

Laura Bacchus Course Project: Blog

1/20/17

Coming in to tutor today, I was nervous because I had no idea what to expect. I didn't know what class I would be in, or if I would be working with one student or a whole class. I didn't even know if I was actually tutoring today or if I was just turning in paperwork. When I first arrived I had to finish my paperwork in Ms. Mimi's office with a few other tutors. A student came in who had won an essay contest and wanted to practice reading it aloud. She was shy at first to read it in front of us tutors, but with encouragement from Ms. Mimi and from us she did. When she read it, I was surprised at first that the essay had won a contest, even though Ms. Mimi told us in our orientation that very few people entered these contests. In my mind, it was not very well organized or especially creative. But I was very happy for the student, that because Ms. Mimi had encouraged her to enter the contest, she got that kind of affirmation of her work and the opportunity to do something new and out of her comfort zone. From the beginning, I was learning to re-adjust my standards of what excellence looked like. For these kids with their difficulties, excellence might look different from the standards of excellence for kids with backgrounds like mine.

After this I was assigned to Mrs. Johns's class. My first impression was that the class seemed a little chaotic. I soon learned that this was typical for a Friday because all of the students needed to get their weekly progress report from Mrs. Johns, so she was trying to do that while also offering any help they needed with their work or with computer issues. Although I knew that many of the classes were computer-based, I expected all of the students to be working on the English because this was technically English class. But they were working on many different subjects. At one point Mrs. Johns had to look up online the biology information a student asked about. The first student Mrs. Johns asked me to work with needed help with economics. I was surprised by how much high school economics I remembered, and was able to help with. When Nikki, the student I was working with, finished her economics, Mrs. Johns told her to work on an essay, and she seemed to immediately shut down. I struggled to encourage her to write anything. Her topic was bullying, and she had three specific questions she had to answer about it. I would ask her what she thought about a specific question, and she would be able to give me a verbal answer, but when I asked her to write down that answer she felt that she couldn't. She told me that she didn't have the vocabulary to be able to write. Eventually I asked her just to type the few points she had outlined in her notebook, and she was able to do that, but she was very much unwilling to write the essay that period.

1/27/17

I'm starting to get more comfortable in the classroom after my second week. One thing I didn't mention in my last journal is what a good impression Mrs. Johns made on me. She is young, and unlike most of the students, is white, and I expected that these things might hinder her ability to gain the respect of or connection with her students, but this was not the case at all. She and her students seem to have a lot of mutual respect. She makes it clear that she cares about them. I spent some time today, before I was assigned to a student, watching her give students their weekly progress reports. She spent time explaining to them how the online grading system worked. Some of the students had zeros in some of their assignments, and she explained to them that their

grade, calculating in those zeros, was not what she cared about, but rather how they were doing on the work that they had completed, and she showed them how their grade could change if they completed the work. It seems as though she does a good job of keeping the students encouraged and working well at their own pace.

I was assigned to Nikki again today, and spent the entire class working with her on economics. I don't think I was very helpful, though. Part of it was that I didn't feel very necessary. Her assignment was to read a lesson and then answer questions about it, and all of the questions asked for her to write the definition of a particular term. These vocabulary terms were bolded and then defined in the lesson, so it was easy for her to find the answer, write it in her notes, and then type it into her assignment. We had a discussion about how she feels about the way she is taught, and she says that the online program is boring and she wishes it were more interesting, or that she had more freedom to learn about what she wanted. I talked a little about how the best thing about college for me was getting to choose what I studied, and she said she wished high school was more like that.

2/3/17

Today Mrs. Johns wasn't there; she had a substitute teacher. He assumed that I was doing my student teaching. I tried to explain the mentoring program and the service-learning class to him, but I don't think he really understood. The last two times I was there, Mrs. Johns assigned me to help a particular student with a particular task, but this time the substitute did not do that. I spent some time just sitting (awkwardly, I felt) in a chair while the students worked. I was able to spend that time looking around at the room and what was displayed on the walls, which I always find interesting in any classroom. One handwritten poster lists reasons to come to school. Some of the reasons are free food, the fact that high school graduates earn more money than people without a diploma, and that school offers a safe environment.

