I first saw as I walked on the campus. I decided to open up my notebook to jot down the things I noticed so that I would be able to make sense of them later. In this paper, I have compiled and attempted to make sense of the experiences that caught my attention throughout my semester tutoring at Classic City High School.

“I DON’T GOT NOTHING.”

Language is constantly evolving, and one of the more difficult issues I think I might face as a teacher is dealing with the unique ways in which people communicate. In Classic City, many of the students spoke a dialect that some might call “African American Vernacular English.” Surely one of the main responsibilities of an English teacher is to teach formal English, but it is also difficult to decide how much English teaching one should do. Am I supposed to correct students when they use slang? Do I correct a student who asks if they “can” go to the bathroom? Based on reactions I have witnessed throughout my time as a student and tutor, it seems that nothing is ever

gained out of “correcting” someone’s everyday language. Language frames the way each of us perceives the world, and so to label one’s dialect as “wrong” seems like an attack on one’s culture. Personally, I think that the school should be a place that is accepting of different dialects and language patterns, however, there are those who would argue that students must be able to communicate in formal situations such as job interviews—which is an interesting thought since most dialects do not necessarily limit a person’s ability to effectively communicate.

Regardless of whether it is the teacher’s job to force students to speak “proper English,” it certainly is the teacher’s job to teach the student how to write effectively. It might be difficult to manage the way spoken language sometimes conflicts with the written language. I am glad that I have a little time to sort this issue out because I want my students to leave school with an understanding of how to write effectively, but I do not want to devalue their culture, or their way of communicating, by teaching stuffy, “proper English”. I think properness is one of the things that discourages people with lower SES backgrounds from appreciating liberal arts. Speaking from personal experience, I have always appreciated English and literature, but it has never been something that I felt like I was supposed to study, especially in college. I felt intimidated by Shakespeare because I was not supposed to “get it”, and because the other kids in AP classes had parents who worked in white collar offices. I was a factory kid. My dad knew very little about Shakespeare. My dad knew that men were supposed to go to work all day and come home tired at night. It was discouraging when I would think that Shakespeare was something that I was not supposed to enjoy because I thought I should be learning about business—or something else deemed “practical”.

I do not want to create an environment that is intimidating to students because of their social backgrounds.

“He lets us use our phones.”

Technology plays such an interesting role in our society, and one of the things I would like to learn is the ways in which efficiently use technology in the classroom. The class I tutored in was interesting in that it was a lab class, and the students would log into their computer program and complete coursework at their own pace. This came as a total surprise to me because, even in high school, my English classes were typically filled with engaging conversation. The ability to move through lessons at any pace seemed like a positive aspect, but the computer program treated English as a black and white subject. Computer work might be something that works with older students, but the dry, undebatable lessons could seriously discourage students who need engaging instruction.

The computer programs also did not demand attention like a regular instructor might. Even if you are a boring teacher, there are ways to get students excited because you are able to determine how engaged students are. A computer program is unable to adjust to different students' needs and learning styles. While the program would lecture, most students I tutored would tune out and surf the web, and some would even pull out their phones to text. I was shocked to see that this was normal behavior. On several occasions, Jasper pulled out his phone during a computer lecture and would not put away the phone no matter how many times I prompted him to pay attention to the lecture. These moments were a little uncomfortable because, as a tutor, I was unsure of just how much authority I wielded. The phones bothered me because the students were

unable to put them down to focus, and then they would complain about doing poorly on tests. I am still a young adult, and I hate rail against technology because it is useful, but it is nearly impossible to do teach when students are so captivated by a screen. So for all of its benefits, there are definitely aspects of technology that inhibit a student's ability to pay attention in the classroom.

“No one's grading this.”

The computer programs also negatively impacted the learning environment because students were able to beat the program at its own game. While I attempted to help Jasper on my first day tutoring, he quickly informed me that, as long as his answers on the computer program included the correct buzzwords, the program would allow him to continue coursework. I am sure one of the most frustrating things as an educator is getting students to worry less about grades and more about the learning process. Our society is so driven by results and statistics that the only thing students are worried about is the grade they will receive at the end of the term. It is difficult because, as a student, a teacher sounds absolutely ridiculous when they tell you not to worry about the grade. To a student, the results are what matters—not the things they learned on the way to those results.

This presents a difficult problem for educators: How do you accurately assess a student's progress in a way that is not counter-productive? Grading seems to encourage students to cheat or take other shortcuts. I am not exactly sure, but I think that English might be a subject that is easier to grade than others. With English, you are able to see a student's progress from paper to paper, and it may be easier to judge a student's effort. I think that by emphasizing the importance of effort and progress,

students might be more inclined to learn for the sake of learning and improving. I think that when you set a bar to reach, you discourage students. If a student can easily reach the set goal, they are probably being stretched to their limits. If a student is unable to reach a certain mark, they are probably being stretched past their limits. When I enter the classroom, I will make sure to emphasize the importance of progress and not results.

