

Classic City Reflection: My Time at Classic City High

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Classic City High School was designed to serve students who do not perform well in a typical class setting. In order to serve these students, the administration created a different environment than the typical high school allows. The classroom in which I spent my time was a computer lab. The room was filled with wall-to-wall desks, each one equipped with a computer, mouse, and keyboard. Although the class is classified as an English literature lab, the students are allowed to work on any subject they choose. The students are expected to come in, sit down at a computer, log into the system and begin working on their respective subjects. Students are allowed to use their smartphones and listen to music while working on their classes.

The students work on a variety of subjects in this classroom, including Spanish, English literature, various math courses, business classes, and social studies courses. For some of the subjects, the online classroom works well. For example, students seem to have no problem completing social studies and business classes online. However, the foreign language and English courses prove to be very difficult for the students to complete without hands-on instruction. Classic City utilizes *Rosetta Stone* as a method of teaching foreign languages, and the students must rely fully on this program to learn a different language because the school does not have any face-to-face foreign language teachers on staff. When I first saw the students working on foreign language classes online, I was concerned that they would not be able to completely grasp the material. I also worried that this method of teaching a foreign language would not pique the students' interest. During my first two years of college, I took two upper-level Spanish classes online, so I know the difficulties and the disparaging results of web-based foreign language classes. While volunteering, I was able to spend the majority of my time helping one student with his Spanish class, and my suspicions about the affectability of the

course were confirmed. Not only were the students expected to learn a different language from a computer, but the speaking portion of the course was eliminated. Because Classic City does not own any headsets for the students to use, the students must skip that portion of the class.

The online English classes provided the students with almost as much grief as the Spanish classes did. The classes are set up in module form, with a pre-test, series of activities, and a post-test, on which the students have three tries to pass. About half of the students I observed did not try very hard on the pre-tests. I believe that the pre-tests do not account for a large percentage of their grade, so the students did not see the point in trying. The post-tests were very difficult for the students. A lot of the questions on the multiple-choice tests were much better suited for a written assessment. Many of the questions were subjective or based on inferences and analysis. I believe that students should be able to argue their own viewpoints on these issues, rather than being told that there is only one correct answer to the questions.

The set-up of Classic City is a little different from my high school, but not radically different. Lee County High School, my alma mater, recently instituted a “Bring Your Own Technology” program into the classrooms. Students are expected to bring their smartphones, laptops, and tablets to school in order to use these devices for educational purposes. Just as cell phones get abused at Classic City, the technology can be a distraction at Lee County as well. My high school had classes very similar to the language lab I volunteered in. The only difference was that the classes were called study halls instead of labs. At both my high school and at Classic City, there were students from different economic backgrounds and different ability levels. Lee County is a predominately white school, however, while Classic City has a majority of African American students.

Teachers and Administrators

Although I did not interact with many teachers at Classic City, I can say that, from all the interactions I did have, the teachers seem to be really passionate about their jobs. They do not view their roles as Classic City educators as simply a means to an end. They try their very best to reach these students and to show them that someone cares about them.

Mrs. Johns is one of the sweetest teachers I have ever met, though she can be a bit dorky at times. She brings snacks and drinks, such as peanut butter crackers and Capri-Suns, for her students every day. She knows that not all of her students can afford to buy lunch or bring lunch from home, and she knows that focusing on schoolwork with an empty stomach is nearly impossible. She is certified to teach English, but she also has a background in Spanish. She tries her best to help her students with every subject. She also allows them to leave the classroom in order to get assistance from teachers with more experience than she has (especially if the students are working on math). Mrs. Johns's classroom is called an English lab, but the students work on whatever subject they need to complete, so Mrs. Johns does not have the opportunity to offer direct instruction to her classes. Instead, the students work on the online programs, calling her over for help when they need it.

Classic City's principal visited our class on two occasions. On the first, Mrs. Johns was jokingly scolding a student for missing the trashcan because the student pretended it was a basketball hoop and threw their trash from across the room. Mrs. Johns was telling the student to pick up the trash, but she was not seriously upset about it, so she addressed the student in a lighthearted manner. The student responded in an equally lighthearted manner. From an insider's perspective, there was neither harm nor foul. However, the principal heard only the student's response to Mrs. Johns and began scolding the student for speaking to her teacher in that way.

He did not try to understand the situation or allow Mrs. Johns any time to control her classroom. He simply walked in, assessed the situation, and took it upon himself to punish the (basically innocent) student. Knowing the nature of the classroom, the teacher, and her students, I was offended by the principal's reaction. This school is not a typical high school, and the students are not model students. He seemed oblivious to the fact that the student may have been kidding or was being friendly with her teacher.