Another section of the wall is dedicated to posters for Hispanic Heritage Month. These posters feature prominent Hispanic writers, artists, and activists, among others. There is also a large poster showing American authors. I only notice one, Maya Angelou, who is not a white man. There is a separate poster for African American authors, which includes several more women as well. There is also a large bulletin board featuring students' work on a project about Greek mythology.

A few other posters offer English help, explaining how to write different kinds of responses to literature or defining literary terms. Over the whiteboard there are two posters, one that says "you may use your technology" and another that says "you may not use your technology" and there is an arrow stuck to the whiteboard that can be moved to point to one of them, currently the one that allows the students to use their technology. Many of the students do, listening to their music through their headphones. Sometimes in my earlier sessions I've seen Mrs. Johns ask students to turn their music down if it can be heard, especially if she thinks it isn't school appropriate, but most of the time it doesn't seem to be a problem. I think about my own studies and the effect of music. Sometimes it can definitely be distracting. But I also think about in high school, when I was taking math and physics, and having background music, especially without lyrics, while I was doing that kind of thinking

was really helpful for my focus. I guess it really depends on the individual. I think it would be hard for me to judge, as a teacher or administrator in this kind of classroom, whether headphone use was helpful or distracting, because it can really be both.

About halfway through the class, Nikki Gray called me over and asked if I knew anything about algebra. I said I knew some and would try my best. I was very happy that Nikki had asked for my help on her own; that must mean she thought I was trustworthy and that I had been helpful the last couple times I was assigned to her, even though I wasn't too confident about that. When we worked with her algebra, it was interesting to see how it is taught differently now compared to just a few years ago when I learned it. I took Algebra 1 before the Common Core standards were implemented, so I wonder if that has anything to do with the change. Nevertheless, it was pretty interesting. When she had trouble with a problem, I showed her the methods I was taught, and she thought they were simpler. But when she showed me the methods she was taught to use, I found that they were very similar to the methods I use when I have to do that kind of calculation in my head, although they seemed more complicated to do on paper. Although I am studying English Education, I find the choices that have to be made in math curriculum very interesting. It seems like there's a tension between making calculation efficient and making it helpful to understand theory.

2/10/17

Today's tutoring was a little more difficult than previous days. I was assigned to work with a student named Trey on English. This was the first time, other than the essay on the first day that Nikki did not want to write, that I have actually gotten to work on English. It was a little frustrating though, because his quiz was on the Legend of Sleepy Hollow, which I have never read and know only a little bit about.

This class is both ninth and tenth graders, and I think one of them does world literature and the other does American literature. I feel as though I know very little about American literature, because the grade in my high school that we studied it I took AP English Language instead, which focused more on essay writing and rhetoric. Here in college I only have to take one American literature class, and I took a class on the literature of the U.S.-Mexico border, which has been fascinating, but I still feel as though I have been exposed to only a small segment of American literature and only really know British and World lit. I guess this is a wakeup call that I'll have to do some more reading before I start teaching. But it's certainly frustrating to see that I wasn't fully able to help Trey with his work.

It didn't help either that I had difficulty understanding him when he talked. All of the students speak differently from the way I usually do, but normally I have very little trouble understanding them if I pay attention well enough. But Trey spoke fairly quietly and not very distinctly, so I had a harder time understanding him. Because of this, and my lack of knowledge about the book he was being quizzed on, I think he could tell I was not going to be especially helpful, and we had difficulty communicating about his work.

One other thing I think added to the disconnect may have been the way I was dressed. Trey asked me where I was from and was surprised that I was from Georgia. He said that with my striped sweater and short boots, I looked like I was "from Iowa or some shit." I can understand why he thought I didn't look local; I actually got the sweater and boots in

England last semester, but I was not about to tell him that.

