TEACHING WITHOUT A NET: USING TEACHER NARRATIVES AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL TOOL IN THE QUEST FOR (UN)CERTAINTY

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ABSTRACT

Teaching without a net is modeling what it means to be a reading, writing, speaking, and listening person and the interconnectedness of lived experiences and using those moments as teaching tools and making meaningful connections to the central act of writing and reading. Teaching without a net means putting an emphasis on narratives and using them as integral parts of the classroom instruction. This work contains a definition of what teaching without a net is and then how it can be practiced by teachers in their classrooms. The work displays examples from my life—as a carnival worker, as person growing up in various religious communities, as a father raising small daughters, and as a colleague interacting with other teachers. All of these examples illustrate how teaching without a net can be utilized. Finally, this work ends with what challenges English teachers have in their current working lives, my perceptions of the differences between teaching English in high school and college—and finishes up with what possibilities exist for teaching without a net in terms of the Common Core State Standards.
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dissertations. Without your help, I would have been at my wit’s end.

Finally, thanks to all people who enjoy great storytelling. Stories can be funny,
serious, raw, instructional, and timely. However, the narrative tradition is such a resilient
and influential genre, and it is my hope that this attempt of using it as a teaching tool has
some success in other people’s lives—just as it has enriched mine.
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PREFACE

Origins

In November of 2008 when I finished my comps, my advisor, Hal Foster and I started meeting quite regularly to throw around ideas about what my work was going to look like. We met at coffee shops, bars, and restaurants. Not too bad considering Hal is such a great guy that he usually picked up the tab. In each of these meetings, he pushed me to think about what I was passionate about and what would be my mark in English education. We talked about various ideas, mostly leaning towards the qualitative branch of research. But in the back of my mind I wanted to do something that was theoretical, yet practical that teachers could really use.

I kept writing. And I kept reading periodicals, such as *The New Yorker, Mother Jones, Harpers, Esquire, Runner’s World, and The Running Times*. After reading essays from many of these publications, I would come away with the thought that I wanted to write something that would reach a wide audience just like these publications do. I didn’t (and don’t) want my dissertation to die, only to be seen by the five people who will put their signatures on the signature page and, of course, my family members who will feel like they want to see what has been consuming me for the better part of four summer breaks. As a result, I had an idea but didn’t know how to approach it.
After many of these conversations, I caught Hal off guard while we were at the Starbuck’s on campus, when I said, “Hal, I don’t want to do a five chapter qualitative dissertation.”

Hal gulped his latte (or whatever he was drinking), and said in complete horror, and perhaps with an appropriate expletive for this surprising revelation, “You want to do a quantitative study?”

And I said,

No. I want to do something that really reaches teachers in the classroom; that has a nice balance between theory and practice. I want it to take the shape of one of your books, or Mike Rose’s, or Tom Romano’s, or Jeff Wilhelm’s, or Lad Tobin’s, or Tom Newkirk’s. I want it to be something that a teacher could pick up—enjoy the writing—and use in their classroom. It will be a piece of work that is grounded in the current literature, with theoretical commentary all through it, which will mean many chapters will be the literature review. As a result, it will have a humanities bend to it and read like a book, with pieces of narrative, pieces of expository text, and pieces of persuasion. And, at the heart of it will be me, Matt Beery; a high school English teacher who writes about his life and uses those pieces of writing as a way to teach reading and writing—by modeling what it means to be a reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing person to my students and colleagues. And since it will do all of those things it probably won’t conform to the five chapter dissertation/research study format that many people use.

A short time later, we were back at his office and Hal put his feet up on his desk and dug his hand into a bag of pretzel rods, waved a pretzel at me, and said, “Yeah, I like it, but I have to tell you two things: first of all, I think in some ways, this could be harder than the traditional study, so keep that in mind. Secondly, you know what ‘Uncle Hal’s advice is to you to write something like that?’” [I sat silently, waiting for this great nugget of information, knowing full well he was going to answer it before I had the chance to speak] “You just sit in a chair and do it, so give me a call in 3 months when
you have an outline, and we will see if we can shape it up into this idea.” And that’s where this began.

Overview of the Sections of this Work

This work is broken up into three parts. The first part provides background information about my teaching. It discusses what type of student I was in high school, how I made my way to college, dropped out, only to return 5 years later, with a very different work ethic and set of goals in mind. The second part provides examples of what teaching without a net looks like. In this section, I provide essays and commentary about how and why I use these narratives from my life as well as ways to use these essays (or others like them) in a classroom. And the third part is an extension of where I think teaching without a net can go and how it can shape certain aspects of the educational landscape.

Each chapter begins with an introduction, telling the reader what the chapter is about and how it fits into this thread of (un)certainty that I have used to loosely tie the pieces together. After each essay, I have a “Passing Time Interlude” section. It is titled this way because it is “passing time” as in the time it takes high school students and teachers to get from one class or course to the next. In this context, I am moving from the essay and transitioning to showing classroom applications. And “Interlude” as in “Inter” = between; “ludus” = “play” or “game.” In my context, the “play” or “game” is the serious matter of teaching without a net. These sections are intended to be the break between my ideas and getting other teachers ideas to use in their own classrooms. In it, I review the example essays and set up the classroom lesson and/or activity portion of the
chapter. In addition, the “Passing Time Interludes” are intended to answer the “so what did I read that essay for” question, so a teacher could see how they could use an essay like the ones I have provided as lessons, activities, units, and create their own worthwhile projects. And then at the conclusion of each chapter I provide a section called “Reflections from the Field” where I discuss some observations about what has happened for me when I have used these essays as well as possible scenarios that could and have come up with each of these essays.

*Part I: Who I Am as a Teacher*

Chapter I gives a basic overview of my teaching and what theoretical frameworks influence my teaching, using a broad range of teachers, theorists, and scholars.

Chapter II tells my story. It begins with my challenges in high school as a student. And then moves through my early college years and progresses into the jobs that I found myself working when I dropped out of college. These jobs were a variety of shifts and times of day. I worked weekends, holidays, and all points in between. The purpose of Chapter II is to show where I came from and illustrate how my life has been shaped by school—and more importantly—my maturation into a teacher and budding scholar.

Chapter III defines what “teaching without a net” is and what it looks like in the classroom. The chapter begins with Carol Duffy’s (2008) poem “Talent” and then goes on to unpack what it means to teach without a net. Throughout the chapter, I answer the “who, what, when, where, why, and how” questions that come up with teaching this
way. Teaching without a net means putting an emphasis on narrative and allowing a teacher to read and write along with their students. This can be a radical shift from how other teachers think their classrooms should run. The purpose of this chapter is to define the concept and see what context I will be using for the subsequent chapters.

Part II: Teaching Without a Net (In Action)

Chapter IV is the first chapter where the reader is confronted with what teaching without a net looks like. In this chapter, “Teaching without a Net (as a Tour Guide),” I use an essay titled, “Carnie Life,” about a job I had for two summers, working as a fair and carnival concessionaire (i.e., carnie), where I sold French fries, lemonade, pork tenderloins, and cotton candy. In this narrative I give a detailed description to what a day in the life of this job was like. The chapter finishes with what kinds of lessons I build around this narrative. The assignment that comes out of this essay revolves around careers, jobs, and pursuing a life after formalized education.

Chapter V is titled “Teaching without a Net (as Em and Liv’s parent).” In this chapter, I use a narrative, titled, “Cell Phone Nation” that focuses on the use of technology and how “plugged in” high school students are—and how schools try to control students behavior with rules for this technology to ensure that they are using it in responsible and non-disruptive ways. As my essay points out, it is challenging to eliminate technology from students because they always feel as if they need to have their technology with them—even when it means hiding it and/or finding new ways of using it. Moreover, as teachers, we know they will need technology to survive in life after high school, so there is some tension between not stifling it completely, but showing
appropriate ways of using it. The end of the essay finishes by discussing the evolution of a new language that is being written through text, tweet, or email. And to wrap this chapter up, I stop to think about what technology my preschool daughters, Em and Liv, will be using when they become high school aged. And more interestingly, what words, abbreviations, or symbols will they be using to communicate with their friends and/or parents. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate that while teaching without a net; it becomes very apparent that many of the roles I find myself occupying begin to merge as I think about myself as teacher, father, son, colleague, friend. Technology will be a part of many of these relationships.

Chapter VI is titled “Teaching without a Net (as My Dads at Their Pulpits and in Their Offices).” The essay in this chapter is an essay about my upbringing in organized religion titled, “Going to Church.” In it, I discuss my involvement in four different church communities, starting in the United Methodist community, moving to a Foursquare Pentecostal congregation, and then my parents—along with three other families—started their own nondenominational church. After many years of not really knowing where I fit into all of this, I drifted away from any church community for 13 years, until I met my wife. Once we were married, we rooted ourselves and daughters in the congregation my wife grew up in—a place I felt at home with—at our current ELCA Lutheran parish. In this story, I use both my dad and my father-in-law as reference points because they are both pastors. I grew up seeing my dad live out his responsibilities to his church, and then when I got married, I saw both my dad and father-in-law both living out their vocations. The essay shows a glimpse of my faith journey, but it also shows how both my dad and father-in-law have to be kind, compassionate, and loving, even
when it means standing their ground and being direct with people they come in contact with each day. The purpose of this chapter is to show how, on many days, I have to do many of the same things in helping and working with many people as a teacher. The classroom activity for this essay investigates context and seeing the world from different perspectives.

Chapter VII is titled, “Teaching without a Net (with Colleagues Where This Could Get Loud).” In this chapter, I use the essay titled, “High School English Teacher Culture and the Complexity of Emotions,” as the centerpiece. In the introduction to this essay, I tell the story of a department meeting that was meant to be collaborative and helpful moment to discuss how we should teach research based writing assignments, in terms of aligning them with other people who taught the same sections. The chapter highlights how this meeting was supposed to be collaborative but turned combative and confrontational. What was meant to be helpful began to create divisions and colleagues got defensive and downright angry about how or why a teacher would teach any other way than what they were used to doing. The classroom activity for this essay revolves around change and when do you try new ideas. Also, the ideas of how to disagree and debate come up because, in the essay, my colleagues did not debate the issue. Instead, they attacked me personally while tangentially mentioning the assignment. The purpose of this chapter is to show that teaching without a net has far reaching influences on many people within a school building. If you teach this way, it will disrupt some norms and comfort zones for people, so some interesting conversations can burst forth (just as they might in a classroom with students).
Part III: Teaching Without a Net (and Where Do We Go Now?)

Chapter VIII is titled “The Educational Landscape.” In this chapter, I take a step back and discuss the challenges that teachers are dealing with, in terms of funding, class sizes, and time constraints. Additionally, I compare my two experiences of teaching in a university and then teaching in a high school. I don’t always paint a picture that is encouraging for high school teachers, because they are inundated with so many things that they must do within a day. Furthermore, I shed light on what a typical day looks like for many high school teachers. The purpose of this chapter is to reemphasize that high school teachers everywhere are doing really great things. However, they are tremendously busy and have to adhere to institutional constraints, so any kind of meaningful personal and/or professional development comes at a premium.

Chapter IX is titled “The Clash between High School and College English.” In this chapter, I try to dive specifically into what the differences are between teaching English at a high school and then what it means to teach English at a college or university. The purpose of this chapter is to attempt to show how each of these environments study many of the same pieces of literature and teach the same skills; however, the way it is accomplished is very different. Furthermore, there always seems to be a struggle between high school and college about where should students learn skills they “need” to have to succeed in college. Is it the high school English teachers responsibility—and college professors should assume that all of their students have the skills when they come in the door? Or, should college classrooms be another place for teaching and augmenting what students can do, even if it means derailing schedules and not getting to as much material because they need to teach a certain skill? I finish this
chapter with a discussion about who takes priority—teachers or students—in each of these institutions. And then how that translates into the business of teaching and learning.

Chapter X is titled “Teaching without a Net Moving Forward.” This is the final chapter of this work. In it, I try to discuss how teaching without a net starts in our classrooms, but if we become reading and writing in all aspects of our lives; what comes out of it is advocacy and being passionate about our professions. These moments of teaching without a net can occur many times through our lives. The intent of this chapter is to be a rallying cry for other teachers to get engaged in what they teach by reading, writing, and sharing these narratives with their students. And, what types of things would need to be put in place to ensure that teachers could nurture themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers. And finally, how teaching without a net connects with the overarching elements of the Common Core State Standards.
CHAPTER I
WHAT INFORMS TEACHING WITHOUT A NET

The core of this work is the concept of “Teaching without a Net,” which I came up with after many failed attempts and ideas being thrown at the proverbial wall. Essentially, for me, “teaching without a net” is similar to what John Dewey called “the quest for certainty”—or, more specifically—his rejection of the human desire to attain certainty. The idea of certainty is a precarious situation because many people want that because without it, their lives feel inexact, lost and/or scary. Dewey rejected the idea of attaining absolute certainty because, to him, certainty is only possible in the abstract, in the theoretical, and in the mind. As humans, though, many people continue to try to fit the ever-changing new world to our old ideas. But, according to Dewey (1929), it is the experimental realm of action where change and growth and situational solutions to contextual problems come.

Currently, teachers are bombarded with constraints that look to attain absolute certainty in all aspects of their profession. In the classroom, these attempts of certainty take the form of rigidly designed and implemented pacing guides as well as formative and summative common assessments. In teachers’ professional lives, the efforts of attaining certainty come in the form of professional development opportunities to understand the latest high stakes testing metrics, making sure they are adhering to
current standards, and then how to use new technology to collect the data that is generated in their classrooms. The word certainty is rarely used; however, all of these conversations have quantifiable data at the crux because it is the linchpin to the current attainment of stability, calcified correctness, and achievement (i.e., certainty). In theory and practice, data-driven instruction is an ideal situation and something that educators should keep in mind. However, the current environment is shifted too far on the continuum. And unfortunately, many teachers feel strangled and overshadowed because the never-ending pursuit of data squelches their best practices and the personality they bring to their classrooms. Throughout this work, I hope to show how teachers can resist and push back on the forces of certainty because this level of rigidness can only lead to dogmatism and petrified practices that lack fluidity and the aspects of what makes teaching and learning great, which the meaningful connections between teachers and students.

To push back on certainty in my context, I read, write, and share my experiences with my students, until I find something that is meaningful and allows them to have significant learning moments. That’s the first move. Secondly, throughout this process, I am constantly turning the critical lens back on myself, critiquing what I am doing, with the hopes that my students and colleagues will be begin to ask those questions of themselves as well (see Chiseri-Strater, 1997; Newkirk, 2009). Some questions I consider: Is what I am doing ethical? What expectations do I have of myself and my students? Why is it appropriate to model this type of writing? How does it resist or reveal my beliefs? How does what I am doing meet standards? For me, these are crucial
questions in my resistance to certainty because I want to model, to build understanding for myself, but, to also demonstrate to others that learning is not stagnate.

In teaching without a net, a teacher uses reading and writing in ways to connect with students, but to also, allow themselves to grow as writers and scholars, to perhaps negotiate their own voice, confidence, and (un)certainty in their teaching as well as have intellectually rewarding moments in their classroom too. In short, teaching without a net allows a teacher to search (in front of students) to get as close to certainty as they can for themselves in their pedagogy as well as, hopefully, create moments for students to succeed, not just on tests, but in life.

What makes this daunting, though, is with this type of pursuit, comes precarious moments of teaching and learning and of not really knowing how some lessons will turn out. When a teacher teaches without a net and reads, writes, and shares this way, lessons might succeed or they might backfire. In the current data-driven educational world we occupy, this is a challenging mission. Teaching without a net is a practical activity, where the teacher is learning alongside their students, for good or bad, as Dewey (1929) stated:

The distinctive characteristic of practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the uncertainty which attends it. Of it we are compelled to say: Act, but act at your peril. Judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious probability. Through thought, however, it has seemed that men might escape from the perils of uncertainty. (p. 6)

As Dewey posited, in any practical activity (with or without students) there are certain risks associated with a practical classroom activity—such as dealing with issues of class, race, political issues, economic status, as well as health and safety issues too. However,
according to Dewey, the act of doing is the only means by which we can test our ideas and develop/evaluate outcomes in the classroom. Thinking and/or theorizing hypothetical scenarios about what we are going to do only get us so far. Dewey (1929) wrote this much more eloquently than I can, that, “judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious probability” (p. 6). These thoughts are at the heart of teaching without a net, where teaching this way creates moments where I am unsure of the outcome. I am merely testing and negotiating my way through these precarious probabilities, hoping that there will be the potential for major learning experiences.

This marriage between “teaching without a net” and the rejection of the attainment of certainty in my classroom means using the narratives of my life as teaching tools, where I write along with my students, and then share that writing, to show students what the writing process looks like for me. It doesn’t always go well for me and I am far from certain about what I am going to create. Many times I produce awful rough drafts because writing for me isn’t the linear, calcified idea that the posters in my room depicts. It’s messy and painful, even for a person who likes it and feels pretty good about getting something on paper (or computer screen). Furthermore, the writing, I produce, is many times sub-par in its early stages and the content doesn’t impress anyone in the room. Invariably, there is always that moment where one of my students produces something much better than anyone else in the room (me included).

Another aspect of teaching without a net that aligns with Dewey is that the personal ideas and essays that are brought up in the classroom are all forms of data. These experiences can be observed, tested, and evaluated, which are all things that
propel teaching into dramatic spaces. In short, the indispensable tool for teaching without a net is personal experience because it allows a teacher (and students) to take what they have seen, done, or heard, and allows them to test their ideas and assumptions. As a result of personal experiences being shared and valued, teachers and students’ perspectives shift, which makes certainty an impossibility because not all people will see, hear, and come to the same understandings.

Origins of Teaching Without a Net

“Teaching without a Net” is who I am as a teacher. It isn’t an act that I learned somewhere; but rather, a purposeful part of my teaching that I acquired through experience. It is cultivated each day as I continually try to link the content of my class to my life and my students’ experiences.