The only other time I saw the principal of Classic City, he was reprimanding Mrs. Johns right outside her classroom. I do not know what happened in order to cause this result, but I could not help thinking that my teacher had probably done nothing to provoke it. The students do not seem to respect the principal. They were as offended as I was when he came in and started punishing one of their classmates, and as soon as he and Mrs. Johns left to talk in the hallway, they started complaining about him. They said that he did not understand the way things work in America. (From what I gathered, the principal is from Africa.) I am sure that the principal is highly qualified to hold his position and that he meant well in defending Mrs. Johns's honor, but his manner of being comes across as a little demeaning.

My students did not speak of Mrs. MiMi during my time at Classic City, but she did step into our class for a few minutes at one point. She was greeted with smiles from all of the students, so I assume she is doing a good job as a graduation coach. I think it is very important to have a graduation coach in high schools. These administrators can help the students see the light at the end of the tunnel and provide a plan for the students' futures.

Students

I had the privilege of working mainly with two students in Mrs. Johns's class this semester. I spent the majority of my time tutoring Jenny and Joseph, though I also worked with other students as needed, such as Nokia, who I only spent one day with.

Jenny is a lively, enthusiastic, and intelligent junior in high school. She tries her best at everything she does, but she often doubts her ability. When I first began working with Jenny, she would call herself stupid every time she missed a question. Once she realized that not even I knew all the answers, she began giving herself more credit. Jenny comes from a Mexican family. Her family moved to the United States when Jenny was born. They moved back to Mexico when Jenny was two years old, only to move back to the United States when Jenny was about 5 years old. Jenny's parents learned English at the same time as Jenny did, and Spanish is the family's first language. Jenny's Hispanic background sometimes limits her ability to understand her classwork. She does not always recognize written words, even when she knows them by ear. Jenny also hates reading long passages of English and often asks me to read long questions, short stories, and poems aloud to her. If I see a word I think she does not recognize, I will point it out and then explain it if she does not know it. Jenny has learned to ask me for explanations as well. When I first began tutoring Jenny, she would get embarrassed when she did not know or remember the meaning of a word, but she has become much more comfortable asking for help now.

Throughout the semester, I helped Joseph with his Spanish class. When I first offered my assistance, Joseph refused me wholeheartedly. However, when I added that I have taken six years of Spanish, Joseph accepted my guidance. Joseph is not the ideal student, though he is not disruptive. Joseph listens to music on his cell phone constantly, often ignoring everything and

everyone (including his teacher). Many of the students in Mrs. Johns's class take their phones out and begin listening to music at the beginning of the class period. This practice keeps the class quiet, if not on task. Joseph's music often takes away from the Spanish lesson. The *Rosetta Stone* program speaks the words aloud so that the student can hear the correct pronunciation of the words, but Joseph misses out on this aspect entirely. There are also some activities which require the student to listen to the instructions and respond accordingly. Instead of listening to the speaker, Joseph simply guesses at the answers until he gets them correct. When I first began working with Joseph, he wanted me to just tell him all of the right answers. As a future educator, I believe that it is important to teach the students how to think for themselves. I tried to explain the underlying concepts and the grammatical aspects of the lessons, instead of just telling Joseph what all the words meant. Once he understood that I was not going to give him all of the answers, he became more receptive to my coaching and even began listening to me instead of to his music. Joseph does not like to admit that he does not understand things, though, and rarely asks for help.

Nokia is another student I worked with this semester. Nokia is normally boisterous and distracted, though she is very intelligent. One day, I helped Nokia with a scholarship essay about a historical African American figure. Nokia chose to write about a female civic activist who was jailed for efforts. Because Nokia is an African American female, and because she has very little respect for authority, her choice of subject matter was not very surprising. Nokia was very happy to have me read over her essay and offer suggestions for improvement. When I was helping Nokia with her essay, she thanked me multiple times and asked me questions about her writing as well. While I was noticing Nokia's nice and polite nature, I happened to look down and see the explicit equivalent of "screw you all" written on the outer sole of her sneakers. Although

Nokia was being kind and grateful towards me, she does not respect all authority figures. She often talks back to her teacher and rarely stays on task. One day, Mrs. Johns was trying and failing to keep Nokia focused, so Mrs. Johns asked me to try. I asked Nokia if she had any work to do, and she told me no and that she did not want to be at school. She put her head down on her desk for about ten minutes, and then proceeded to take some work out for a different class. Although she did not want Mrs. Johns and me to see her obeying us, she did eventually comply and complete her assignments. Nokia seems to be the victim of peer pressure. She has grown up in a world where it is normal and accepted to disobey authority figures. She tries to fit in, even if she does care about her grades.