Trey also showed me a flaw in the e2020 system his quiz was on. Part of the assignment asked him to enter a paragraph short answer response to a quote from his book. Before I realized exactly what he was doing, he copied and pasted the quote into a Google search, then copied a random paragraph of text from the Internet, not even related to the question, and pasted it into the assignment box. The program counted his response as correct. Between this experience and my experience the first day trying to work with Nikki on writing, I feel like this system may not be teaching writing in a way that is effective or enjoyable.

2/17/17

This week I was assigned to work with Trey again. He was working on his final test to complete his English course, which involved grammar, usage, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and literature questions. He did not seem to really want my help, though. He positioned himself and his laptop so I couldn't see it, and only let me see it after he had gotten a check from Mrs. Johns to see which questions he had missed.

This was the first time I had seen any English assignment other than literature. I found that I was glad that I'm taking an English grammar class this semester; I don't think I would have remembered all the names of the different kinds of phrases and clauses he had to know otherwise. Some parts of the grammar were difficult to help him with, like subjunctive. Trey was not familiar with the concept of subjunctive or the construction, and I had trouble explaining it well, probably because neither of us use it very often. Now that I think about it, I occasionally use the subjunctive in everyday speech, but generally I use other kinds of constructions, using auxiliaries rather than the subjunctive mood. I also have taken foreign language classes that have taught me what it means for something to be subjunctive in ways I don't think English classes taught me. Here at CCHS they use Rosetta Stone for foreign language. I've used it before and I think it is useful (though not worth the high price) for learning vocabulary and basic grammar, but as much for more complex grammar.

Anyway, I felt we still had difficulty communicating, and feel a distance between us that I don't know how to bridge. I still had trouble understanding the way he spoke, and when I clearly had not understood him, he would just shake his head and laugh softly. He asked me again about where I was from, and asked me if everyone there was white. When I told him the name of my hometown he looked it up on Google Images. The central area has become very artsy and hipster over the past few years, and he stared at the pictures like they were of a different planet. I felt like I was from one. He looked at pictures of groups of people and counted how many black people there were. There weren't many; I looked it up later and my hometown is only ten percent African-American. Eventually he went back to his work, but for the rest of the time I felt more awkward than usual. It didn't help that he also made occasional comments about my appearance, at one point saying I was "skinny as hell," and asked me if I had a boyfriend. At the end of the class he had nearly finished his final test. Despite all the awkwardness he had improved his score with my help, but I had hoped we would have finished with it. I'm kind of grateful that they have next Friday off, I could use the time off to kind of have a reset and reflect, and think on what I need to do better next

time.

3/17/17

This is my first time tutoring in a little while. First they had Friday off, then I was sick the next Friday, and then we had spring break. It was good for me to have that time off and reflect on my discomfort last time. Part of that discomfort, I think, was necessary for me. During the time since my last tutoring, I've spent a lot of time back in my hometown of Woodstock over a weekend and much of spring break. I think it was very important for me to recognize that there are big differences between my background and experiences and those of the students at Classic City. I don't think these differences should be cause for me to feel shame, or fear that I would never be able to relate to the students, the way they were at first, but I do need to be aware of the differences. I need to be intentional about getting to know these students and their experiences and not to make assumptions that they think and do things the same way that I do. So I tried to come in today with that mindset.

When I got to the class, I noticed that Trey was not there, and I was kind of relieved. While I think the discomfort relating to my difficulty in communicating and relating to him was a good learning experience for me, his comments about my appearance gave me a much more negative discomfort and I was glad to not have to worry if he would make them again and worry about how I would handle that. I was happy to find out later that he had passed his final test for his English course and now had a different class that period, and that he wasn't just absent.