In all honesty, teaching without a net was conceived by accident during my student teaching experience and in my first year of high school teaching. My first teaching experience was teaching writing with college students, so I felt pretty good about putting lessons together and teaching students why we write; how to write; and what good writing looks like. I enjoyed the interaction of watching students become writers. Their essays made me think about the world in different ways because of their experiences.

However, entering a high school language arts class as a student teacher was a bit different for me. For starters, five days a week, five sections a day, was far more than I was used to planning for and teaching. And at the end of each 50-minute class period, another group of 25-30 students would come in with a different set of needs and
expecting to get the same amount of energy as the first time I taught the lesson. My classroom felt like a train station.

Furthermore, I was now in a setting where the teaching of literature was king, as most of the curriculum revolved around teaching work from the American and British canons. This was new to me, because in my writing classroom, I used literature to investigate what good writing looked like by looking at elements such as the lead, focus, detail, textual support, dialogue, and closure. Literature was used as examples, during the writing process, as students created their own pieces. The high school classroom had a different slant and, again, the pace never let up.

So, at first, in my high school classroom, I navigated through the literature talking about each selection as a piece of writing; rather than focusing on the historical context, symbolism, and other extended metaphors that have seemingly confounded high school English students for centuries. During these early conversations, I went back to what I knew and talked about the literature from a writing standpoint; what does the writer do well? Why do you think he/she wrote it? Why is it considered literature? What has allowed this piece to stand the test of time? How does it reflect good writing?

These were just some of my early ideas about my teaching of literature. My next move was to talk about the writing process—and eventually my own writing made its way into the class as models. And as extensions to their learning, my students would write critiques or imitation pieces, based on what we had read, and we would share and discuss their writing in a workshop format. I followed many of the ideas put forth in the book When Writing Teachers Teach Literature (1995), edited by Art Young and Toby Fulwiler. Three chapters that stood out to me were “Breathing Life into the Text,” by

And here is the first teaching without a net moment when I had some problems with a piece of candy in my classroom and decided to write about it—and share it. And I have used this anecdote to entertain, inform, and to teach narrative.

Werther’s Hard Candy

For 4 years I taught composition at The University of Akron; 2 years as a graduate student and 2 years as a part-time adjunct faculty member. By the time I walked into a high school classroom, I felt pretty good about planning lessons and existing in front of students. I started to create my own high school repertoire and personality, but there are two moments that illustrate what teaching without a net can look like in transition from one lesson to the next.

I enjoy candy. Jolly Ranchers, Gummy Worms, Sour Patch Kids, and M & M’s are some of my favorite confections. My wife calls me a candy addict because she has found candy stashed all over our house in the linen closest, in my nightstand, and on the family bookshelf. She reinforces her point by saying that I am no different than an alcoholic who hides a bottle of gin in a ceiling tile or a six-pack of beer in the toilet tank. I’m not sure it is that bad, but there is convincing evidence in support of this issue—and my students have see what can happen when you love candy.

One day while discussing the poetry of William Blake, someone was nearly injured and almost died. Eighth period started just as it did on many days. I said good afternoon to my students while I took attendance, as they chatted and discussed how
their day was ending up. After finishing my clerical duties of making sure who was present and who was absent we were ready to begin. I walked in front of my lectern, pulled an unused desk towards me and turned it around and sat on it.

“Yesterday,” I said, “we talked about some of the basic beliefs of the English Romantic poets. We touched on Blake’s ideas of ‘innocence’ and ‘experience’ and messed around with some of the things in our lives that fit those definitions. Tomorrow, we will look at a couple of Blake’s works, ‘The Tyger’ and ‘The Lamb,’ and we will discuss what makes either of these works either ‘innocence’ or ‘experience.’ As far as today, however, we are going to look at two poems titled, ‘The Chimney Sweeper,’ so let me pass out this handout, and we will see what we can find. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?”

No questions, and at that time I climbed off the desk I was sitting on and made my way to the other side of the table at the front of the room. As I walked the short distance I found a Werther’s hard candy in the right hand pocket of my khaki-colored cotton dress pants, and I pulled it out quickly and unwrapped the golden yellow plastic and popped it into my mouth to aid me in my discussion of “The Chimney Sweeper.” However, at that very moment, the Werther’s candy got stuck in my throat and cut off my breathing, and I was choking.

I panicked and flailed my body around.

I firmly grabbed the lectern tightly with overly straightened arms with my fingernails digging into the lip of the upper surface of the wooden lectern. My eyes were wide open as I made horrible clucking and choking sounds. I looked out at my students and 22 of them stared horrified back at me, not knowing what was going on—and one
student sat pointing and laughing at me. I continued to struggle and thought that dying in front of my students would be a bad way to end the day for all of us.

While commotion began to swirl within the classroom, one student hit the “panic button” in the front of the room that went to the main office and told one of the secretaries “to get help, Mr. Beery is choking.”

The panic continued.

I started to get light-headed and knew that time was wasting and that the help from the office may be too late. Students were rushing up to me and offering to do the Heimlich maneuver on me; a small, blond-haired young lady named Tiffany who identified herself as a lifeguard grabbed me, just I grabbed the front of the lectern and jammed it into my stomach incredibly hard. I grabbed the front of the lectern as Tiffany grabbed me, and I did this twice.

After two firm lectern jams into my gut, the saliva-soaked candy flew out of my mouth and hit another student in the front row—and the crowd groaned. “Oh my God, sick.”

Shortly thereafter, as I was seated in the front of the room, my six foot five, 305-pound principal came bounding into the classroom and asked what had happened and how I was feeling. My students told the story to the principal with much laughter and hyperbole. Tiffany the lifeguard said, “I had your back Mr. Beery; if you didn’t get it, I would have.”
Connection to Choking and Narratives

Teaching without a net wasn’t fully realized, as I nearly choked on this precarious piece of candy; however, it was fully realized in the days after that as I told this story over and over. As I re-told the story, it occurred to me that my students were all listening. I told it differently from one class to the next, changing the order, adding voice inflection, slowing down some of the moments, and adding special doses of animation. And, I had them all—and they were laughing, crying, and wanting me to repeat certain sections, not because they didn’t hear it, but because they wanted to hear it again. I don’t know about other teachers’ experiences, but that doesn’t happen all the time for me. It was at that moment that I realized that this type of language interaction is what makes “English class” so wonderful. I had to add this to my normal teaching practices.

Over time, I gained confidence and shifted my pedagogy and started bringing in the historical contexts and extended meaning, by way of literary critics and pop culture commentaries. The one thing that was a mainstay was that I continued to write and share my own writing with my students in this same way. It became part of my repertoire and a wonderful blend of reading/writing/speaking where I saw students connect with me and an understanding of the literature. As a result, it quickly became common knowledge that Mr. Beery was the guy that would stop in the middle of Chaucer’s “Wife of Bath Tale” (or any other piece) and say, “Did I ever tell you the one where I learned the meaning of context?” Then I would proceed to tell a story about how to get into a lot of trouble for roasting a marshmallow. Or, I’d follow up with, “Do you want to see an essay that I wrote about Chaucer?” Then we’d look at an essay I had written in all of its
glory—as well as its sadness too. Having my writing and the stories of my life on stage for my students to see just snowballed from there. What started out as happenstance or spontaneity worked its way into my teaching on most days. And these experiences are still powerful elements to my teaching.

Teaching without a net started out as a survival strategy for my high school teaching. And it has been this technique that, I think, has allowed me to be successful in reaching a wide variety of students—from the highly motivated AP students, to the students who get D’s and F’s and hate school and despise most of their teachers. Being human and sharing who I am has allowed me to connect with all of these students. This has caused some confusion for a few colleagues, though, as they ask on some occasions, “How come I don’t hear students ever really complain about you? What are you doing in there?”

I don’t think what I am doing has any magical mystical qualities to it, but I would argue that at the heart of it is the power of narrative in my classroom. Each school year, 140+ students get to see and understand basic qualities of what it means to be human in the stories we share and read together; learning is a two way street in Mr. Beery’s classroom. Of course, this is not all we do, but it does do what the late Wendy Bishop called bringing “canon and community” together.

This high-wire act originated out of some rough experiences where I fell short, but then shifted my thinking and practice into an integral part of my pedagogy. I plan to keep refining these moments into purposeful activities that not only allow me to build community, teach reading and writing, but also allow me to have some fun in my daily
teaching that will allow me ultimately to create some meaningful moments in my life as well.

**Why Teaching Without a Net?**

As I mentioned, currently, many teachers feel as if their individuality and ability to be creative in their classrooms is being strangled and being heavy-handedly taken over by way of assessment protocols and multiple ways of collecting data. I’ve heard from more than one colleague that the pursuit of data overshadows who they are as teachers. Teachers feel like they are forced to “teach to the test” and to be perfectly “aligned” with their neighboring colleague so students will succeed on high stakes tests and the districts will collect good data and get positive ratings.

These types of feelings burn teachers out and make them feel like they are no longer unique individuals, but they are pawns, just parroting what they need to say and do for student success. I have heard teachers say that their feelings don’t matter, just as long as they get their students to succeed. I think that some of these feelings are valid; however, not all of them. Data and being aligned are important and can be beneficial. But, when the scale tips too far, where data is the only goal, and teachers are squelched out of being who they are, and not using data to drive instruction, it can become troubling.

And with all of this in mind, I wrote this work (and use teaching without a net in my teaching) because I think teaching without a net allows teachers to be creative, rigorous, standard-based, and data driven. I also think it can allow teachers to stay connected, kept alive, inspired, and invigorated about teaching. With all of these great
things come challenges as well. For starters, it requires a teacher to have a certain level of comfort in the classroom sharing their life. Furthermore, it might turn disastrous for teachers who are new to the classroom or who are in challenging environments because it may change the teacher/student relationship a bit. Of course, there are control issues as well because once a piece of writing is shared, students may receive it like you thought, or they won’t. Moreover, it could bring about reactions that are surprising; perhaps leading a particular class in new directions. In that respect, teaching this way and keeping each class working on the same thing does make the school day more challenging, but it isn’t unbearable, and it isn’t much different than other scheduling challenges that invade English classrooms (e.g., school pictures, class meetings, course scheduling assemblies, visits from guidance counselors).

What trumps all of that is that teaching without a net allows students to connect and progress at their own pace; however, that can be a scary proposition. By doing this, it allows for students to truly be engaged, but it also means the teacher has to give up some control. Flexibility is a significant part of teaching without a net. Within each area of study a teacher needs to surrender strict dates where units have to be completed at a certain time. Instead, focus on steps that need to be accomplished and not focus on the “that is what I always do” kind of thinking. Students can have rich, full experiences with language arts. As June S. Gould (2005) stated:

classrooms that are moving in this direction provide relevant, literate talk; real literature; spelling [and grammar] taught in context; and writing that grows out of children’s interests, experiences, and expertise. Worksheets, canned teacher-proof lessons, assigned topics, and language arts textbooks have no place in these classrooms. (p. 99)
In many ways this sums up my classroom, with the exception that, yes, I do find many uses for my language arts textbook, since it contains many of the literature pieces that we read throughout the year (i.e., *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*). However, my students read many excerpts from books, essays from daily newspapers, magazine such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, *Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, and *English Journal*—and hear podcasts from *This American Life*, *Talk of the Nation*, and CD excerpt readings from Shel Silverstein, Billy Collins, David Sedaris, and Tim O’Brien.

Teaching without a net allows students to come up with their own assumptions and ideas about the use of language in its various genres. Even though many of these publications and productions have a particular ideological bend, “I want students to discover that essays [and Podcasts] can be humorous, cynical, poignant, intimate, informative, persuasive, flexible, and literary[. . .] essays are written and read because we need to share our thoughts, our experiences, our voices” (Fosnot, 2010, p. 50). Many times, among high school students, they are exposed to so many different medians that they forget and/or think that written language is not as powerful as other pieces they see in their lives.

In addition, teaching without a net makes room for students to participate in selecting and defining what types of topics they will be willing to wrestle with. As a teacher, however, that means we need to be what Carol Jago (2001) called “able masters—teachers with a love and deep knowledge of their subject matter who can awaken the same in students” (p. 16). As a result, each year I have a different research topic, because each year my classes come up with what we are interested in; different groups of students come up with different topics. Within each group, however, I find
commonalties and craft a topic that will fit each person’s interests. This gives high school students ownership of their own work and empowers them that their choices do matter and what they do have to say is intelligent. For a teacher to operate in this way requires an extreme amount of flexibility of knowing themselves (as a person and teacher); knowing their students and knowing the school curriculum.

Along with the physical writing of these narratives, too, the content can get tricky. As I write and share comes moments where I am sharing about my life, putting my life on display, as an emotional, vulnerable person and that can be uncomfortable. My students will see me as a person who messes up some times, as I share my perils and challenges. But what I hope they see is the way I surge on because this practical activity has the potential for greatness, even at the potential erosion of certain boundaries in the high school classroom.

Still today, first-person narratives cause colleagues in English studies and education to feel uncomfortable. It is the most personal. It is the most visceral. And it is writing that is about a real-life person. And to some academics, it is disconcerting because they want writing to be more distanced and removed from the experience; a more of a third person perspective allows for introspection, without specifically identifying a particular person. A passage from Patricia A. Sullivan (1998) that I hold near and dear—and one that is quoted on a piece of paper on my bulletin board above my computer (that I will capture in its entirety for this work) stated:

But what are we defending ourselves against? Is our prevailing anxiety about narrative in the academy—the “personal essay” in composition, the case study in social science, the first-person account wherever it appears—really about narrative’s status as knowledge, its reliability, its representativeness, its applicability to other cases? Or do we fear what the
personal might be about? What an I might have to tell us if granted the same epistemological standing as an it or a them? Don’t we fear at some level what the personal might commit us to if we allow a self to speak in a genre other than fiction? (p. 240)

Sullivan’s contention speaks to me and has helped me in many situations while fine-tuning my ideas of teaching without a net. I have had colleagues at the high school I teach at feel uncomfortable about (my) first-person narratives, and I have certainly had university professors unclear and uncomfortable with such an emphasis on narrative as well. I welcome these conversations because, most times, while I am having these debatable moments, all parties involved are using “I” to convey their points. The first-person pronoun in their speech has “the same epistemological standing”; why can’t that occur in writing as well?

Even still, there are some areas of teaching without a net that present dangerous situations (not just tricky) to what I am suggesting, in terms of race, gender, class, subjectivity, and experiences. The challenge becomes trying to negotiate some of these contact zones. And, it takes recognizing who you are (as a person and teacher) as well as really knowing who your students are to see what will be effective. As Ira Shor (2005) wrote, the current education “situation calls upon us to invent creative, local, evolving knowledge’s of social class” (p.168). I would argue that this is also true of other sensitive issues that could come up through the experiences shared in class. Certainly, the current educational situation calls for a lot, but we are the professionals that engage in these topics and concerns.
The Theoretical Tradition of Teaching without a Net

Teaching without a net may seem vibrant, but a teacher will need to be mindful and need to work within the constraints (perhaps in subversive ways) to pacing guides, curriculum maps, common planning sessions, and assessment. I am not suggesting to undermine, disrespect, or misrepresent these constructs, but, perhaps, use them as a compass and not a step-by-step map. “My own journey through the curriculum invite[s] students to come along as fellow travelers and co-conspirators [. . .] critically examining the curriculum, in a sense, [is] our curriculum” (Ayers, 2001, p. 87). Teaching without a net gives a teacher a new perspective on curriculum—not to throw it out or tell students that it’s worthless. Rather, the main thrust of teaching without a net revolves around allowing students to learn from authentic moments and then asking what students need. The constant questions are: (a) what is the objective of doing this? (b) Who does it serve? and (c) What options exist?

In addition to the “quest for certainty,” John Dewey’s constructivism and pragmatism push and pull me in many ways because “Dewey was a philosopher of reconstruction” (Garrison, 2008, p. 15) and along with that contains a hybrid in using curriculum and pacing guides while also creating something else by using my students’ interests as guides as well to design meaningful activities. For Dewey, intelligence, especially reflective and creative intelligence, which both critiques actual conditions and imagines and constructs alternative conditions, is the key to freedom. We liberate and control ourselves by comprehending and controlling the world that conditions our conduct. (Garrison, 2008, p. 2)

This quote is important to remember in a teaching without a net classroom, but it also should be used in our dealings with the responsibilities imposed on us. If as teachers
(with our students) we can imagine reflective and creative intelligences throughout the year, it can prove to open up a vast array of opportunities. In addition, as teachers (trying to do all that is required of us), if we can both “critique actual conditions” (testing, scoring rubrics, pacing guides) and imagine and constructs alternative conditions (portfolios, holistic grading, re-envisioned curriculum) could be the key to freedom.

This freedom, of teaching without a net, comes with an exhilarating yet daunting dynamic. As a result, my class doesn’t always look like other English classes in the high school system. If my students had an opportunity to label my teaching, they may have a hard time. At certain parts of the school year my class resembles a social studies class, discussing sociology, psychology, rhetoric, and politics. Then a few moments—or days—later the topic of the day may be the ethics of stem-cell research or the most influential mathematical axioms and the language used to convey them. As Dewey (1938) wrote, “I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he find himself.” (Boydston, 1974, p. 84). Echoing Dewey, I see high school language arts teaching as serving all of these topics because it is a way of seeing the world and formulating intelligent conclusions and making language matter and seeing the interplay between society and themselves.

Furthermore, I agree with Dewey’s idea that “Interactive Constructivism emphasizes that democratic learning must never confine itself to one interpretive community. Instead, it must expose itself to many interacting communities of interpretation, imagination, communication, [and] observation” (Garrison, 2008, p. 11). For me, these interpretive communities are a wide variety of issues—other disciplines
within a high school, ways of teaching, social and cultural traditions and mores, political ideology, economic factors, and many others. My job is to get students to think about language and the power that it has in different contexts. Teaching without a net begins with observation, which, as English teachers “we need to be critical observers of such participation” (Garrison, 2008, p.73).