All of the students I worked with came from different cultural backgrounds than I do. Jenny is Hispanic and Joseph and Nokia are African American, while I am white. They all have jobs outside of school, which shows that they come from non-affluent families. The students I worked with all seem to be from lower middle class families. Their economic situation does not affect their everyday school life very much, however, because almost all work required of the students is expected to be completed at school. This is one of the advantages of Classic City: its staff recognizes that these students have responsibilities other than schoolwork. The African American students sometimes tease Mrs. Johns, who is white, for not understanding cultural references, but they do not show any other signs of a worldview which differs from their teachers' or administrators'.

My Role as a Mentor, Tutor, and Future Educator

As a mentor, I believe that I had an impact on my students' self-confidence. I did not let them call themselves stupid or say that they could not achieve their goals. I encouraged them to try their best and told them not to give up. They became more comfortable with mistakes and with asking for help, as I mentioned before in writing about them. The students appreciated that I did not pretend to be an expert on any subject. I am a student, just like they are. The students and I got along well together. Even the students I did not work with greeted me in a kind manner when I came in or when they saw me in the hallway outside of class. As a future educator, I take acceptance of others very seriously. Although I may not approve of their actions or I may disagree with their beliefs, it is important to me to focus on the person underneath the actions and beliefs, and to try and reach them on a deeper level. Therefore, I did not judge my students for their language or their stories about their weekends. I believe this attitude helped me better connect to my students.

As a tutor, I would like to believe that I helped my mentees become better students. I tried to show them critical thinking skills, like eliminating wrong answers in order to choose the correct answers, rereading passages, paying attention to key words, and looking up words they did not know. I was able to fulfill the roles of mentor and tutor simultaneously without a problem. I believe it was clear to the students that part of the reason I cared about their schoolwork was because I cared about them succeeding as individuals.

As a future educator, my time spent with Classic City high-schoolers was very beneficial. It allowed me to become better acquainted with people from different backgrounds. I have a lot of Hispanic and bilingual friends, and I teach an English as a Second Language class, so I

already had some experience with people from a Latin background before working with Jenny, but I was able to learn more about African American culture and its impact on school performance through my experiences at Classic City. I learned not to pretend that I know what the students are talking about when I do not. Instead, it is better to have the students explain their cultural references to me. This way, I can learn as much from my students as they can from me. Also, allowing the students to explain their culture shows them that they are experts at something, even if they are not straight-A students.

The books my book club chose to read and report on were very relevant both to my time spent at Classic City and to my goals as a future educator. From reading *Life, Animated* by Ron Suskind, I learned the importance of caring about the student as an individual. Suskind also explained how everyone has different talents, and that all students cannot be judged equally. More specifically, the book taught me a method of educating children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, but Owen's story resonates with students of all ability levels. *Doing School* by Denise Clark Pope gave insight into the mechanical method of working the system in order to receive desired grades rather than enjoying school and learning on a deeper level. Even though this book chronicled the lives of upper-level, model students, its message about the deficits of the nature of school apply to students on all levels of ability. At Classic City, for example, some of the students do not read the directions or the passages that pertain to the multiple choice questions. Instead, they try to guess what the test creators would want to hear and simply choose an answer based on their assumptions. These students do not truly learn the material; they simply do what it takes to obtain a passing grade. *Readicide* by Kelly Gallagher discussed the practice of testing the love of reading out of students. I saw the aftermath of readicide when I was tutoring Jenny. She was not interested in reading at all, and asked me to read aloud to her instead. Gallagher

provides a long list of suggestions for cultivating students' love of reading in his book, and I will definitely use his suggestions in the future. I used some of his "good reader" techniques in my tutoring practices, and they seemed to help the students with their comprehension abilities.

Based on my experiences at Classic City, I will try to be an understanding and flexible teacher. I realize that it is important to work with my students and to recognize their responsibilities to their families and to the community as a whole as well as to the school system. Based on the students' performance with multiple-choice tests, I have determined that asking students open-ended questions (about theme, motives, and other items that are open to interpretation) do not belong on multiple-choice assessments. These types of analysis are better suited for written assessments instead. I do not think I will allow my students to listen to music, even though it does prevent the students from conversing with one another. I know very few people who can effectively multitask, and I believe that allowing the students to have their cell phones out in class distracts them from their schoolwork.