Today, I feel, was really successful. I worked with a student named Darrius on his English class, and today he was doing a quiz that involved a few different works of literature. A few of them I didn't know, but we looked through the passages together and read online summaries and were able to work out what was going on. He seemed genuinely interested in the stories. We were able to have a really interesting conversation about *The Great Gatsby* (one of the few well-known books of American literature I have studied in-depth) and about the movie adaptations of it. I'm seeing that, as we've learned in class, having discussions about content can be much more successful than simply taking the content in and spitting it out again. It would be interesting to see a face-to-face class here; I wonder how they're structured. None of my classmates that I've talked to are working with an English face-to-face classroom; they're all in technology-based classes or math or science classes, where they've said they don't do very much.

3/31/17

Today there were a few other tutors here; I think they're trying to make sure they get enough hours. At the beginning of class it was just us sitting around a table and talking to each other and Mrs. Johns. I always arrive about a third of the way through 3rd period, and Mrs. Johns explained that at that point no one wanted any help. I think this was the first time it had actually been explained to me that we were there just to be available and offer help if the students wanted it, but it was up to the students to ask for it unless Mrs. Johns saw they were off focus or working on something important and assigned us to them. Before that, I was always very concerned when I wasn't always with a student. Mrs. Johns even told stories of

past years when a student with a heavy workload volunteered during a period that wasn't very busy, and would bring her homework with her. Mrs. Johns said we were welcome to do the same and that she could even get us onto the network if we needed the internet. I don't intend to do that, but I feel like I better understand the expectation that we be available to support when needed rather than having to constantly be doing something. In my conversation with the other tutors, I also learned for the first time about how the student teaching process works your senior year, and Mrs. Johns shared about her own student teaching experience and what she learned from it. I recently read a book about teacher collaboration in urban schools (which I bought accidentally mistaking it for the book my book club group had chosen), and it talked about how teachers need time to talk to each other about what they're learning and be willing to share both their successes and their mistakes. This time of conversation reminded me of that. I really hope to be part of a great teacher community like that once I'm in the field.

I worked with a student named Mya for a little while on English. It was mostly reading comprehension and she really needed very little help with it, but I enjoyed working with her and it was good to meet a new person. I'm finally actually feeling at home in this classroom.

4/7/17

Today went a little differently than normal. There were fewer students than there typically are on a Friday; maybe about half the usual number. I think the prom might be tonight; that may have something to do with it. There were also more tutors than usual in the class. I'm usually one of two or three tutors in third period on Friday and the only one in fourth. Today there were three in third and four in fourth. Some of them normally tutor on Monday, when there have been breaks, so they were trying to make up their hours. All of this made for a different atmosphere in class.

Besides that, Mrs. Johns was working on sorting test prep materials, which included a wide variety of literature and grammar practice. She told me that there are only three more weeks until the 9th and 11th graders take a state standardized test. She asked me if I could help sort the materials, apologizing since she knew I was "trained for more than this" but I love organizing and was excited to help. Through talking with Mrs. Johns about the material I learned a lot about the standards for high school English classes, their structure, and the kinds of material available. Since she was about to teach poetry I helped find all of the poems. Since 11th grade studies American literature, I also sorted out all of the American works, which I was happy to see were written by people from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Since my book club has just read a book that encourages teachers to teach literature dealing with relevant issues of social justice, especially in urban schools, I was also happy to see some of that too.

While I was doing this I got to talk with Mrs. Johns more. She described her experience working at a middle school. This school was meant to be a STEAM school, but many of the students who were selected to go there were not at all prepared. She described having some 7th graders in her class who didn't know how to read or didn't know multiplication tables. According to her, the district was using the STEAM school to get

discretionary grant money that could be sent to other schools. Mrs. Johns was glad to come from there to Classic City.

Near the end of fourth period a tutor who was working with a student had to leave, so I took her place. The student, Ke'ani, was taking notes on a video lesson and highlighting the parts that were bolded in the presentation, but she was also very friendly and chatty. She told me about her skills in stage makeup, and about the time she tricked her mom with a fake scar. She also told me about the college she wants to go to, and that she wants to study criminal justice. I prompted her to work on her notes at one point, but I tried to strike a balance between our conversation and her work, because the book my group had just read put a strong emphasis on listening to students and learning about their lives outside of school, and especially their dreams and goals, and to encourage them in those things. I enjoyed being able to do that today.