In terms of practicing teaching without a net (in and out of the classroom), I engage in my own hallway and classroom version of Donald Murray’s (1972) “Listening Eye” concept. Murray used this concept in a writing conference, where I have broadened this idea because I sit or stand back and observe and listen to each and every interaction in my classroom or in the hallways near my classroom. I want to know what my students are talking about; what they are anxious about; how they are dealing with the day. I don’t do this to be inappropriate; however, I do this to help understand who my students are and what they may be bringing with them to the experience of my English class. Whether the students in my classroom are arguing about who should be prom king or queen, or if they are having some challenges with the course, or if they are exhibiting something that is going on in their personal lives, these all have a tremendous impact on where teaching without a net will go that day (or even that school year).

I try to keep my quiet contemplations and observations inconspicuous or unnoticed. This behavior sometimes looks unresponsive and as if I am disengaged and not interested or overly patient with the people who are talking too much. However, when I feel as if I have seen or heard enough or someone’s position is being overshadowed, I interject myself; “I go to my students; I ask questions [. . .] I’m friendly, interested in them as individuals, as people who may have something to say”
(Murray, 1972, p. 70). I operate in this way to give them a space to stand and find their own way through what is important to them.

Sometimes, though, these moments of observation irritate my students and especially my colleagues as I “fade to black and lurk under the radar.” A colleague of mine actually confronted me on my actions, and at the end of our conversation shook their head as they walked away and attributed my behavior to my liberal educational ideals: “It’s all rainbows and unicorns, with peace and love for all in Beery’s classroom.”

This colleague wanted to see me being more vocal, critical, and prescriptive. But, in many of these situations, “I believe in democracy, civil liberties, and the rule of law. That makes me a liberal, and I’m proud of it” (Krugman, 2007, p. 267). I value the ideals of democracy by allowing each person involved having their say in a respectful way and that in turn guides my reaction and/or instruction. Of course, when I need to, I speak clearly and hopefully in a way that people will respect.

In addition to listening and acting appropriately, with teaching without a net, I know that there is a spectator concept to it as well because students observe *everything* a teacher does and says. It may not be course related, but a teacher’s actions are scrutinized each and every day, whether it is what they are wearing, what the homework assignment was, or how they conduct their classroom and relationships with everyone in the high school. High school students are perceptive and soak up far more than some people may know or care to admit. And, if teachers are willing to teach without a net, they need to be ready for this kind of inquiry from students. After all, students are simply using what they have been taught; many times it comes with a few surprises.
Among colleagues, when teaching without a net, it’s been my experience that others wish to engage in conversations to “toss some ideas around.” Generally, my colleagues are happy to share or come up with new or fine-tune new ideas with me. There are moments, however, when colleagues begin to resist my seemingly off the curriculum map approach— or “leaving safe harbors of those comfortable truths” that other teachers hold true and guide their teaching ideology (Carlson, 2002, p. vii). I don’t discount or discredit those colleagues who do teach with a net. Teaching without a net makes people feel out of control, but, keep in mind that teaching this way is always a work in process; a tinkering and fine-tuning of the process itself and always asking, as Kersten Reich (2008) does: “To what extent [do we] contribute to ‘facts’ seemingly coming from outside while we are actually involved in the process of creating them (Garrison, 2008, p. 73). In other words, as my colleagues, students and I are involved in the process of teaching and learning—and reflecting and focusing on our processes—we are constantly thinking about our thinking. I would argue that we need to be cognizant that we are not only replicating what is going on in the larger world. Instead, we are creating our own experiences with these facts in a way that is specific and contextual to our learning environment that can be taken to the larger society. What we do in the classroom does have an impact on the rest of the world because students will not always have a net when they get into the “real world.”
CHAPTER I

TEACHING AND THE HYBRIDITY OF MY LIFE

Introduction

This chapter outlines who I am and what experiences I bring to teaching and how I am not a pipeline student, going straight from kindergarten to graduate school in a lock-step fashion. I was not a driven student in my younger years. I never was labeled gifted or scored off the charts on standardized tests. Rather, I was not very good at going to school and as a result, my academic career has taken many different detours. I have stopped along the way; made mistakes, picked up the pieces and tried to make the best out of a situation, but ultimately found my way through a lot of trial and error.

My High School Woes

Even today, I find it a little odd to think about myself as a teacher. As a teenager I wasn’t the best student to ever walk into a classroom, which makes my job even more amazing, as I work with all “honors” and “AP students” each day. It seems like an entire lifetime ago and a totally different person too. Throughout high school, I struggled with trying to form an identity for myself. I struggled with trying to fit in with friends. I struggled in all of my athletic endeavors, coming in last in 800m and 1600m track events, or being pinned at more wrestling matches than I would like to remember. I struggled with how I should act at home with my family as my mom and dad were
creating and building a church community from the ground up, as we met for a while in a family friends’ basement, moved to an elementary school gymnasium, and then to a high school auditorium.

As far as high school academics, I struggled with doing my course work or asking for help when I needed it. At best, I was a B/C student. There were moments of beauty but they didn’t always last. It wasn’t that I couldn’t do the work; it was that I wouldn’t and didn’t do the work, thus forcing me to swim upstream in many of my subjects. I had my own agenda and revolution going on in my head.

In the middle of each grading term, I would try to intercept my progress report that was mailed home because many of my grades were in the C- to F range, especially in mathematics and science. Most times, I was successful in destroying the evidence and life went on without many more than usual grade confrontations. Then, when grade cards came out, I nervously waited for what grade I received. It was my high school’s practice to send the grade cards home with me, so if there was a grade that I thought would disagree with my parents, I had the entire 45-minute bus ride home to do my best to change them; make a “D” into a “B”; an “F” into a “B”; or add an extra line to make a C- into a C+.

If there was a grade I couldn’t change, when I got home, I always had an elaborate story produced about why it was not my fault. Many times, I created this story on the bus ride home or during the coming days before the grade, reports were produced. When I told it in my head and aloud, I tried to add just the right amount of inflection in my voice, and added just the right amount of crying and remorse. The consistent fact was that my grade was because the teacher didn’t like me, or because the teacher wrote
the wrong grade for me. Instead, they wrote the grade for the kid below me on the roster or they used a different grading scale than the school sanctioned one. It was always something, but not me.

This scheme of tampering and lying about my grades ultimately caught up with me when I failed chemistry during my junior year. Throughout the course of the year, I had changed all of the F’s into B’s, which made my parents think I was doing fine. Everything worked out nicely until two weeks before the start of my senior year when my guidance counselor called our house. Mrs. Krajik informed my Mom that I needed another science credit because I failed Chemistry for the year. My Mom pulled out my grade reports from the previous school year and compared what she had in her hand, as Mrs. Krajik read what the official school record stated. The deceit became clear and this revelation went off like a bomb in our house filled with yelling, crying, and disappointment.

I signed up for Chemistry and retook it with the same teacher from the year before, because my school, Northwestern High School, was so small; he was the only teacher who taught the course. I passed my second year of the same Chemistry class with a C- and thought the worst of my high school grade shenanigans were over. Not so fast.

U.S. Government class was what nearly prevented me from graduating from high school. For starters, I didn’t like my teacher, Mr. Yomboro. He was a strange individual who arrived to school each morning in a jogging suit, and he got dressed in his room. He made up nicknames for everyone in class, so all of our names would have an Italian-American feel to them. I was Beerylini, Beerymani, or Beerimano. Mr. Yomboro didn’t
comb his hair because, as he said, “it would just get messed up 20 minutes later.” His voice was gruff and his appearance was unkempt as he prided himself on the mantra, “pain in life is inevitable.” To say it mildly, I had a personality conflict with him.

To combat his oddities, I decided to respond by doing nothing he wanted me to do. I would plead the fifth so as not to incriminate myself whenever I was called on in class; I turned in blank tests, and I wouldn’t do or turn in homework either. I figured that by taking part in my own version of civil disobedience, it would show him that I didn’t respect him or the class he taught. I was taking a stand, and making a point that he couldn’t keep me from doing what I wanted, and I asserted my power. However, in early spring, the home phone rang, once again, and it was Mrs. Krajik informing my parents about how I needed U.S. Government to graduate and my (lack of) progress wasn’t helping in this goal.

A meeting was set up with my parents and me. The meeting was in Mr. Yomboro’s classroom and he showed my parents all of the assignments I decided to not do. My parents began to turn red, breathe hard, shake their heads, but they fully prepared to let me live with the decisions I had made—and make up the class in summer school, meaning I couldn’t take part in my graduation ceremony. However, Mr. Yomboro had another idea and asked me if I would be interested in a special project that would give me enough extra credit to graduate. Without knowing what it was, I immediately said yes; however, the task that was lurking behind his offer was mysterious.

Mr. Yomboro smiled and spoke with his rough voice and wild hair and told me if I painted the concrete walls of the gymnasium, I could earn enough credit to graduate. To this I responded completely horrified, “The entire gym?”
“Yep, every last wall, Beerylini.”

It wasn’t my proudest moment, but for the next seven weeks I spent my study halls, after school, and Saturday mornings hanging from a scaffold or climbing up and down a ladder with a dripping paint roller, trying to get enough blue and gray latex paint on the walls to fulfill my obligation. It was no fun. While my friends were preparing for prom and graduation, I painted the gym.

Early College and Working for a Living

In the fall of 1990, I went to a state university and took four courses—English, Zoology, Sociology, and American History from the Civil War to the Present. I went in with a new determination from high school, but, unfortunately, I fell into my old patterns very quickly. I thought I had a major, but that was a lie; I was just taking classes that looked fun, as I resisted any counsel to look at the course outlines for each major because that would require me to take classes that didn’t sound fun to me.

Somewhere in my mind, too, I thought I was majoring in becoming a plumber, electrician, or state trooper—all of which were not offered as majors at the university I attended. Even after my advisor told me that these were all occupations that I would have to pursue at other institutions, I kept pushing on, perhaps in a delusional state, waiting for the university to add these majors to their curriculum. This was my college revolution.

After a year and half of that kind of erroneous thinking, I dropped out of college in the Spring 1991 semester. I passed all of my classes with Cs or better, but I skipped a lot of classes and didn’t put much effort into my studies.
In the summer of 1991 I began my work as a midnight stocker/tow motor operator/store clerk in a grocery store. Initially I thought that this job would help me transition from college to another job, but it turned out to be 6 years of my life, where I stocked groceries during the night and slept during the day—and resulted in me being affiliated with that grocery company for a total of 14 years once it was all said and done, because I stayed on during my return to college and graduate school.

Initially, I worked 40-plus hours a week unloading semis; cutting cardboard boxes open and stacking groceries on a shelf, and then ordering grocery products for the next night’s shift. I made $10.15 an hour and had health benefits, vacation, and a roof over my head. All of it seemed like a good deal for me at 19 years old.

I had money in my pocket, got paid to stay out at all night and rode a Kawasaki Ninja 600R motorcycle. Life seemed great and what more could I ask for? I even decided to grow a mullet-type hairstyle many years after it was even remotely near being stylish, and wore a wide assortment of earrings in my left ear. My revolution was complete.

Each summer, though, the grocery company I worked for hired a few students from area colleges who were on summer break to help fill in for vacations or for the summer holidays. Since I was one of the senior members of the stock crew, I was put in charge of training and showing them what needed to get done and how to do it most effectively. For three weeks each summer, I trained people how to cut open boxes with a razor cutter, price the product inside, rotate the old product from the back to the front of the shelf, and to prefect the art of “working the product.” Along the way, we had
philosophy sessions where we would yell over the tops of the aisles and talked about life, ladies, and music, and what it all meant to us.

These conversations generally came back to goals, aspirations, and careers. Many nights I felt less than exuberant to have these conversations with the college students. I was afraid of school or anyone affiliated with one. I had had a sordid past with grades, and they were all aspiring to become doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, sports trainers, and business managers. And at the time, I was aspiring to work 40+ hours a week so I could collect a paycheck every Thursday. That was pretty much the extent of my long-range goals. On the other hand, these college students wanted to talk about books they had read, or what classes they were looking forward to taking in the next semester, or when they would be getting some real experience in their chosen field. I was interested in talking about what racing exhaust I was going to put on my motorcycle or what Ozzy Osbourne concert I was going to attend.

In short, all of the talk about school made me sad, mad, jealous and self-conscious because it always made me feel like I was not working to my potential in life and made me feel like I was not proud of what I did for a living. The store was a job and not a career, and the worst question in the world to ask me during this time was, “what do you do?” I hated that question and found myself trying to make it sound better than it was by using words like “point of sale merchandising” or “in store logistics”—especially when people dismissed my job as just “working in a grocery store,” or “being a stock boy.” I didn’t like that, but in all reality; it was the truth, but I was the only one who didn’t know that small detail.
Throughout our conversations, many of the college seasonal employees put pressure on me to explain what I was doing in life, by asking, “Where do you see yourself in five years? Are you going to be a grocery store lifer?”

At first I was defensive, dismissive, and downright upset. “Get the hell out of here; I have a great job; screw you college boy—all books and no work, must be nice! You guys just wait until you have to be out in the ‘real world’ out from under mommy and daddy’s money; just you wait!”

I enjoyed being around the grocery store employees and knowing the people who represented and filled all of the products from the outside. There was Larry from Keebler, who I used to talk about current events with and talk about his sons. There was John from Frito Lay, who used to change all the lyrics of the piped in Muzak into words that were never intended to be sung, which generally made me laugh. Of course, too, Tom from Little Debbie, who enjoyed discussing high school football as he supplied everyone around him with Fudge Rounds and other chocolate goodies. And Dan (aka, Lieutenant Dan from Forrest Gump) from Coca-cola, who used to bring me free shirts and coupons for my beloved Coke. And finally, Carl from Pepsi, who had the greatest laugh that was jolly, loud and full of the harshness of many years of smoking non-filtered Camels.

All of these guys were my people. They were my friends because we were all apart of a tough business and we had plenty to talk about. We talked about “working product” and “blown out shelves” after a busy weekend. We talked about rotating stock and new items. It was strategic and fun. But, along with all of the great people and the
wonderful work ethic that all of these people and me exhibited, what the college students said hit a nerve.

The Beginnings of “Mr. Beery, the Teacher”

I continued to have these feelings, but I started to talk to one guy named Brad. He was majoring in Sports Management, and he had an essay he had to write. I had always felt confident about my writing abilities, so we talked about what his topic should be or what would be a good angle to take with his essay.

Once he started drafting his topic, I would proofread his drafts. We had writing conferences during our night shifts and would sit in the company break room and discuss how to shape his writing—as our store-brand burritos and pizzas did laps in the microwave at 2:45 in the morning. We’d yell, laugh, share, argue, and compromise, and argue some more about his writing.

It felt good to use my brain in this capacity. In fact, it was strange, but I felt sad when he had to turn in his essay. What would we talk about after the essay was turned in? What would his professor say about it? Would we do okay? What if I screwed up his grade?

Two weeks later Brad brought his graded essay back with a giant red “A” written with a Sharpie marker on the top margin of the front page. The comments read, “Well written and thought out. Nice!” Along with my congratulatory handshake, Brad said, “I couldn’t have done this without you, Matt.”

That comment resonated with me.
During my 70 mile an hour motorcycle ride home from work that morning, it occurred to me that I could be going to college, writing my own essays, and earning a degree and not just helping other people get theirs. I nervously called three area colleges and asked for academic catalogs, financial aid forms, and a schedule of classes.

It took a lot for me to make these calls, because I was afraid that what I did in school before would come through in my voice over the phone. That was all I knew. However, now I had some newfound determination and a drive at earning a degree was my top priority. My plan was to go into school with a zeal that could not be tamed, but I was still afraid of failure. I had never felt comfortable in school. Never before had I felt confident about a test or an essay. I had always felt like school was a shot in the dark at a moving target. But, this time, I knew there was no choice in the matter; I had to succeed.

Later that day, I rode out to each school, when I was supposed to be sleeping, and picked up the materials I had requested—and scheduled appointments with admission advisors. For the next few months, I poured over the course catalog, looking at all of the possibilities.

The following January, 5 years after dropping out, I walked back into a college classroom as an experienced person and somewhat an academically battered and bruised 26-year-old college freshman. As I entered that first class, I looked like a small child going off to kindergarten, feeling nervous, and not quite sure about a thing.

During that first semester back, I took English, Math, Geography, and Western Humanities. To my pleasant surprise, I found all of those classes incredibly fascinating, and I began taking advantage of office hours with all of my professors to sit and talk
about their course in more depth, but also to talk about books, current events, and politics.

It quickly became apparent that I came back to college as an adult who was an advocate for my learning. I changed my major four times because I was interested in everything and had a hard time deciding what I should settle on doing. There were too many choices because my brain was fully engaged in absorbing as much as I could. My majors went from psychology to physics to astronomy to math, until it finally ended with English. It was the first time in my life where I was really applying myself to school work and seeing that I was capable of good things if I put my mind to it.

With all of the different majors came significant changes in me that were unexpected. I felt as if I was trying to make up for lost time, but I felt like I was sitting in neutral, revving the engine, trying to make up for the mistakes I had made in school in the past. I didn’t take a break and went to school all year around—fall, spring, and summer, too—at a breakneck pace with full-time schedules in each of those semesters, while I still worked part-time at the grocery store throughout the day.

After 2 and half years, I earned a B.A. in English, but felt like I had more to accomplish and more ground to make up, so I didn’t waste any time being out of school. I graduated with my BA in English on Saturday, and then I started on my MA in English composition on Monday morning.

During my Master’s program, I was offered a position teaching a freshman writing course, which gave me a graduate assistantship stipend and paid for my tuition. This was the first time I felt important in a professional way. No longer was I ashamed of what I did for a living; now I was looking for every opportunity to tell the world that I
taught writing. Even if I was a graduate student, the lowest of the low in the teaching world, I didn’t care. I was making a difference in peoples’ lives, and I enjoyed walking into a classroom and working with students to make their writing stronger.