“I read in class.”

Another issue I pondered during my semester at Classic City High School was the amount of time wasted by in-class activities that could have been done at home. (Though, wasted time is not an problem specific to Classic City, and it is surely a problem in most, if not all, classrooms.) Time and time again I walked into class to find out Jasper needed to read something for his lessons. At first, this was a frustrating occurrence, but I soon grew accustomed to the fifteen minutes of silent reading that would begin Monday classes. Eventually I asked Jasper why he never read at home, and his response was vague, but I realized that some students have other priorities. In *The Colors of Poverty* the Lin and Harris point out that, often, people with lower socioeconomic backgrounds are forced to prioritize certain things that may inhibit their educational progress. Without assuming too much, I could tell that Jasper was a student whose priorities lied elsewhere, so when he told me he was too tired, I understood. He did not explicitly say that he is tired because he has to work after school, but that seemed to be the issue. It was interesting, and even a little sad, that Jasper did not realize his lack of enthusiasm towards school might have been caused by his work schedule.

So how does a teacher treat a student who works nights and cannot focus during the school day? Is there a way to keep the student on pace with the rest of the class? In my previous experiences, teachers were often disappointed or angry with students who did not complete assignments, and I was partially motivated by my desire to avoid disappointing teachers. The “I’m just disappointed” treatment is not always effective, however. What first struck me as “wasted time” now seems to be a necessary part of class. There is no use in chastising a student for not doing homework because, frankly, it is a waste of time. The time spent reprimanding a student could be spent giving the students time to catch up on whatever work they may need to do.

I think that one of the most important things I can do as a teacher is to be understanding of different students’ needs. As an English teacher, due dates can be adjusted, and I have the ability to tweak certain assignments if need be. My goal is to make sure every student has the opportunity to succeed—even if that means occasionally working on individual lesson plans for students who are struggling to understand or complete assignments.

“Can I go to the bathroom?”

Nearly every class started with a student who asked to use the restroom. “Can I go to the bathroom?” has always been, to me, the most annoying question you can ask in the school. Every class has the one kid who constantly wants to go to the restroom. As someone who efficiently used the restroom during passing periods in high school, I find it difficult to have sympathy for students who constantly ask to use the restroom. It is important to me that students learn how to act properly in certain settings. Whatever career you find, your colleagues will not respond well if you drop everything to meander

back to the restroom in the farthest corner of the building because you are bored. It is not even necessarily a bathroom issue. I just want to make sure that students are prepared for the competitive society we live in, and I do not want to give them the idea that it is okay to just wander around a building while there is work to be done.

However, the discussions we had in class will always stay in my mind, and I never want to be the teacher who humiliates a student—especially over a bathroom issue. I understand the human body is complex, and students will need accommodation. I am not exactly sure how to make every student comfortable, but I will go out of my way to make sure nobody is humiliated in a class that I teach.

“We have a sub today.”

In any classroom, productivity takes a huge hit whenever there is a substitute teacher. During my time at Classic City, several of the class periods I tutored were managed by substitute teachers. The students would not even log onto computers when their regular teacher was not in class. This brought two issues to my attention.

Firstly, I will strive to have great attendance. It is obviously a job, and you cannot simply skip class, but I want to set a good example for students. I do not want to take advantage of sick days or whatever policy is in place at the institution where I will work. During my career as a student, I came across two teachers who prided themselves on never having missed a day—both retired after my junior year of high school. To go your entire career without missing a day is admirable. I do not know that that is possible for everyone, but it certainly inspires me to be at work unless it is absolutely impossible for me to get to school.

Secondly, if I do miss school, I still must figure out a way to make class productive and valuable. There are probably many creative ways to construct an adequate learning environment even if you are not physically in the classroom.

As a teacher, I think that I have the ability to make the classroom a place where learning happens, even if I am not present. I want to be a teacher who prides himself on being consistent and productive at all times.

“Are you gonna be here next week?”

Many of the experiences detailed in this paper have been treated as “problems”, but the goal of this paper has been to sort out a few of the recurring themes that I saw in the classroom. My overall experience was extraordinarily pleasant. Every frustrating moment was cancelled out by something positive.

The most important thing I learned was that I must be a respected role model who can create relationships with students. I quickly noticed that when my partner and I communicated freely and treated each other as equals—rather than as teacher and student—we made much more progress in his coursework. Jasper felt more comfortable and would tell me if he did not understand something, whereas in the beginning of the semester before we had developed any sort of relationship, Jasper was a little timid.

I have always thought about becoming a teacher because I never pictured myself walking into a business. I do not want to produce goods. I want to facilitate learning—of any kind. While I was at Classic City, I realized that my goal is not to force students into loving Chaucer. I decided that my goal is to create relationships and just be an accessible human being. As I learned with Jasper, when you create relationships with

students, they want to work hard for you and for themselves. I was nervous when I first walked into the classroom, but now I am sure that I want educate.

Works Cited

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