4/14/17

Today I came in knowing there would be another substitute for Mrs. Johns; what I didn't know was that there would be only four students. I think only one of them was even working on classwork. Two had full meals and the others had snacks; a couple were on their phones, and all were wearing headphones except for one who was engaged in conversation with the substitute teacher. So I was left sitting at the table with nothing to do for a little while. Maybe I should have offered to help someone directly rather than just being there, but instead I took the time to examine the bookshelf next to me.

The books on the shelf were a wide variety of works of American literature, which I've said before I've read much less of than I should. Looking at bookshelves throughout my school year and even now is always inspiring to me. If they're full of books I've read, they inspire me with pride in my accomplishment and remind me of the enjoyment of reading the books or the lessons I learned from them. If, like this one, they're full mainly of books I haven't read, they inspire me with the fact that there are always new things to learn and experiences to be had. On top of the shelf was a book of important quotes sorted by topic, and I spent some time looking through it until a student named Quindrick asked for my help.

Quindrick was working on English, on a short story called "Next Term, We'll Mash You," about an English boy and his family touring a boarding school. His parents like the school because of the prestige and status it offers to their middle-class family, but when the main character meets the other boys, they threaten and insult him simply because he'll be the new boy the next term.

I had a productive time working with Quindrick on his questions relating to this story. I've moved from just getting frustrated or stuck whenever a student is studying a piece of literature I don't know to being able to go through it with them and help them discuss it in order to find the answers. The story was written in kind of stuffy and polite early 20th century British English, so we had fun summarizing particular parts of it in our own language, something I'd seen Mrs. Johns do a lot with the students. It was really helpful.

4/27/17

Today was my last day at CCHS for the semester. There was a fairly small class today. I was worried that since I came on a Thursday instead of a Friday the class would

be different, but it was all the same as usual. During third period I was assigned to work with a student, but she seemed really unfocused and like she didn't feel too well, so I didn't stop her when she put her head down and fell asleep. When she woke up a little later, she seemed much better and more focused.

While she slept, I joined in with Mrs. Johns in working with a student on the poem "the Lady of Shalott." I've studied that poem a couple of times before and really like it. My instinct when discussing something I know about is to just dump all of my knowledge, but I've been learning to fight that instinct, to learn that teaching is about helping others to learn, not showing off what you know. I found it really interesting to watch the way Mrs. Johns worked through the poem with the student. As they went through the questions of his assignment, she would read the section of the poem that was discussed on her laptop, then help him summarize it, putting the more archaic parts into modern language for him, then asking him questions to guide him into summary and main ideas of the section. From there he was much more able to answer any question, having better understood what the poem was about as a whole.

As fourth period began I struck up a conversation with Nikki, and she told me she really wanted to get a couple of assignments knocked out so I sat down with her to help her out with them. She was working on her business and technology class again, and had an assignment that required her to write about a hypothetical business she could start. This was actually really fun for her. She asked me for clarification on some of the prompts, and we were able to have a fun and interesting conversation about the hypothetical restaurant business she was creating. She had some really great ideas and was able to express them on paper fairly easily. When I compare this to my first day with her, when she would not even try to brainstorm for an essay, I see so much improvement and I'm really encouraged. After she had finished with that, we started her online work with a business and technology assessment. It seems like this class deals with a very wide variety of business and technology issues and is really connected to the real world. During this time Nikki said she was happy I was still coming so late in the year, since most tutors had stopped once they got their hours. I explained that I couldn't really take credit for being a super-tutor or anything because I was still getting my hours. But it made me think about similar issues I'd seen at another tutoring site I volunteered at for a different service-learning class this semester, that had a lot of problems with tutors leaving once they'd finished their hours and having difficulty providing for all their students during the last few weeks. My other class offered extra credit for getting over the required hours; maybe it would be beneficial if this one did something similar.