One of the challenges in my college classroom was that up until that point, my formal academic background revolved around the reading of contemporary and canonical literature and the interpretation of it, so teaching—and the teaching of writing—were foreign to me. Writing for me, up until that point, had been a necessity to succeed in school and in my creative moments of my life. In terms of classroom expertise, I did my best to trust my instincts and to think about some of my worst experiences in a classroom with teaching, and I did the opposite. And in that same vein, I worked really hard at planning lessons and a culture in my room that would promote being smart, approachable, and fair—and my lesson plan turned into being my greatest classroom management tool. I over planned and thought through everything that could happen and put together a number of scenarios if what I presented went well, but most importantly, if it did not go well. There were, of course, those days when I was left standing in front of my class with very little to say and a small single thread of what we would talk about next, hoping it would last the rest of the class time.

My anxiety slowly subsided as I started to read and write more about the teaching of writing. Composition was a field that I wanted to know more about; my interest in it grew exponentially, but the more I learned, the more I felt at a loss. My appetite was insatiable.

However, along with the passion for something that was exciting and academically rewarding came the daunting fact and realization that I did not belong
there. I had nothing to say, add, or contribute. I was merely surviving, trying to read, write, speak, and listen to the theory and practice and trying to make sense of it in my head. The more experience I had with the composition discourse community, the better, but I was still not contributing. What gave me comfort was that at least now I could make some sense of it and could talk about it with other people in the field as I was exposed to many of the field of composition’s underpinnings.

I was instantly drawn to what is commonly called expressivist pedagogy. For expressivists everyone is a writer, people just need to cultivate the practices of what writers do. The expressivists are interested in self-expression through their writing. It was one of the first theories I was exposed to, which may be a contributing factors about why I was enamored with it. However, to say that the only reason I liked it was because it was my first would be inaccurate. I was impressed with a theory that encouraged writers to find their own voices, write what they know, and write early and often and without a filter with unrestrained passion. As a romanticized writer, I loved this because it was the way I had always felt about writing. I loved to write; however, what I wrote was usually criticized by editors and teachers, which discouraged me and sometimes shut down my writing. But, this was the first time I had a collection of theories, teachers, and thinkers who said it was okay to write and to make mistakes and then go back and fix them (see Elbow, 1986; Goldberg, 2005; Macrorie, 1985; Murray 1972). Perhaps I had heard this before from other scholars and teachers, but this was the first time it resonated so strongly with me.

Expressivism was something that I enjoyed and felt incredibly empowered to take by the horns and into my classroom and use as readings, activities, and essays. To
my students, the ideas of expressivism seemed fresh and different from what they were
used to writing. This made my class exciting, interesting, and rewarding for me to teach,
but also for my students to participate in each day. On many days I was only a few hours
ahead of my students—learning about the concept I was teaching just a couple days
before I presented it to my students. The excitement I brought to the class was just as a
small child finds pride in being able to do something new.

Donald Murray’s book, *Write to Learn*, energized and encouraged me as a
teacher in a demanding and rigorous, yet very accessible way. Murray, the Pulitzer Prize
winner and writing coach, spoke to me and was unrelenting with the fact that “writers
write” and they need to make time to perfect their craft each day. Murray came at
writing with intensity and a ferocity that I had never seen. It was contagious, yet
incredibly overwhelming. His voice challenged me first as a writer, but really challenged
my teaching practices, especially in terms of revision and meeting with students in
writing conferences.

Peter Elbow’s (1986) book, *Writing Without Teachers*, pushed my teaching into
new ways—taking Murray’s ideas as a pure writer and transforming them into classroom
practices. Elbow’s attention and almost religious belief in freewriting further solidified
that the first step in writing is getting words on a page, either written or typed.
Furthermore, it gave me a great deal of material to use in my classroom and helped me
come up with other activities I could utilize with my students and in my own writing.
Elbow also challenged me in interesting ways and brought forth the idea of how much of
writing can be taught—and how much writing is just tenacity and sitting in a chair
churning out as many pages as possible; the tension of “writing without teachers.”
Ken Macrorie’s (1985) chapter, “The Poison Fish,” from *Telling Writing* further augmented and made my writing and instruction all the more rich with his term “engfish, which is writing that lacks authenticity, truth, and honesty. Macrorie continues to argue that “engfish” is the type of writing that students write because teachers encourage and privilege it.

These expressivists encouraged me as a teacher, but more than anything, they affected my writing and the way I think about writing.

As I became more entrenched in composition, I strived to be a well-rounded composition scholar so my knowledge base was not limited. To that end, I came to the realization that I was never going to be able read and know everything. It was an elusive goal, though. The only thing I could hope for would be that I knew enough, and my thinking and writing considered multiple perspectives so my positions were well founded and considered by others in the field.

Nevertheless, as my composition wings began to take flight, I read criticisms of early expressivist pedagogy, particularly from the social epistemic school of thought that pushed on the ideas of authenticity, self, and truth. I liked reading these ideas and could see what they were talking about—and in many areas I agreed with the social epistemic thought. It was not that I was abandoning the early expressivists or wanted them to be disbanded, but, as I said, I wanted to be informed, so I could engage in conversations and debates surrounding these perspectives.

Essentially, I was trying to create my own academic identity, but this caused a great deal of disequilibrium in my thinking. I felt like I had to find a place to stand and assert my beliefs, but couldn’t decide.
The cognitive theorist branch of composition influenced my teaching too. It interested me how this pedagogy traced its roots to psychology and cognitive science, most notably Lev Vygostky’s and Jean Piaget’s contributions to the theories of cognitive development and developmental psychology. Early cognitive composition theory did a nice job for me, linking these sciences with composition.

Particularly, Linda Flower and John Hayes’ (1981) essay, “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” provided me with some interesting thoughts and grounded some of my thinking in the motivation for what psychological processes influence the writing process. Furthermore, the psychological theorists sought to outline the writer’s choice-making throughout the writing process, and how those choices constrained or influenced other choices until a final product is created. Janet Emig’s (1971) monumental essay, “The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders,” further solidified what the writing process looks like in a classroom; taking writing from just an idea in students’ minds and creating a finished piece of writing. All of these articles and ideas formed and informed me—and continue to today.

For all intents and purposes, I was doing what David Bartholomae’s (1985) article, “Inventing the University,” argues. I was trying on certain theoretical identities and seeing how they fit in with the academy. In short, I was trying to find my theoretical lens to occupy this space. I was comparing what I knew to what I didn’t know and trying to invent myself in this new community. This was an incredibly formative period in my life and had a huge impact on me as a teacher as well. Ultimately, I think that Bartholomae may set the bar too high with his classroom expectations, but the idea that we want our students to indoctrinate themselves into academia is something I could not
ignore. I was living through that transformation right in front of my professors and students.

James Berlin’s (1988) essay, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” did a nice job of putting many of these writing theories into compact constructs, which I think Berlin does too much and ultimately makes caricatures for these ways of thinking, teaching, and writing. Even so, Berlin’s work is a perennial work that helped me categorize writing theory and had a profound impact for me when discussing expressionist, cognitive, and social epistemic rhetoric.

As my scholastic maturation continued and I moved more confidently, I got really intrigued with Cultural Studies and its influences on composition. These were the first people who I read and liked who based many of their writings on Marxism or postmodern theory. These ideas added a new dimension to my thinking and teaching. Moreover, these ideas were the first that moved almost exclusively outside of the classroom. Many of their ideas were highly theoretical and not based in classroom activities or practical applications of what to do with students. Rather, these ideas were applicable theories that pushed and pulled on many of the institutional constraints educators occupy.

Henry Giroux (1999) challenged me in really interesting ways. Two pieces of work that I found extremely poignant were *The Mouse that Roared*, a book that describes the power of Walt Disney productions and its influence in culture, and Giroux’s essay, “Breaking into the Movies” (2001), which pushed me in ways that really intrigued me and allowed me to see that some of the media literacy I was using in my classroom could be critiqued in really meaningful ways. Stuart Hall’s (1981) piece,
“Notes on Deconstructing Popular Culture,” pushed and pulled my widely held assumptions on what types of ideas rest under the surface of popular culture. Both of these people helped me realize that it is not only okay, but it is encouraged in academia to resist and reveal the power structures in culture. As a result, I looked at cultural institutions and representations in a new way. It was enjoyable to participate in this way. Giroux and Hall had a huge impact on me as I developed writing assignments around their ideas, using TV shows, commercials, and movies.

Another group of thinkers that challenged my thinking and were closely aligned with the social-epistemic and Cultural Studies thinkers were the practitioners of Critical Pedagogy (see Shor, 1996; Friere, 2000; McClaren, 2006; Giroux, 1999). Critical pedagogues, based in Marxism, focus on the radical ideas of democracy, feminism, anarchism, and any other movement that attempts to define social justice. In this way of teaching, students are taught to go below the surface of the world they (think they) know and identify the root causes and contexts in which they exist. Critical pedagogy theorists believe there is a continuous process of what they call “unlearning,” “learning,” and “relearning,” “reflection,” “evaluation,” and the impact that these actions have on the students. Specifically, critical pedagogues are interested in giving voices to the students whom they believe have been historically and continue to be disenfranchised by what they call “traditional schooling” (Shor, 1996, p. 8). Critical Pedagogy is interesting me, particularly because they use narrative in different ways, but I continue to be concerned that the Critical Pedagogy ideology is too strict, rigid, and dominating in classroom application. It forces students to practice the ideology before they have a motivation as to why they are doing it.
Moving Away from Grad School and Part-time Adjunct Work

Two years later, I completed my M.A., but had no idea what I was going to do. It was the first time that I felt confused about being too successful in school—and having too many choices. My head was spinning and I wanted to make sure that I picked just the right avenue in life. And furthermore, there was a tinge of exhaustion in me because since I returned, I had yet to slow down.

I spent the summer of 2003 reading, writing, researching, and soul searching what it was I wanted to do with my life. I read great fiction, spent some time writing some of my own nonfiction, stayed in contact with people I had met at conferences, and traveled to see some family members in San Francisco. It was an exciting time for me, but I was anxious about what I should do.

I thought about going right into Ph.D. studies. I thought about going to law school. I applied for business writing and public relations jobs in corporate America. I thought about teaching English in Mexico, China, or South Korea too. All of these adventures seemed magnificent, but I stayed stateside and continued teaching as a part-time adjunct faculty member.

I quickly realized that being a part-time adjunct faculty member was no way to spend my professional life, being overworked, tremendously underpaid, and teaching too many classes, just so I could scrape enough money together to survive. If I did that for more than the 2 years I did it, I would become firmly entrenched as part of the academic working poor because I wanted to teach, but I didn’t have a state teaching license or a Ph.D. to get a position that would be higher paying and have some health benefits.
My personal life took a turn for the best too, as I started dating Kari, whom I had known all through my graduate classes. She taught high school English and talked to me about all of the wonderful things her career allowed her to do. I had the experience of teaching at the university level, so we had a lot of classroom experiences to discuss. Not only that, but we had the love of literature, learning and writing in common. Ultimately, my path led me to getting another B.A.—this time in English education with state licensure—and Kari and me getting married.

During my student teaching experience, I was offered a job and took it. Teaching is something that makes sense to me, but there are challenges each day. Each school year is different, exhausting, yet rewarding, which is one of the reasons I wrote this body of work.

My Vocation and Life as a Teacher

I have no doubt that my challenges as a student, as well as my work in the grocery business, shape the way I approach teaching. Throughout all of those moments, I learned what it means to put in a hard day’s work and work with challenging personalities and adversities when things don’t always go my way. There are many days I think about how I used to clock in and out of work and think about tackling my teaching as a blue collar worker, getting my hands dirty in my work. Not only that, but I empathize with students’ parents I meet who are working the types of jobs I once had. I share my experiences and can relate to their swing-shift schedules and working hourly. It gives me a different dimension to my teaching, one that has some street credibility and real life to it.
Along with that, I keep in mind that I am privileged with being able to work with other peoples’ children; to talk with them; to read with them; and to ultimately shape them into literate, thinking adults. This is not something that should be overlooked. Parents entrust me to spend hours, days, and weeks with their children, and this is something very special to me—especially as I see my small daughters and realize the impact that other influences have on students. Teachers are a huge influence on students’ lives—good or bad. As many people would agree, for those of us who have been in school for many years, we have had excellent teachers who made us think, energized us in the subject, and encouraged us to take on the world. On the contrary, we have had teachers who have made us feel discouraged, perhaps belittled, and ready to bury our heads. Both situations are tremendous learning experiences and what I take with me as I complete this work and when I walk into my classroom each day.
CHAPTER III

TEACHING WITHOUT A NET

Introduction

This chapter sets the groundwork for this entire work and introduces the concept of “Teaching without a Net.” This is a term I came up with as I thought about what it is I do in my classroom each day. Each time I thought about myself and my teaching, I kept seeing the image of a circus high-wire act; that person who walks high above the audience and/or rides a unicycle juggling fire. That says a lot about teaching in itself, but I thought about how it isn’t always a forgone conclusion (or certain) that that high wire daredevil will get across unscathed. I feel the same way about my teaching. As a result, I tried all kinds of activities trying to find my way through my teaching, and connecting with my students, but these ideas don’t always pan out, but sometimes they do. In this chapter I define what “teaching without a net” is and what my work is intended to do.

Talent

This is the word tightrope. Now imagine a man, inching across it in the space between our thoughts. He holds our breath. There is no word net.
You want him to fall, don't you?
I guessed as much; he teeters but succeeds.
The word applause is written all over him.

By: Carol Ann Duffy (2008)
Teaching without a net requires talent from a teacher, just as Carol Ann Duffy’s poem suggests. It means writing about our own lives and then sharing that writing with our students, as a kind of teaching as a creative performance. And telling these stories and making the content and experiences come to life as a curricular objective. That might be scary to some teachers because it means coming out from behind our desks and interacting with our students in revealing ways. Teaching this way means becoming even more human in front of our students and, perhaps, having some of the same feelings as our students codified—and showing some of our vulnerabilities. It means bringing students closer to the edge of that nicely divided boundary between our “personal space” and our “professional space” that many teachers keep at bay for most of their career for many good reasons. But what I am suggesting is personal and professional and a place where learning could take root for further growth.

Teaching without a net means, sometimes, laughing at ourselves, sharing our faults, mistakes, and follies with our students and colleagues. On some occasions, teaching without a net allows us to be the hero or heroine, but not always because life is made up of far too many moments where lessons are learned when plans go awry and our expectations are altered. Teaching without a net is an instructional strategy that displays a teacher’s love of language and connects that to their lives—and to their students, and to the material they are teaching. Teaching without a net is modeling what it means to be a reading, writing, speaking, and listening person and the interconnectedness of lived experiences and using them as teaching tools; making those meaningful connections the central act of writing and reading.
Teaching without a net means putting an emphasis on narratives from many aspects of our lives. I have shared experiences with first year teachers, administrators, and, of course, students because the context of a classroom is something we all share and can identify with as we exist in a high school. The one that follows, titled “Hershey Kiss” is another moment that is etched in my mind—and a story I had to tell and retell many times.

Hershey Kiss

On another day, my 10th grade class was working in small groups on a writing assignment. The students and their desks were clumped together around the room and they were working on giving each other feedback and talking with me as I made my way around the room. As I finished with one group, a quiet, slight female student called me over to speak with her. Stephanie was a mature, kind student. She called me over and said, “Mr. Beery, you have something on your back.”

To this, I wiped the middle of my back with my left hand and said, “Did I get it?”

Stephanie looked at me wide-eyed and with some horror, “No... lower,” so I brushed closer to my waist, which prompted Stephanie to whisper in a hushed hissing way, “It’s on your butt.”

Upon hearing this, I made a beeline to the hallway where there was a full-length mirror. I looked at my back-side and noticed a large, suspicious, dark brown substance firmly planted in the center of buttock—just as my small daughter’s pants looked when they had a dirty diaper that leaked. I closed my eyed, clenched my teeth, and thought about all kinds of obscenities and thought where did it come from? What the hell? All I
could come up was that a Hershey’s kiss from one of the handfuls I had at lunch fell on
my seat, and I sat on it. Even today, I don’t know fully what happened.

After trying to rub it off with drinking fountain water and a paper towel, it was
no use, so I walked back into my classroom, thanked Stephanie, and nervously made the
announcement to my class that I have a smudge on the back of my pants and I knew it.
The class period came to an end, and I noticed tenth graders trying to catch a glimpse of
the foreign substance as they exited the classroom, and I hid up against the corner by the
door.

During this first year of high school teaching, I traveled to three different
classrooms each day, which meant I needed to walk down a high school hallway (with
1600 high school students passing to their next class) to another location with a dark
brown smudge on my pants. I knew in the hallway that students in the hallway would
have no problem pointing and laughing at my wardrobe issue, so I carried my messenger
style leather briefcase strategically slung around my body, so I could cover the problem.

As I walked down the hall, I ran through my mind how I would conduct myself
so the next class would not see the mess on my pants. My next class, 8th period, was a
group of 12th graders, who I had already entertained by choking in front of them. They
would have really lost it and never would have let me live it down, so I resolved to keep
my back turned to them the entire 50 minute period. I rehearsed mentally how I would
move and conduct myself. The plan seemed perfect.

I arrived to the classroom with a minute to spare and put down my bag, grabbed
my attendance book and promptly leaned against the chalk board and shuffled back and
forth, side to side, talking with the students who had arrived early. One student was
talking to me about how a military recruiter had called him the night before; a young lady was telling me about a joke her social studies teacher told the class. Then the tone sounded which signaled the beginning of class and it was time to follow my uncover plan. I had a student close the door and all of my students were seated, and I was getting ready to start the day’s lesson, but then the door opened and walked in my associate principal, Dave, with a legal pad of paper and laptop computer in his hand. “Hello, Mr. Beery, I’m going to sit in on this class and watch you work today.”

“Shit, what do I do now?” My heart started thumping faster than it should, and my face filled with blood. My first thought was to keep with the plan. Then, I thought of something entirely different.

I walked front and center, said good afternoon and welcomed Mr. Broman to my classroom and told my students that I had an important announcement to make. This statement made everyone sit up and take notice. I started. “Ladies and gentlemen let me begin by saying, I am a grown man, and I do not have a problem with my biological processes. With that said, let me tell you that I have a large, dark brown smudge firmly planted on my butt, and it does looks like feces. It is, in fact, not feces, but it is there, and I know it. What I am going to do to start the class today is, I am going to stand here, turn around, and I want you to look at it and point and laugh at it as hard as you would like for a couple minutes. Then we will get started with our class period after we laugh at my expense. That way it will be out in the open and no one will be trying to sneak a peek and laughing. Here we go.”

I revealed the brown smudge and the howls of laughter began; the loudest, of course, coming from Mr. Broman, who was in the back of the room sick with laughter,
with tears freely flowing from his eyes, as he stared at the dark brown mess and tried to write my entire quote down in his report and his observation of my teaching and my class. It was a long year after that. I was known as Mr. “Hershey Kiss” Beery, and I even won a district-wide most embarrassing moment award for this incident—complete with a plastic spatula with twenty-one Hershey Kisses super glued to it.

Teaching with a Net and Current Literature

The “Hershey Kiss” episode is an example of a moment when we teach without a net. These episodes are unexpected, unplanned, and unscripted, but could be written and then taught as pieces of writing. Teaching without a net is a pedagogy based on a teacher’s life experiences—written or spoken—in the classroom, to make our lives apart of the teaching. These pieces can be funny, serious, sad, but can be a significant way to teach reading and writing by allowing students to construct knowledge.

Teaching without a net focuses on using narrative writing in powerful ways. It is a way for students to learn about themselves, their teachers, the society they live in, the power of writing and reading, and the impact they can have on the world. Teaching without a net does four things: (a) it allows student to see their teachers as real people with real life experiences as part of the class curriculum, (b) it allows students to see a piece of writing that is vibrant, full of details, and something they can access and work with, and (c) it allows students to have the opportunity to think about their own experiences and the meta-cognitive characteristics of writing and sharing, and (d) it allows students to construct their own learning as a result of these experiences. As teachers, we need to be consummate writers and then speak about our writing with our
students and use those experiences and writing as part of the class content; not as peripheral material. As Foster and Nosol (2008) pointed out:

modeling writing introduces student to the idea that writing isn’t just for them—teachers as well. Also, when teachers share drafts, students see that drafts aren’t perfect pieces of writing but rather a necessary and creative step toward the development of a piece. (p. 15)

In addition to showing students that writing is not perfect and that multiple drafts make up a piece of writing, the sharing of writing and those experiences teaches students (without a net) that teachers are not perfect as well. Teachers are people, full of lived experiences of successes and failures and those pieces of their lives make them who they are and what they bring to the classroom.

Teaching without a net could be scary and/or unadvisable for some teachers because it is a hybrid of personal experiences along with a merging of the more formalized curriculum. I have the privilege of being a white male with more than twenty years on my students—and teach in a suburban, primarily white school district. Being a male is an advantage; I don’t agree with it, but many of my female colleagues, say, “Yeah, that’s easy for you, you’re a guy.” I could imagine, however, if a younger teacher—especially female—tried to do what I do. Sadly, their authority would erode completely. Moreover, I could imagine if a teacher (of a different race/religion) tried to do some of these things, it could have the potential to create dangerous moments too.

Throughout these moments of teaching without a net, there are strong social class issues that arise in my narratives. These stories are who I am, and I think the master narrative is how I raised classes and made a better life for myself, which is something I hope to convey. I would argue that this dimension of my pedagogy gives me the ability
to connect with many different students. As Parker and Howard (2009) stated, “Using narratives to address these issues, however, provides opportunities for individuals [students] to look both outside and inside themselves to gain deeper awareness of the social and cultural class in their own lives and in the lives of others different from themselves” (p. 12). Part of teaching without a net is intended to do just that: force students to think about other perspectives and ideas, so they will be more sensitive and understanding of other peoples’ experiences.

More specifically, the narratives that you are about to read (and have already seen in the previous chapter) revolve around jobs I have had, my family’s involvement with religion, raising my own family, and having the resources and wherewithal to attend higher education—and have a career in education. According to Ruby Payne (2005), these are all attributes that give me middle class status because my “driving force [sees] work [as] achievement,” my “family structure [was] patriarchal,” and my “social emphasis [is] on self-governance and self-sufficiency” (p. 43). All of these moments come to light in the narratives you are about to read. However, if you dig deeper and rewind the tape of my life and look at some of the narratives, what strikes me is that at one time in my life, I fit into a few of Payne’s lower class status markers: “Education [was] valued and revered but not as a reality [;] humor [at work] was about people and sex[;]“social inclusion [was] of people [I] liked” (Payne, 2005, p. 42). It is my hope by having these different moments in my life, I can be more approachable and understanding to students’ and parents’ experiences because I have occupied different spaces in my life and can speak to multiple perspectives as a result.
Nonetheless, there is still the potential that a teacher could share too much, in perhaps, inappropriate or harmful ways, especially in terms of sexual activity/orientation, substance abuse, psychological issues, or other ideas that could be defined as they are in my state (Ohio in the 2005 HB 79) as being “unbecoming to the teaching profession.” Again, this type of behavior would be detrimental to their students as well as their teaching career. Even if it isn’t a serious infraction, at the very least, for a younger or less confident teacher, it could erode any boundaries in the classroom. For those individuals, teaching without a net may need time to grow and become part of their repertoire over time, slowly and in different degrees.

Once teaching without net is engaged, though, I would argue that this partnership has the potential to blaze new ground that veers off the typical path that teachers find in curriculum maps and pacing guides. These supplemental pieces from our lives have the potential to augment our teaching and make the classroom experience with high school students more of a genuine experience. As Howard Zinn (2010) stated just before his untimely death:

I have often wondered how so many teachers manage to spend a year with a group of students and never reveal who they are, what kind of lives they have led, where their ideas comes from, what they believe in, or what they want for themselves, for their students, and for the world. (p. 13)

As Zinn alluded, we need to make our lives part of the teaching and learning in our classrooms. Of course, these narratives would have to be crafted with great sensitivity and without the turning these writings into a confessional session in front of our students as a collective audience.
Teaching without a net creates experiences through seemingly ordinary narratives from life, perhaps shared experiences, that become learning texts that are part of the class, not just something in the margin: “we must bring nonfiction texts directly to our English classes and scrutinize, investigate, and appreciate” just as we do with canonical literature (Lindblom, 2010, p. 11). Again, these experiences allows students to connect with their teacher, even by using adversities and transforming them into positives and making the time in class with students dynamic, intelligent, and dare I say, teaching without a net, is fun (the other “F” word that sometimes circulates the halls of a high school). Teaching literacy is “serious business,” but “fun sits in English class every day, but she is quiet and can go unnoticed. Students are often unaware that she has slipped into the room and awaits an invitation to participate” (Romano, 2009, p. 36). My hope is to invite her to participate with the power of these pieces.

Another piece of teaching without a net that is something that is many times left in high school English classes, especially upper level or “honors” or “AP” classes is oral storytelling. Teaching without a net brings to the forefront what I call orature (oral+literature) by making the writing and reading of a piece of work a priority. Some teachers feel that extended reading out loud to high school students is juvenile and not rigorous enough. However, Newkirk (2009) discusses how reading and speaking are so vital to each other—because “there is no article of faith so secure in education as the belief that reading can be tested in situations that involve no social interaction” (p. 60). And the magic of having someone read their own work is a powerful moment. Newkirk argues that reading instruction and assessment metrics has shifted too far to being totally silent, largely because, perhaps, it is easier to administer. Another issue is that many
teachers feel as if silent reading and comprehension exhibits more independent thought. However, Newkirk points out that “to view independent comprehension as an end is to confuse the part with the whole; it is to fail to see reading as embedded in other language activity; it is to separate reading from its public uses” (p. 61). And in my opinion, reading aloud is something students need to hear and see valued, especially with some many medias dominating their lives; a significant moment with a person reading to them could be powerful.

Teaching without a net means embracing the contradictions with the processes of teaching and learning; really accepting and implementing “teaching [as] a stitched-together affair; a crazy quilt of odd pieces and scrounged materials, equal parts invention and imposition” (Ayers, 2001, p. 1). In this crazy quilt, too, high school English teachers do feel pushed and pulled and like chameleons throughout the year, depending on what time of year it is, what they are supposed to be doing with students, and what types of projects they are working on with colleagues. What I am suggesting is being cognizant of that change—as painful as it may be—and use it as a strength and designing reading, writing, speaking and listening objectives.

Teaching without a net means being honest and within yourself as a teacher, personally, pedagogically, and professionally. It means sharing experiences and telling stories to students and colleagues. It means making reading and writing matter by finding and designing pieces that connect with students and colleagues. Moreover, it means crafting and sharing an authentic voice in front of our students. I agree with Tom Romano (2009) when he stated that the “most appealing authentic writing voices provide substantial information, use narrative at least a little to make their points, and surprise
readers with interesting perceptions” (p. 34). It is my hope that all of the teaching without a net narratives I use meet this criteria.

And finally, teaching without a net is a pragmatic constructivist approach. It is pragmatic, meaning that it is not a pedagogy that is married to one ideological set of beliefs, either personal or social. And I need to point out that I am not forgetting, but choosing not, to put labels on these ideologies (i.e., personal = expressivist; social = social epistemic, Marxist, socio cognitive, feminist, cultural studies, post modern). Certainly, these theoretical lenses are present in my work and I use them together, even when they may seem opposed to one another. I am not suggesting that I ignore these lenses, but high school students are a sensitive population that has far reaching community involvement with other teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, and other community members.

In short, with high school students and using some of these words, such as Marxist, feminist, or postmodern there is the potential of being misrepresented because of other connotations that exist with these terms. Even though these theories are valid ways of seeing the world, a teacher could run the risk of having uninformed community members distorting these concepts into hurtful, conservative talk radio points “femin-nazi” or “teaching 10th grade Marxism” as a parent told me a few years ago.

The second component of teaching without a net is constructivism, which follows the tradition of John Dewey. It allows students to have their own experiences with a topic and then construct their own knowledge about a particular subject. It “means establishing situations in which students face dilemmas they find interesting and relevant to their own lives” (Fishman & McCarthy, 1996, p. 346). Furthermore, teaching without
a net forces “students to think for themselves, to be able to engage in the ongoing critical and constructive tasks demanded by the human condition” (Fishman & McCarthy, 1996, p. 346) and it “sets the conditions for doubt, ownership, and cooperative inquiry” (Fishman & McCarthy, 1996, p. 363). What makes these ideas significant is that they need to be reinforced, valued, and made to be a part of the classroom culture. It truly is “cooperative inquiry.”

To marry these concepts of Pragmatism and Constructivism, with teaching without a net, I use and expand on Lad Tobin’s (1993) ideas from What Really Happens in an English Classroom. I inflate Tobin’s ideas and contextualize them to show that based on how a teacher writes and presents their writing can bring a rich, full learning experience in the classroom. These specific pieces can be significant ways to teach various writing pedagogies, again, using these chameleon-type moments in our teaching to make meaningful lessons and units. The four aspects of teaching without a net are:

Chapter IV: Teaching Without a Net (as a Tour Guide)

Chapter V: Teaching Without a Net (as Em and Liv’s Parent)

Chapter VI: Teaching Without a Net (Sounding like My Dads at Their Pulpits and Offices)

Chapter VII: Teaching Without a Net (with Colleagues Where This Could Get Loud)

Setting the Groundwork for Classroom Practices

In each of the following chapters I show essays I have written based on life experiences that I use in my classroom, that students know they will hear during the
school year, and get passed down from student to student. “My friend told me you tell a
story about. . .” they say. In each of the following chapters, I explain the context of my piece, how I use the piece in class, and how I get students to begin thinking about their lives and then giving them the experience to write their own. Some of the jumping off points are small pieces and some are larger works. And most definitely, my intent in sharing these ideas and assignments is for English teachers everywhere to use these examples, rework them, and make them their own. At the end of each essay and chapter are “Classroom Practices.” Embedded in those questions are the words “personal” or “social.”

However, let me define these terms from current composition scholarship to explain the intended use, especially in the context of a high school English classroom.

*Personal.* The foundation of this term comes out of the early expressivist tradition based on composition theories from Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and Natialie Goldberg where writing is something that each student can do because everyone has something to write about. As Elbow (1997) answered in an interview,

> freewriting is one way to get away from this obsession with evaluation and quality. You’re just writing and you’re just inviting garbage, and you just write without stopping. I love freewriting because it helps open the door to their minds and finds things they didn’t know were in there. . . . (p. 201)
I’m looking for variety—a variety of audiences and writing experiences.
The main thing I’m trying to do especially with underprepared students is build confidence. (pp. 201-202)

In addition to feeling as if all students have the capability to write and they just need help drawing it out, early expressivists such as Elbow, Murray, and Goldberg focus on the writing process as
the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world. (Murray, 1972, p. 12)

*Social.* For the purposes of teaching without a net this term is a hybridization that encompasses much of everything outside of the personal/early expressivist perspective. My intent is not to diminish the other perspectives, but rather to use a term that focuses outside of the student, shows relationships and influences on learning and writing. The basic tenets of this amalgam concept stem out of the work by Karl Marx, Henry Giroux, Patricia Bizzell, James Berlin, Susan Jarrett, David Bartholmae, which broadly believes that society shapes consciousness, social and economic conditions, and what people believe and value. In terms of the student, “the self is always a creation of a particular historical and cultural moment” (Berlin, 1988, p. 489). And as a result of society’s influences, when students come to high school and college, they must “learn to speak our language” (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 134). Part of my job, then, is to acclimate students to this discourse community and allow them to find a space within it.
CHAPTER IV
TEACHING WITHOUT A NET (AS TOUR GUIDE)

Introduction

It may be a worn-out, highly cliché metaphor to say that a school year is a journey or trip, but there are many days when I feel like a tour guide, helping to guide students from last year, through this year, and to prepare them for the coming years in school and then on to their job. It isn’t to the point where I say, “Now, on your left you will find something very interesting; look at it quickly because we have to keep moving.”

In this chapter, I begin with what I believe is one of the most meaningful ideas of teaching without a net and negotiating certainty. Using stories from my life is a significant part of it, and when I write and read these pieces to my students, I keep what William Ayers (2001) stated:

Teaching is highly personal—and intensely intimate encounter. The rhythm of teaching involves a complex journey, a journey of discovery and wonder, disappointment and fulfillment. A first step is becoming the student to your students; uncovering the fellow creatures who must be partners to the enterprise. Another is creating an environment for learning, a nurturing and challenging space in which to travel. And finally, the teacher must begin work on the intricate, many-tiered bridges that will fill up the space, connecting all the dreams, hopes, skills, experiences, and knowledge students bring to class with deeper and wider ways of knowing. (p. 122)
Ayers’ quote is powerful and an ideal illustration of what control and sensitivity an influential teacher must have in their teaching and with students. The idea of telling stories and being a student with students—each of wrestling with our own lives—is an extraordinary idea and one that can get lost in pedagogical theory. The rhythm of teaching and realizing that disappointments in teaching are inevitable are both important to understand and work through. These are not tangible lessons that can be exclusively taught in a classroom. Instead, these are long lasting practices and ways of life that need to be nurtured and experienced. Nevertheless, with teaching without a net, I am either guiding students throughout their coursework, or I am guiding them through the pitfalls and challenges of life, whether it is friends, career goals, the culture of the high school or how to negotiate people who have different ideas.

These ideas crop up throughout teaching without a net piece that I use as my tour guide piece titled “Carnie Life.” In using this text the “tour” is the summer I worked as a French fry stand worker. I take my students through a typical day and what my experience was each day. In terms of class, it does display a moment in my life when I was “working class” or had “lower class” tendencies, according to Ruby Payne (2005) because “I did know how to move in half a day [and] I was very good at trading and bartering [and] I did know people who could get guns, even with a criminal record” (p. 38). These items are not mentioned, but if you peer deeper into the narrative and investigate the life I was leading, these elements can become apparent.

In the classroom, however, the “guide” piece is to talk about what goals students have; what kinds of jobs interest them; what kinds of working conditions did I have; what kind of working conditions do they want; how much money would they like to
make; how does job identify you as belonging in a particular social class, experiences from this, and I try to do explore some of ideas surrounding goals, jobs, and what their adult life may look like.

Fry Guy: A Day in the Life of a Carnie (Written June 2004)

For three summers, I was a carnie.

You know, the guys that travel from fair to fair, from town to town. I was that guy.

I had a scruffy look—mostly with messy hair, bad breath, unshaven beard, grease-stained jeans, white Nike sneakers and a Marlboro cigarette dangling out of my mouth.

Sometimes I found time to bark at men, and encourage them to win a prize for their wife, sweetheart, or daughter.

Looking at me now you’d never guess. I look like every other well-scrubbed English teacher, with neatly pressed shirts and pants, colorful ties, and dress shoes. But don’t despair; I’ve left my carnie days behind.

However, for three summers from 1988 until 1990, I enjoyed my days of partying all night and working all day, half dazed and out of control.

I was drawn into the life by a promise of having a good job for the summer, making decent money, and working with friends. In addition, I would be lying if I didn’t confess that becoming a carnie was also a bit of rebellion on my part against the simple, conservative life I led in Wooster, Ohio.
I was “recruited” for the “ tamest” of the carnie jobs—the fry guy. I worked 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, serving up fries, cotton candy, pork tenderloin sandwiches, onion rings, lemonade and soda from a red, white, and blue 24-foot trailer that was outlined in white lights that read “French Fries.”

Talk about a job that gave me some life experiences; life experiences that mom and dad probably never had in mind for their oldest son.

The hours that I worked were hard, and the conditions were sticky, slippery, and stinky.

A typical day for me started by waking up in an over crowded camper that sat on an 8-foot bed of a red Chevrolet pick-up truck. Our sleeping quarters were included in the job. The plaque on the outside of the camper stated that the maximum sleeping capacity was four, yet somehow we crammed six, sometimes eight people in—by doubling up in the beds or simply sleeping on the floor.

Where we slept resembled a mix between a bomb shelter and a dorm room. The walls were made of thin, dingy colored plywood, and there was usually a massive amount of food and clothes strewn about, as underwear, socks, t-shirts, empty soda cans, half eaten candy bars, cereal boxes, cassette tapes, and bubble gum wrappers were sitting on every flat surface available—and sometimes hanging from the ceiling.

Our camper had a shit-load of crap strewn about, like a Salvation Army bin vomited—as someone usually complained about the smell resembling ass, because, many times, it smelled like feet, gas, grease, rotten fruit, or good old fashioned body odor.
Each morning we climbed out of the hovel we called home, and we would stagger a mile to the public showers, which were usually located at the outer edge of the fairgrounds. On our journey to the showers, our wardrobes consisted of the clothes we slept in, which incidentally, were the clothes we wore the day before—consisting of a red “polo” type shirt that had our company’s logo on it, a pair of grease stained worn out shorts or jeans, a pair of red, white, and blue Nike sneakers—and most times—messy hair, a can of coke, and a burning menthol cigarette with our faces unshaven.

The showers were four cement walls with a rusty shower nozzle protruding out of one of the walls.

While showering, we would stand under the water wearing our sneakers because there was no way we wanted to stand bare footed on the cold, mildewed, crack-filled cement floor because we weren’t sure if it was contaminated with some kind of disease, at the very least. Nonetheless, the milky, lukewarm water warmed us, and we could feel the previous day’s grime washing off of us—and into the maze of sewer pipes below.

After we took our daily shower, it was time to open up the concession trailer for business, by assembling the people who would be working together. At each fair, a typical crew consisted of five people per trailer. We were given our assignments on a weekly basis.

The crew I was a part of consisted of four of my friends and me: Craig, Michael, Shawn, Dave and we sold French fries all day long, working 14 hours side by side.

At the trailer, the first order of business was to clean around the outside from the previous day’s business. Many times, along the white exterior fiberglass walls was
ketchup, salt, dried Pepsi and dirt speckles scattered all over as if some of our customers were rolling around, digging in the dirt like hogs.

After we cleaned the outside of the trailer, we started on the inside: cleaning around the deep fryers vats; polishing the sink with Comet; going over the counters with Soft Scrub—and making sure that all of the condiment containers (ketchup, salt, and vinegar), napkins, and the Pepsi tanks and carbon dioxide were refilled.

The task of checking the oil level in the fryers was dangerous. To do this, we would ignite the burners to high, which would liquefy the solidified grease. If each of the fryers showed that it needed more oil, we would climb around the back of the trailer and grab a white and red 5 gallon bucket of shortening, and we would begin spooning it out into the fryers until they were filled to the appropriate cooking levels.

Once the preliminary work was completed, we would start cleaning and cutting potatoes, so we could start cooking them into French Fries. All of this took about 2 hours to complete—from 10 am until Noon.

At Noon, we would open the heavy, white, aluminum awnings and start our business day. Depending on what midway (a fair term meaning street) we were perched on that day made a huge difference in how many orders of fries we sold. As in real estate: location, location is everything.

A concessionaire’s (or carnie) location at a given fairground is the same each year, but it is largely based on seniority and how many trailers you have at one fair.

The best locations (read: the most profitable) are on the midways near the games, rides or the grandstands, where most of the people hang around. People flock to challenging games (with cheap prizes), rides, and the grandstands where their favorite
entertainment acts do their acts—and many of these people get hungry after spending their money on stuffed animals and mirrors with naked women on them.

On the flip side: the least profitable locations are near the business merchants and agricultural displays. On weekdays from Noon until 3 pm we termed “family time” because most of the people who were there were with little kids or senior citizens.

During Family Time, there weren’t a ton of people who congregated around any of the fry trailers because they were mostly over by the rides, so the work for us was slow, boring, and tedious. We would typically have a small rush, but it was never a giant, angry mob of people. Overall, it was a good time to screw around and act like the idiots we were.

To make time go faster, my coworkers and I would lip synch to the radio or to a tape of our favorite Motley Crue, Poison, or Def Leppard songs. Or, we would yell at concessionaires near us. And when all of that got boring, we would invent dumb things to do, mostly in the form of practical jokes.

One prank was when we glued a Susan B. Anthony dollar coin to the pavement directly in front of our trailer with some super strong epoxy. From our trailer, we would watch—and count—how many people bent down and tried to pick it up. Many times men and women of all ages would pick, pry, and try to get it to come up until we all started laughing and pointing at them until we embarrassed them enough to move on down the midway.

Nobody could ever pick it up with their bare hands.

Another favorite hobby of ours was to dip our metal tongs (that we used to handle the hot fries) into the burning hot oil. After holding the tongs in the oil for a short
time, we would walk over to a coworker and graze the unassuming person’s leg with the tongs, giving them a burn. We would howl when the unsuspecting person jumped and yelled, “Ah shit, you assholes,” as a little blister formed on their leg.

We were cruel and bored—and that wasn’t a good combination.

Another activity that entertained us was adding “special” ingredients to someone’s Pepsi, since we were permitted to have as much Pepsi as we wanted.

When one of our coworkers wasn’t looking, we would add apple cider vinegar that was normally intended for the French fries, and we would fill their Pepsi up with it. We would laugh hysterically when we saw that person drink it, only to run to the back door of the trailer and spit it out.

All day long we would sell fries and make more. That was how we passed the time—second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day.

Typically around 3 pm we would, one by one, take our one hour meal break. Most of the time it was an exhilarating feeling to get out of the French fry haze to take a walk around the fairgrounds. It was exercise, independence, and mental stability. But also, it was a good time to screw around some more.

Around the fair, there are five types of people. The hierarchy, from top to bottom goes: local merchants, people showing animals, people who sell food, game guys, and ride guys.

As the list indicates, the most highly respected people are those who live within the community hosting the fair. These people are the ones who have real estate businesses, furniture displays, or car dealers. Or, they are simply the people who are showing their cows, pigs, horses, or goats as a part of a 4H project.
Conversely, the bottom feeders on the fair hierarchy are very different: the game and ride guys. These people are the armpit of the fair. They travel around in semi-tractor trailer packs, hauling their rides and games from one location to the next.

What’s interesting is the way game and ride guys interact with the public: they make sexual and profane comments as people pass their games. “Hey baby, nice ass; tell your man to win you a prize.” Then when people would ignore them, you could hear the game guy mumble, “cheap ass,” under his breath.

I did my best to stay away from these people, but there were always ride guys lurking.

One guy I remember was named Ron. He wore a black, grungy baseball cap that was too greasy to make out the words that were originally printed on it—but it appeared to be an advertisement for beer or something about blonds, redheads, and brunettes riding for free—and the bill was bent into an upside down “V.”

Ron’s teeth were brown and the only visible pieces of skin that were present on his face were stained with soot, as the rest of his face was covered with a black, puffy, scraggily beard.

On most days, Ron wore the same filthy black and white Adidas t-shirt with the sleeves torn off, which allowed him to accentuate the massive amounts of body odor that emitted from his body. His upper body stench could be compared to a mixture of vinegar, urine, moth balls and skunky beer—with a hint of smoke.

He wore ripped, tattered, wretched looking Wrangler blue jeans that had a silver chain working its way from his belt to his wallet, which was housed in his right rear pocket.
And his black, steel-toed biker boots were covered with many days of grime and mud—and the remnants of his own feces as one time one of my coworkers and I caught him shitting in the middle of the public bathroom—by aiming for a floor drain.

What’s important to remember is that fairs need rides—and most of the people who run them are not as disgusting as Ron; however, their work is mechanical, dirty, and mundane. More importantly, though, the assembly of a ride needs to be perfect because if it isn’t, it could spell disaster, catastrophe, or a lawsuit.

All of which are serious.

In addition to all of that, the major reason I stayed away from the ride guys was because of something I saw one night, when the fair transitioned into a counter culture that could be termed as a rampant bacchanalian event filled with large amounts of drinking, smoking, sex, and fighting—that lasted into the wee hours of the morning, many times until 5 or 6 am, making it directly antithetical to “family time.”

The event that I saw Ron do was something that could only be termed as wicked and brutal.

Since Ron had unlimited power, control, and access to his ride—the tilt-a-whirl—he could allow anyone he wanted to ride it. Consequently, during the course of his work day, he leered more than usual and invited certain people (read: pretty women and their partners) to come back after the fair had closed for his own version of a special ride on the tilt-a-whirl.

Ron’s normal procedure after the fair was closed was to drink cheap beer and strap (read: trap) a full load of riders into the tilt-a-whirl and then send them around and
around as fast as the ride will go—first clockwise, then counterclockwise, as Ron would tilt and whirl the passengers into misery.

As the ride would tilt and whirl out of control, the physical structure of the ride would hiss and groan as the hydraulics propelled the ride to great speeds. Ron would explode into a deep, evil laugh, and would yell over and over, while sipping on a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, “Fuck yeah, man! Faster! Faster! How do you like that, smart asses?”

This horrendous event went on longer than any of the passengers ever expected.

After Ron’s excitement was over, each of the passengers staggered off of the ride, if they could walk. Many of them were covered in their own vomit (or from their friends near them).

It looked awful—and smelled even worse—as everyone who got off the ride was crying and wishing that they had never met Ron. The only thing they could do was fall to the ground near the base of the ride and vomit some more—and wish to God that the world would stop spinning and Ron would shut the hell up.

Back at the French fry trailer: after my meal break was over, I knew that we were shifting from the family time to the busiest time of the night when large groups of people would come down to the fairgrounds to see their favorite singing groups, tractor pulls, or demolition derby.

During the busiest of times, we rotated the jobs within the fry trailer. Sometimes I would stand in the back of the trailer, grab large Russet potatoes with my hands from a large white Tupperware container, and thrust them through a hand operated cutter, which
cut them into the shapes of fries. I would then dump the fries into the closest fryer.

Cutting the fries sucked, as it was the dirtiest job in the trailer.

Cooking the fries required standing in front of the hot fryers and cooking the fries until they started to float in the boiling shortening. The fries that were farthest in the back of the trailer were the most uncooked. The object was to rotate each basket of fries to the front—and it wasn’t uncommon to burn yourself repeatedly through the course of the day.

The hardest job mentally was working the counter and taking orders and getting Pepsis for the customers. The counter was demanding because it was the point of impact, where the customers were in a hurry and demanded the world.

In addition to trying to pay attention to all of the orders that came in, it was hard to compute how much each customer owed. The company I worked for didn’t have cash registers. It was up to us to do the math in our heads.

One time I took someone’s order, provided them with the food, and when the man asked me how much he owed, I looked him in the eye, bewildered and confused, and I stated plainly, “I don’t know.”

My comment prompted the guy to grow impatient with me, as he yelled, “What the hell do you mean, kid, how much does my shit cost? I’m in a hurry.”

It was at that moment, my brain froze. I could no longer do the math and add up his total and make change, so I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed one of our giant, round salt shakers and started dumping salt all over the counter until it was thick enough to not see the counter anymore. Then, I began writing in the salt with my finger.
I said, out loud, “Sir, you had 3 large fries at $3 each, 1 large Pepsi at $2 and 2 small Pepsis $1 each—that will be $13; out of $20; your change is $7—have a good night.”

A typical night consisted of an 8-hour sprint that would go one moment where we’d be swamped with people screaming and growing impatient—and the next moment—every one was gone.

As it approached midnight, the greatest words to hear was when the owners of the trailer would call over the CB to, “clean the cutter.” That phrase meant it was closing time.

At closing time, we washed all of the tiny, sharp, interlocking cutter blades; took off and cleaned the nozzles of the Pepsi machine; and wiped down the counters, and turned off the fryers. Our closing routine was basically like our opening events in reverse order.

After closing the trailer, we would slowly retreat back, like a heard of exhausted animals, to our musty, smelly camper and collapse—either outside in a lawn chair or sprawled out on a bed.

Wherever we fell, we ate chips or cookies, and watched TV, as we planned a full night of illegal meetings. Or, we simply did what one of my fellow crew members, Dave, did, which was snorting crushed Froot Loops through his nose with a straw because someone bet him $20, getting ready for another day.
Passing Time Interlude

In this example, I provided an essay about a job that I had as a carnival concessionaire (carnie). The purpose was to give a behind the scenes look at what goes on in a carnival setting. Not only that, but it speaks to who I am. Jim Daniels (1998) echoes something I see each day, as he states, “I am arguably one of the most available and approachable teachers on campus. While I am no longer a member of the working class, my paradoxical teaching style reflects my background as a working-class kid” (p. 1). I feel that same way as I walk the halls of my high school—and most of the respect, curiosity, and approachability that I feel from students comes from stories just like this one (if not, *this exact one*).

What a teacher could do with this essay—or one like it from their life—is to develop a lesson and/or unit about work narratives, telling the story of what a typical day looks like for the students or their parents, if they wanted to extend it into an assignment like that. What I do with this essay is tie it into the *Canterbury Tales*, discussing what a job title says about a person or group of people.

Classroom Practice Using a Social View

1. Typically, not always, but I use this essay and topic during the introduction to the *Canterbury Tales* after we have read and discussed the prologue and what their jobs were and what Chaucer was saying about them. After reading this essay and discussing some of the jobs in the prologue, we begin with some of the basic questions about what, perhaps, Chaucer would have said about my job as a carnie as well as:

   a. How does society view my job as a carnie?
b. How would Chaucer characterize my job using direct and/or indirect characterization.

c. Describe what you (or society as a whole) understand as my working conditions?

d. What kinds of working conditions does society value? Same or different than mine here?

e. How does a job determine a social class?

f. Blue collar job or white collar job? What do those terms mean?

2. Moving from society to how students exist and see the world

a. What type of job do you want that you feel has a positive societal perception?

b. Realistically how much money do you hope to make?

3. Once we have spent a lot of time discussing all of these aspects about my job and what they hope to find in life, I bring in a stack of recent newspapers with employments ads and I have student go through the ads and look at what kinds of employment opportunities exist. I have each student select and cut out a job ad and mount it to a piece of paper. Then with that ad in hand I have the students do some research on the ad in their hand by looking up what the actual earning potential is for this job on the Internet in career databases or simple searches, answering such questions as what the working conditions are like; how many years of education are needed.

4. The last piece of this is to set up a mock job interview where each student (along with a partner) come up with a set of questions and responses for the job they have selected. And then they perform the job interview in front of the class.
Reflections from the Field

The “Carnie” essay and the assignment is generally an engaging and rewarding experience for everyone involved. However, there are surprises that come with essays such as this. The first surprise is that there are language issues that come up in the reading of the “Carnie” (or other essays) that need to be handled in a sensitive manner. Language issues give a nice entry point into discussing diction, but I don’t want to offend anyone, so I have handled this a couple different ways, depending on the class. Either I read the “PG” version or I simply ask if anyone will be offended if I read a piece with some strong language.

Another issue that comes up occasionally is that because this is a job narrative, many students will discuss what jobs they have had, or their parents or other family members have had. Generally, this is light-hearted; however, I have had a few students who shared that people in their families have been prostitutes, sold drugs, or work in other unsavory businesses. These occurrences are outliers, but they have come up.
CHAPTER V

TEACHING WITHOUT A NET (AS EM AND LIV’S PARENT)

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss how technology has infused its way into my high school classroom; and how it can be beneficial and disruptive all at the same time. In the central essay of the chapter, I discuss what I see in my classroom, but then I juxtapose it with my daughters, Emerson and Olivia, and hypothesize what types of technology they will be using in 10-12 years. In many ways, this is my chapter, where I try to tackle the impossible task of trying to figure out with certainty my role as a parent and the desire to hypothesize how my daughters will look, act, and behave when they are high school aged. Of course, most of these ideas can’t be answered until I have the experience of having teenagers.

In addition, I want to show that I do more than just provide written texts to my high school English class. I do want to keep up with and be able to use all forms of technology (iPods, Kindles, iPads, cell phones, computers, TVs, and films) in my classroom on a regular basis. However, my goal is not to use these pieces as an excuse to get out of teaching. Rather, it is to provide exercises, lessons, and activities that will enhance the literature, so my students will be learning something about themselves—and the world they live in.
Furthermore, I use various media experiences (or visual texts) in a different way than the usual “teacher plays a movie for the entire class period.” I resist that tendency because I want to accomplish more. First, I want to always use technology as interactive tools to teach the skills of analysis and critical thinking and reading by utilizing something my students are familiar with, so ultimately, I can create a situation where my students’ contribution to a diverse democratic society are not seen as something rigid or totally foreign—because they will be using pieces from the world, in movies, news clips, and TV shows.

Most noticeably, I use television, which sometimes can be seen as a genre that is dismissed by the academy because of its destructive nature of distracting students from reading and writing. But, as Bronwyn Williams (2002) wrote: “If we shut the door on television, however, it is clear that we shut out of our classrooms a broad range of students’ rhetorical skills and experiences, some of which can help them become better writers” (p. 6). As Williams’ quote suggests, there are many skills that television can assist in the teaching of reading and writing. By utilizing a medium that my students are familiar with, it gives them the opportunity to view something critically. I think this can be said about using computers as well because very few students come to class without some kind of prior knowledge of computer applications.

The danger or critique of being this flexible, allowing student to have such an integral part in their learning, and valuing so many technologies can be associated with emotional pleasure. Furthermore, some could argue that by providing that kind of “fun” experience to my students in the classroom, it does a disservice to them because “English class” is supposed to be torturous to be productive. Learning should be
uncomfortable, but engaging and supportive. Henry A. Giroux (2001) wrote that by giving students a voice in our diverse democratic society and in our classes, it also suggests recognizing the pedagogical importance of what kids [students] bring with them to the classroom (or to any other site of learning)[... as expanding the possibility of teaching students multiple literacies, as a part of a broader strategy of teaching them to read the world critically. (p. 110)

As both Williams’ and Giroux’s quotes suggest, technology is a great source to work in concert with stories and other experiences, which mold theory and practice together in reading and critical thinking. At first, during those first days of class, students may not see the connection between their lives and other experiences, but by providing a good conduit, through meaningful reading, writing, and speaking that provide the best instruction possible, students will see that they are and can be active participants in their society.

Em and Liv (and Mr. Beery as Father)

Ever since my daughters, Emerson and Olivia, were born, I can’t help looking at my students as someone’s son or daughter. It certainly gives me a different perspective on the students I meet each day and gives me a wider view of my students and their parent’s lives.

In addition, I look at my students and think: How tall will Em and Liv be? How will they wear their hair? Will Em be a writer? Will Liv be a basketball player? Will they be able to solve any math problems, being the daughters of two English teachers? But in all of this, I hope they are kind, compassionate young ladies and they have really nice friends and are respected by their teachers.

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I can’t help thinking, too, what will Em and Liv be wearing when they go to high school? I also wonder if I would let either of my daughters wear what I see (on people) while wandering around the high school? Or, when I hear the typical four-lettered language flowing through the halls of the high school, I wonder when one of those words will find their way to my daughter’s ears—and more seriously—when will they experiment with one for themselves? And then there is the question of romantic relationships, but I am not going to speculate any further because I think my point has been made: my daughters make me think about my teaching and the culture of the high school.

Technology is another aspect I wonder about because I see so much of it strapped to students each day. Whether it is their iPods they have strategically placed in their coats with the cord of their ear buds snaking their way to their ears. The Kindle or iPad reading devices that students use to read electronic versions of books. And, of course, the cell phone that is always placed in their front pocket or hidden in their purse that is a part of every part of their life.

These three pieces of technology leave me with the most questions because I think back to the portable technology I had as a teenager in the 1980s: a Sony Walkman. Yes, that was it, and I felt pretty lucky to have that too. However, now there are a multitude of portable electronic devices, but my daughters are too small to use many of these, so my questions go in all kinds of creative directions. Will my daughters have chips embedded in their heads and be in constant contact with their friends? Will they speak in complete sentences or use abbreviations and acronyms for everything? Will
they ever know the beauty of buying (with their own money) a CD and to read the song
lyrics in study hall? Will they still have a love of reading paper and ink books?

All of these questions run through my mind. But then, too, I wonder what kinds
of rules my wife and I will have to set up in our house for the usage of these devices.
Also, I think about how schools will react to these new technologies that could be
incredibly useful in everyday instruction, but there are dangers that go with each of them
too.

The reason I use the essay titled “Cell Phone Nation” is to discuss how prevalent
cell phones are in high schools. And I discuss all of the ingenious techniques that
students use to hide their cell phones throughout the school day. And the incredible
amount of savvy and technology literacy that is required in doing some of these tasks.
And furthermore, how language is shifting and changing into something very different.
And at the end of the chapter, I show how this essay works real well with the project
called “The Mirror and the Lamp,” where students investigate whether what they value
is either a reflection of the society we live in (a mirror) or is what they value showing us
the way (a lamp).

Cell Phone Nation (Written April 2010)

Cell phones are a ubiquitous part of our society. We see them in the hands of
people walking down the street; driving in their cars; riding their bicycles; and while
waiting for planes, trains, and automobiles. Cell phones come in various sizes of small,
smaller, and smallest and can function as a means for communication, the Internet, GPS,
and video and music players—and the uses or “apps” are seemingly endless.
They have even started to take unassuming and unexpected identities such was the case when I was hunched over the baby food aisle at my local grocery store. There I was looking for sweet potatoes, squash, and prunes along with another person doing the same. As my eyes made their way down the four-foot section of puréed food, the person next to me blurted out, “do you think that is right?

I responded with, “I don’t know, it sure looks weird,” which prompted my fellow shopper to look up at me and point to his hands free, “Bluetooth” device. I felt like an idiot; embarrassed that I responded to someone who wasn’t even talking to me. What is even more embarrassing is that this was not the first (or last) time I have done this.

Cell phones have made in person conversations very different. No longer do we talk to our close friends about what we did in the time we were away from them. Rather, many times, we talk about what we were doing away from them (while we were on the phone with them.) These conversations have shifted from describing what we did, to filling in the gaps because they know what we did, but now we want to expand on the imagery of the experience.

In the workplace cell phones have made it easier to be attached to our work. Supervisors and clients can now access us at any moment to discuss items that were typically saved for conference rooms and during presentations. Now, these conversations occur wherever each party can get to their cell phone. It keeps them connected, like a leash.

For teachers cell phones come with some troubling realities, especially if they give out their cell phone number. Certainly there are some practical uses for students to have a teacher’s cell phone number, such as being able to schedule practices or to notify
them of something important. However, with the simple gesture, there is no longer a
division between school and personal time. Cell phones transport these lives into one
entity as students and teachers now have each others’ phone numbers in their address
books. The good news is students can get a hold of their teacher; the bad news is
students can get a hold of their teacher.

Cell Phones in High Schools

Many high schools have instituted cell phone policies, but that does not mean
that students keep them at home. One day I asked my 11th grade students if anyone in the
room did not have a cell phone. Not one person in the room raised their hand. To this I
said, “Okay on the count of three, can you show me your phone very quickly and then
put it back in its hiding spot? 1—2—3, show me your phone.” Instantly, I saw 26
phones lurch out of pockets, purses, and pouches, wave at me, and quickly return to their
place of rest.

This did not surprise me, even as our high school has a pretty stringent anti-cell
phone policy, cell phones are pervasive, just as my small example showed. The
challenge, however, is keeping them put away and then if presented with one, following
what is categorized under the Nordonia High School handbook as “Communication
Devices and Personal Electronic Equipment.” The rule states:

While Nordonia High School recognizes that rapidly changing technology,
and our ability to access it, has become an integral part of our lives, its
uses during the regular hours of school operation via communication
devices, video taping devices, cameras, personal electronic equipment
(i.e., pagers, cellular phones, radios, CD players, headsets, televisions,
electronic games, digital players, etc) can pose a significant disruption to
the educational process. In addition these items are subject to unauthorized
use and/or possession by others. These and any other personal items that
interfere with classroom instruction, will be confiscated by the supervising adult and submitted to the appropriate unit principal. Consequences will be as designated by the Communication Devices/Personal Electronic Equipment policy outlined in the Student Discipline Guidelines quick reference section of this handbook. (Nordonia High School Handbook, 2010, p. 21)

As noted, Nordonia High School’s policy is for teachers, aides, and other “supervising adults” to be an integral part of this process. What is left out of this rule is the procedure by which “supervisory adults” should go about apprehending the device. As teachers we are instructed to ask for the device once, and if the student refuses, it is no longer a “communication device” infraction; rather, it is now an insubordination issue, which carries a different set of weight and consequences. This piece is the linchpin and where it can either end peacefully or turn volatile.

Generally, the phone is taken and the teacher and class can continue with their lesson and the work for the day. However, there are those instances where the apprehension of a phone turns into a full-blown mess, requiring class interruptions, principal(s) being called to the classroom and/or students being escorted to the office. The follow-up to the altercations, too, begins with witness accounts of what happened in the classroom and referral forms filled out to show that all parties involved followed the established code of conduct.

However, if the student gives the phone over on the first request, it follows these procedures:

The first offense is to confiscate the device (phone) and it is sent to the appropriate principal with the students name attached to it, where the phone will be kept until the end of the school day. At the end of the day or when the phone is received, parental contact will be made discussing the events that transpired. The incident is recorded for future reference. If the student has a second offense, the phone is, once again, confiscated,
parental contact is made, and the student is required to serve a Saturday detention from 8:00 until 11:00 am. Then, if a student violates this the third time out of school suspensions (OSS) ensues with two days of unexcused absences. The fourth offence results in four days of OSS; the fifth offence warrants eight days of OSS. And the sixth offense results in ten days of OSS. (Nordoina High School Handbook, 2010, p. 63)

What I “See” as a Teacher

It may seem extreme, but a chronic phone-using student could be expelled from high school. Cell phones are powerful devices in high schools. Anything that happens through the course of the day, from one end the building to the next is relayed through text messaging. There are very few love notes found in classrooms or in the halls. Students don’t need paper, pencil, and/or pen to tell that special someone how much they love them or want to break up. Instead, they send them a text and have conversations all through the day, within their 160-character limit. Even with such strict cell phone policies in place, students are quite ingenious about how to access and use their phones for messaging purposes.

One such example of subversive texting during school hours is the “purse barricade.” Young ladies will put their purses on their desk and open, while their phone is at the very opening of the purse. This location allows for the phone to be out of sight of the teacher and lets the student monitor the phone during class. And when they do get a text—or need to send something—they pounce on every transition of the class period, from passing out papers, walking over to help a student at the far end of the classroom, or turning to write something on the board to complete their communication. The purse barricade is tough to defend because the purse is personal property of the student and many times contains personal items that are not meant for public viewing.
Another tactic is the “Emergency Bathroom Run.” In this scenario, generally, the student impulsively and without notice announces that they must go to the bathroom to take care of an emergency that has just occurred. Sometimes students announce that they are going to vomit, have diarrhea or young ladies will point to their purse hanging over their shoulder that they have to have to go the bathroom to attend to “lady matters.” I certainly do not want to over generalize and suggest that all high school students are untruthful and that these issues do not legitimately present themselves, such as sickness or other bodily functions. I know for a fact that all of these things happen. However, I suspect that many students use the bathroom as protection and solace to complete their texting needs.

“The No-Look Hoodie” is one of the more amazing techniques used by high school students. To complete this skill, the students wear a hooded sweatshirt (hoodie) to school that has a large pocket in the front right around their stomach. The phone is set on vibrate and when the phone signals that a message has been received, the student will choose very carefully when to edge the screen out of the pocket just far enough to see the important message. That in itself is quite clever; however what is more amazing is how students send their response. While the student is “listening” in class, taking notes (with the other hand), or talking to the teacher, the other hand is hidden in the hoodie pocket, typing out messages without making any mistakes.

My Students Set Me Straight

One day I decided to tell my students that I was “on” to them and shared with them the hidden techniques that I just discussed. They laughed, but told me that I was
only hitting the tip of the proverbial iceberg; there are many more. I asked what other techniques they use all day long, and, of course, there was more laughter and some reluctance because some felt as if they were giving away too many secrets. However, they filled me in on some other techniques that go on throughout the day—while they are in all of their classes; sometimes sending 200 text messages a day! Here is a basic list with limited explanations of what each technique requires.

“Behind the back” is when the operator keeps the cell phone in one of their back pockets and then simply reaches back as if they are stretching and keeps the phone behind them as they text blindly.

“Gun in the back” is a technique when a person needs to text quickly with very important information. The person texting simply walks up to another person and says, “Don’t move,” and they text while their friend offers cover from the proper authorities. This technique can be accomplished blindly or while watching too. And this technique can be accomplished in a classroom or in the hallway on the way to class. Students seem to think this is one of the best techniques.

“Under the table” is a technique where the person texting will put the cell phone under the table and use it as cover. This technique can be accomplished blindly or with secretive limited sight.

“Book fort” and “The Note-taking Method” is where the person texting places a text book up so it stands upright, allowing the person some cover to protect themselves from being seen, also to give the impression that they are taking notes in class.

“Not too smart” could also be called the “blatant, don’t care if I get caught way” because is just doing out in the open in a way that the person texting doesn’t care who
sees them. The students who use this technique feel like rebels that live on the edge and enjoy the adrenaline of almost getting caught. Or, as the students pointed out, they know that for teachers to take a cell phone requires a lot of effort and paperwork and many times teachers will just tell them to put it away. Location in the building seemed to have a bearing (i.e., teachers with classrooms closer to the office were more likely to take the phone).

“Math way” makes it look like a person is working with a calculator and solving a complex math problem; however, they are actually texting with a tip of a pen or pencil.

“Can’t find what I am look for in my bag or purse” is for the person who can’t seem to find that one “school supply” to be prepared for class. For this technique the student puts the cell phone in the bag and acts as if they are look for something, when really they are texting.

After these students told me about all of these techniques to keep up their conversations throughout the day, I asked them what is so important that you have to do this all day long. To this, many students told me that it keeps them informed about relationships, homework, and what teachers are wearing or doing that day. Also, it gives students something to do because they are used to doing many things at once.

Another piece of all of these techniques is that students say within the first few days of school they observe the habits of a teacher. They watch what side of the room their desk is on or where they stand, sit, or walk when they are speaking to the class. Also, students try to get a sense of what would happen if that particular teacher caught them with their phone. In their minds, students rank their teachers and know what teacher will take the phone and start the punishment proceedings—and what teachers
will simply say, “put it away and don’t let me see it.” Students observe and come to conclusions very quickly about all of these aspects of using their phones and text accordingly.

**Conclusion**

Whenever I have these types of conversations with students I always let the students guide and teach me. Generally, I am the slowest person in the room because I don’t have the vast experiences with my phone as my students do. Sometimes I really don’t know and other times I act like the blundering fool who asks all of the wrong questions, to get a laugh or to get students to open up. Of course, many times, these lines blur.

The literacy skills that are involved in these techniques are creative, complex, and incredibly difficult, especially in terms of mastering their key pads. However, students tell me that the more they do each technique, the better they get at each of them. And, yes, they feel as if they have strengths and preferred techniques because they need to be in constant contact with their friends. Even if it is just to tell someone across the school trivial information about each of their classes and/or friends, they feel like they need to do it.

In terms of etiquette within each text, I asked students what ways of writing these very short messages conveys emotions—or what is the correct or wrong type of response. How do students know when someone is happy, mad, sad, sarcastic, or serious? Or, how do you know when you should or shouldn’t be responding a certain way? Overwhelmingly, students said, “oh you know.”
According to students emoticons are significant in letting a person know what emotion a particular text is intended to convey. However, there are underlying understandings, too, among the teenage texting community. One of the worse messages someone can receive is “k”—as in an abbreviated version of “okay.” Students tell me that if someone answers this way, it means they are mad, don’t have the time of day for you, and are blowing them off. This is the one of the worst said/unsaid messages a person can receive.

Another piece of texting etiquette is the use of acronyms and/or abbreviations such as “jk” (just kidding); lol (laugh out loud); ha ha (laughter); lmao (laughing my ass off); WTF?!?!?!? (What the fuck, always capitalized with question marks and explanation marks); hbu (how about you?); idk (I don’t know); nvm (never mind); bff (best friend forever); ttyl (talk to you later). All of these abbreviations are accepted and used; however, students say that a person doesn’t want to use too many of these too many times in a row. There is a fine balance, and the biggest offenders of using too many in a row are adults (i.e., parents who are trying to appear cool). “That is way uncool, Mr. Beery,” many of my students said. “And if you are going to do that; do it with your dorky adult friends.”

Passing Time Interlude

“Cell Phone Nation” describes a phenomenon that occurs each day in schools. One of the biggest challenges that teachers, administrators, and other support staff deal with are untethering their students from their cell phones, iPods, and other pieces of personal electronic gear that students bring with them to school. Students are very savvy
and know how to use it, which is a good thing. However, students do not know when it is appropriate to use these pieces of technology and that is where the rub occurs. As an “educator, [I] had to ask about [my] part in the creation of this behavior” (Garrison, 2008, p. 38). This is something I wrestle with all the time. I want students to use resources that are available to them, but with courtesy and respect. Yet, in the back of my mind, I think, “I am so glad I didn’t have a cell phone as a high school student; who knows what stupid things I would have done.” I attribute this last statement to the fact to why I connect with high school students because I am simply a 40-year-old high school senior who never graduates.

And furthermore, there is the issue of theft and/vandalism that comes with bringing these items to school. In many ways, that piece of technology, to them, is the students’ lifeline to the world (or so they think), so other students will use that device, generally a phone, as leverage. In fact, many students I spoke with stated that if their parent takes their cell phone from them, it is the worst punishment ever. Not only that, but a certain cell phone or piece of technology is looked at as a class and status symbol. This is something very important, and as teachers, “we have been reluctant to consider and include social class as a crucial piece for research, practice, and theory” when investigating usage and experiences with certain technologies (Jones, 2004, p. 462). This is something I did not do for this work, but it something that should be investigated at a later date.

The reason I use “Cell Phone Nation” is because this essay gives a nice entry point into the minds of high school students and what they value and deem important. Also, it is the introduction to a research assignment I developed called, “The Mirror and
the Lamp.” What I do with the information I gather from them about their feelings and attitudes about their personal electronic devices is to begin to talk about whether they think their feelings are a reflection of the society or is what they are feeling a lamp, showing our society a new way of living. The responses are mixed, but this is a great way to introduce this topic to them, so they can make a personal connection. It is a lengthy research topic essay and PowerPoint where students spend time reflecting, researching, writing and sharing what they have come up with pertaining to their topic, but what comes out of it is generally very good.

Classroom Practice from a Social Perspective

“Cell Phone Nation” opens the door to many issues that are incredibly important to high school students as they negotiate life in a diverse, busy society.

1. Write an essay using text abbreviations that you learned from the societal discourse community—then translate it into Standard English. Discuss the process of learning how to do this.

2. Values/Beliefs: discuss a party in text language by pretending to send one to your friends—and then send another to your mom. How does this language change based on these different cultural moments? (i.e., the difference between messaging to your friends and then your mom)

3. Economics/Ethics of the iPod: describe the economics/ethics of it. Who made it? What does a name brand say? What does the half eaten apple represent? How do you know? What purpose does it serve? Who values it? Who is harmed by it?
After reading and discussing these connected moments with cell phones and technology—and our connected experiences—I introduce the “Lamp and the Mirror Project.”

Lamp and the Mirror Project

Description of the Topic and Rationale

Throughout this school year we have talked about one of MH Abrams’ quote dealing with the way literature exists, informs, and influences society and the culture as a whole. As we have discussed—and we will find out—until the Romantics (Blake, Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge et al.), literature was usually understood as a mirror, reflecting the real world.

However, for the Romantics and for many contemporary writers, literature or writing in general portrays a nice combination of both a mirror and a lamp. Some would argue that writing is more like a lamp: the light of the writer’s inner soul spills out to illuminate the world about the topic. As a result of this information spilling forth, these pieces of work inform and show us the way—or inform culture to the point that it may have changed it and created a new way of doing things.

For your research assignment you will find a topic that interests you in its various forms of writing in books, magazines, databases, blogs, newspapers, etc. Your job will be to find this writing (fiction, nonfiction, graphic novel, drama, or other genres) and argue that, in essence, what you have chosen is a lamp for our society. Essentially, your job will be to choose a topic and create an essay—and eventually a PowerPoint presentation or class handout—showing the class what you have been researching. In your talk you will be showing us how your topic is influencing our culture.
Getting Started

Think about your life and our culture. Think about the essays I have shared with you from my collection. Topics could include: Reality TV shows; radio; Disney films; media experiences; video games; scientific advancements; women’s sports, environmental issues; health care issues; war; terrorism; peace movements; corporate greed; print journalism; school funding; political debates; a media outlet; shoe brands; clothing prices; recycling; iPods; cell phones; laptop computers, nature, or whatever. This is not a comprehensive list, but it is a good start.

For example, let’s say that you choose to look at the health care debate. For this topic, look at as many people who you can find who are writing (or speaking) about it in books, magazines, journals, podcasts, radio, blogs, or TV—and ask yourself some basic questions: 1) What is the debate? 2) Who is trying to make these reforms? 2) Who is against these reforms? 3) Where do the tensions exist? 4) More importantly for this project, how is this topic a lamp to our culture? 5) What does this debate say about our culture—and what is it shining a lamp on? (i.e., it says that we don’t have clear answers; we privilege money over peoples’ health; we don’t like change; health care lobbyists have tremendous power, etc.)

**Notice:** Realize that the last answers to this question could be the basis for your research. Also, this assignment is not to persuade your position on your chosen topic. It is not to take a stand and persuade your audience why your position is the correct one. Rather, it is to argue—or persuade—how this topic (in all of its complexities) is a lamp for our culture. What does your topic—and the subsequent writing and reporting—say about our culture? How does it make people act, respond, and participate in life? These
are questions that we wrestle with all the time throughout this school year with all of the various time periods we have and will talk about. These ideas are inescapable to get around in literature and life. Now is time for you to grapple with these concepts.

If there is something you are interested in, let’s talk. We will spend some time in class conferencing and trying to generate a topic because they are all around us. If you are unsure about what to look into, think about something you are interested in and then ask yourself: how does this topic affect how you think or see the world? How does this topic affect the way people around you think? How does this topic create new ways of doing things? How does this topic make peoples’ lives better—or worse? How does this topic describe what our society privileges and finds important? How does this topic affect you? Why do you like it? Why do you hate it? What do you want to do with this topic? What does your topic say about you or the people around you?

**Timeframe**

Our research project will not be a boom, boom, quick hitting, two and half week affair in the IMC. Rather, it will be a project that will last over many weeks, where we will still be working on our textbook assignments during the same time period, but we will also be spending a certain day each week reading, writing, or speaking about your topic. We will have deadlines, but it will be an independent study on your part to stay current. It will be apparent at the end of the process who stayed current and who procrastinated. Find something you want to research to keep you engaged.

Think of this as an independent study or thesis you will do in graduate school. Or, many colleges and universities have these types of projects that you do at the end of
your senior year during your undergraduate experience. The extended period of time allows you to really read and research primary sources and thoroughly throw yourself in this project in meaningful ways.

At the end of this process, we will have a small “Mirror and the Lamp English conference” where you will be required to put together a presentation to tell your classmates what you have been working on for the past few weeks. These presentations will be signed up for in advance and can be either a PowerPoint presentation or a class handout for the class to read while you speak to us for 7-10 minutes.

Parameters of the Essay

You will write a five-page (minimum) research essay that focuses on a topic that you feel works as a lamp in our culture. The purpose of this paper is to not only to increase your knowledge of the subject matter and your ability to analyze, but also to teach you the research process. You will be following the Modern Language Association (MLA) research format in your writing. This is such an important project and skill to learn. Only one student will be permitted to write about any specific subject.

Steps in the Process

“PROBLEM, PURPOSE, QUESTION, METHOD”

----a quote that Mr. Beery will say throughout this process

1. Locate at least 6 items that will serve as possible critical sources you MIGHT use to prepare your paper. These can include reference books, journal articles, magazine articles, database articles, or some research. Move away from just Google; it can be a good place to start but not a final destination.
2. Use and include the checklist (I will provide) showing me that the source(s) you are using is valid and respected. I will look at what you have and will be able to guide you if you have any questions.

3. Submit a one-paragraph prospectus identifying your topic and initial focus. We will talk about refining your ideas (like a funnel; going from big ideas to smaller things that will work for this assignment).

4. Read your sources, take notes, and figure out what you want to use in your work. Discuss with me how you can integrate your thoughts with the experts.

5. Create a working thesis—a simple statement about what your essay will include—and prepare your first outline for your paper.

6. Draft your paper.

7. Conference about the rough draft with me

8. Complete your FINAL paper

9. Prepare your presentation for our mini conference at the end of this process.
   (We will talk about the parameters of this later).

**REMINDERS AND POINTS OF CLARIFICATION**

1. I will adjust due dates if needed due to what we need or snow days, holidays, or just lost days.

2. All of the process leading up to the finished product will be in the third quarter. The finished product and your presentation will be in the fourth nine-weeks. However, both parts are just as important as the other.

3. We will have at least one day during each week of this process dedicated to the research, writing, and speaking about your topic. Generally speaking, you
will have deadlines throughout the process. Sometimes they will be each week or some of them will be a little longer periods of time. These deadlines are designed to chunk this process and to give you time to digest and interpret your work.

4. All work is due at the END OF CLASS unless otherwise noted.

**RESEARCH PROJECT SCHEDULE OF EVENTS**

Week 1: Research discussion and brainstorming of topics; discuss “problem, purpose, question, method”; begin gathering readings and forming ideas. This will be a time to look through books, magazines, journals, and electronic databases. You will be able to print and gather your ideas and sources.

Week 2: One page prospectus due and discussed with me. This will be a paragraph where you put your ideas of what you want to do in your research essay. Think of this as a mini, mini research essay—and where your ideas and research are leading you; continue reading and collecting pieces to use in your essay.

Week 3: Reading and/or writing conference to discuss where you are headed with this project (with Mr. Beery). At this time we will refine your topic and discuss where your research is going. Perhaps at this time you will have a draft in the works or ideas about it. We will shape it.

Week 4: Reading and writing day(s).

Week 5: Peer edit; feedback; Mr. Beery and the projector

Week 6: Rough draft due

Week 7: Editing exercise and final polishing
Week 8 (end of the 3rd nine-weeks): Final draft due. Due date will be announced when we get closer and can see the finish line.

Week 9 (beginning of the 4th nine-weeks): Begin creating presentations over your topic with Ms. Dillon.

Week 10 and 11: The Beery Lamp and the Mirror English conference

Note: If you are absent the day an assignment is due; it will be due the day you return. It is your responsibility to get your work in on time. I will NOT ask you for it. Because of the advance notice, there will be no excuses accepted for late work.

Printer problems are your responsibility and will not be accepted as a reason for late work. If you anticipate problems or have had problems in the past, I would suggest getting your work done in advance.

Reflections from the Field

This is one of the greatest units for me. It took a few years to develop this assignment, but the discussion about technology and their phones at the beginning is a great way to get students engaged. Each year I do this assignment, I learn so much about how powerful technology is in the hands of teenagers. Furthermore, students love to be the experts about something in the classroom and watching me goof up and say silly things always makes them laugh and roll their eyes. I hear a lot of comments like, “that’s something my dad would say.” Many times, I exaggerate how clueless I am, but it makes for a real nice give and take classroom.

One thing that is disconcerting for students is the format of the essay they will produce. For starters, the fact that they have total choice in their topic makes them feel
uneasy. I have had students ask: “you’re not going to give me a topic? Or, you’re not
going to have us choose out of a hat for our topics.” Also, the fact that they have to
conference and talk to me about their progress makes them uneasy as well, in addition to
the fact that many students are not used to a project that will last this long. It’s a great
project, and one that students always remember (and always find meaningful topics), but
it does come with some disequilibrium with it. However, in the end, there is a lot of
learning that takes root.
CHAPTER VI

TEACHING WITHOUT A NET (LIKE MY DADS AT THEIR PULPITS OR IN THEIR OFFICES)

Introduction

In this chapter I use probably one of the most personal essays from my life titled, “Going to Church.” It is an essay about growing up and is sensitive to me because it is about my family’s upbringing and journey of going to church and then creating a church from the ground up. The essay in this chapter deals with my personal challenges and grappling’s with trying to come to terms (certainty) with organized religion. Of course, I haven’t been able to accomplish this because my ideas ebb and flow and change and shift, but these are subjects I have wrestled with for the better part of 30 years. At the heart of the essay is my dad and my father-in-law, and I discuss how, in many ways, this combination has helped me make some sense out of where I am in this situation, but it’s always changing.

When I share this essay, my goal is not to indict and/or make anyone uncomfortable. However, I want to show them what power an essay about an experience they know well can do. In turn, when they do their own writing, I want them to feel as if what they have to say is valued, respected, and intelligent. I feel that topics such as my life, students’ lives, will, on the onset, nurture success in reading and writing, by allowing them the opportunity to manipulate and mold the text into something
meaningful—or locate themselves in the zone they feel comfortable occupying.

Perhaps, in life, students will need to hone their writing skills into something a little more prescribed, but once they begin thinking in the right direction (through the help of their peers and me), the skills of more formalized writing genres will come with practice. Overall, my goal is to encourage my students to do what Natalie Goldberg (2005) wrote that:

You must be a great warrior when you contact first thoughts and write for them. Especially at the beginning you may feel great emotions and energy that will sweep you away, but don’t stop writing. You continue to use your pen and record the details of your life and penetrate into the heart of them. (p. 10)

Taking Goldberg’s quote further, I want my students to see that their initial thoughts are significant and sometimes are the most important ideas to emerge. If somehow I can show my students how their lives are significant, they will feel comfortable and have a place to stand in their writing. I encourage exploration, and I want my students to follow what Joyce Carol Oates (2000) wrote, that:

The essay, in its directness and intimacy, in its first-person authority, have been categorized as formal or informal; yet it can be argued that all essays are an expression of the human voice addressing an imagined audience, seeking to shift opinion, to influence judgment, to appeal another in his or her common humanity. (p. xvii)

As Oates’ quote suggested, I want my students to see that their writing is powerful and can change peoples’ lives—but I don’t stop there. After discovering what my students feel and can do with their writing, I try to encourage them to think about their lives on a wider scale—as something larger. I don’t stop with emotional, empty statements because I want to empower my students into significant spaces in academia, so their writing is strong, and their voices are heard.
At the end of this chapter, I show how I use these techniques I have learned from my dad and father-in-law and have created an assignment of looking at diction, perspective, and the power of language.

Going to Church (Written July 2010)

*Beery Family Life*

Before I attempt to explain some of the things that I lived with and experienced with my family, I don’t want to come off as writing a “woe is me” sad story somehow making it out to sound like I had it so bad. Rather, I want to be very clear that I grew up in a great family, full of great relationships and people, and full of very smart, happy, wonderful people. My parents were (and are) truly giving, selfless people and their house was (and is) filled with laughter, love, support, and joy. As I grew up, we worked hard and played hard, too, as we took family vacations every summer to Niagara Falls, Wisconsin, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, as well as other places, driving in the family station wagon.

In addition, I saw both of my parents as being tremendously strong—and a true partnership in all facets of their lives, whether it was raising my brother, sister, and I or in their division of labor within their marriage. There was never a “wait until your father gets home” moment because my mom could bring the hammer in ways that more than took care of the problem. My dad simply gave a male’s perspective to the situation when he returned.

Their partnership continued when working outside of the home, too, when they went to their work places on time, even when they were sick, didn’t want to go, or were
energized about what they were doing. In short, my parents are two of the strongest, most independent people I know, and their role modeling and patience with me has had a tremendous effect on who I am in terms of work ethic, the way I think a marriage should look like, and pursuing ideas and causes that are important to me. To them, I will be eternally grateful, and it is with those thoughts that I explain some of the unique situations that make me who I am.

When I was around four my parents decided that it would be a good idea to take me, along with my brother, to church (my sister was not born yet). Neither one of my parents grew up in overly active religious households, so I think it was us kids that propelled my parents into starting this tradition, to expose us to a religious tradition. During those early years, we attended the Church of the Cross, which was a United Methodist community in Wooster, Ohio. There I was baptized, attended Sunday school on a regular basis, made friends, and learned about the Bible and its teachings.

During the summer, at Church of the Cross, my mom would go to a Wednesday morning women’s Bible study. While she studied with some women, I would run around with some of my buddies from church whose mothers also attended the women’s Bible study. We would get sweaty and run the halls, play tag in the sanctuary, or a little tackle football in the back yard, and generally take part in activities because we were left to our own rambunctious, unattended devices.

During one of these meetings, my mom met someone who went to another church, but came to the Wednesday morning Bible study at Church of the Cross, just to continue her spiritual growth with another church community. They had a son that my brother and I liked a whole lot and had fun playing with, and my mom and she got along
real well too, so a family friendship emerged with this family. Along with having very similar family experiences, they started talking about their faith journeys and how they felt about their respected churches. I can only suspect that a large part of this discussion was the fact that my parents were not too thrilled about, in their opinion, a lack of evangelism at the Church of the Cross. I don’t know if it was discouraged, but my parents didn’t feel like the Church of the Cross was fully carrying out the mission of the church by supporting many efforts to take what was taught in the church to the communities and the world.

As a result of these disagreements with the church—as well as—my mom’s discussions with her new friend and our subsequent friendship with the rest of their family, my family switched to a new church; the Foursquare Gospel Church. Most notably, this church was different in the way they worshipped (quite charismatic) and the way they saw their place in the world was different (evangelizing to the world). The minister—who my parents commonly referred to as “James E” shouted when he preached and his bald head turned red and the veins in his neck would bulge as he pounded on the pulpit. The first few times I saw this, it scared me and prompted me to ask my parents, “What is he mad about?”

To that question, my parents said, “Oh, no, he is extremely excited; that’s why he shouts.”

The service was full of clapping hands, sometimes dancing in the pews, a host of musical instruments (electric guitar, bass, piano, drums), and speaking in tongues and talk of being baptized by the Holy Spirit were common. Regularly, there was Langston Hughes “Salvation”-like altar calls with people being prayed for with the laying of hands.
and people falling backwards. In short, my family was now apart of the charismatic, fundamental, evangelical Christian movement, and I was smack dab in the middle of it as a child.

*Life Really Changes*

Respectfully and without being too dramatic, but the Foursquare Gospel church experience changed the trajectory of my family’s religious traditions even further. We attended church as a family at least three services a week: a Sunday morning service; a Sunday evening service, and a Wednesday night meeting. Many times, too, there were other adult meetings that my parents participated in and/or home group Bible meetings in different peoples’ homes. Sometimes we hosted these meetings, but many times, we were left home with a babysitter so my parents could attend. It felt like we, or at least someone from our family, was always at church or involved with something that was church sanctioned.

To me, this involvement in church changed what we talked about and listened to around our home as well. We always had dinner together because that was one time each day when we all could meet as a family. The conversations at the dinner table revolved around what we did that day; my brother, sister, and I got to discuss our days at school, and my parents got to discuss their days at work—my dad’s day job as a microbiologist and my mom’s job as a special education teacher. In addition to that, there was always some talk about friends from church or what activity the church was preparing to take part in. Current events were discussed some times, but there were many times I
remember discussions about how both Ohio senators John Glenn and Howard Metzenbaum were far too liberal, especially when it came to their positions on abortion.

Coincidentally, there was a bigger emphasis and analysis on what kind of music was played and listened to in our house. In many ways we went from hearing popular soft rock (Linda Ronstadt, John Denver), folk (Peter, Paul, and Mary), or Ohio State Band music to a shift to extensively praise and worship music, as my parents became members of the Maranatha music club, which sent new tapes each month filled with worship services and new praise music. During this shift, the music my brother, sister, and I listened to was scrutinized for its lyrical content; back masking, questioning the artist’s personal lives, and deeper meaning lyrically were incredibly important to my parents. One time, I remember having a family meeting to discuss the dangers of secular music because my parents heard us humming these tunes around the house. Kiss, Michael Jackson, Led Zeppelin, Queen, and the J. Geils Band were not publically viewed and/or listened to because of questionable content. Rather, Christian “rock” bands such as Petra, Stryper, and the Rez Band were encouraged. These bands used the same rhymes, guitar riffs, and vocal styles of secular bands, but the messages were based in Bible scripture, even if they were loosely based, such as Stryper using Isaiah 53:5, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (King James Version). Of course, this didn’t mean my brother, sister and I dismissed the other music that we listened to at school or at our friends’ houses; rather, we had to listen to it in secret, get cassette tapes made from friends or listened to the radios in our rooms at low volumes.
In addition to music, the way my family celebrated Halloween changed at this time as well. Up until this point we dressed up in costumes, went trick or treating, and took part in school Halloween parties. I remember dressing up as a cowboy, a clown, and football player on many occasions. And I remember my dad going to a costume party as Zorro, with a black mask and sword. However, when I was around the age of 8, the phrase “celebrating Halloween” changed in the way it was said around the house; now it was said in a slow, raspy whisper. And when it was talked about, it was not taken lightly; celebrating Halloween was something that pulled unsuspecting people in and did very bad things to them.

My parents stopped celebrating Halloween because they felt like there was too much of an emphasis on wicked and evil ideas that could be attributed to the devil. For them, Halloween was a gateway for evil spirits to get their claws into unsuspecting people with a fun activity filled with candy and dressing up first, but the spiritual undertow was a powerful force. Because of this belief, when my elementary class had a special Halloween party or activity, I was generally sequestered to another room with the Jehovah’s Witness students, or I was pulled out of school for that portion of the day.

One time, I remember, when I was at school, I tried to take part in the activity and “forgot” to go to my special room while the class was making their Halloween craft. That day our class was using Styrofoam to carve out jack-o-lanterns and skeletons with little wooden sticks, then we would dip our carved out creations in little bowls of paint and then press them on a piece of construction paper, making an orange Halloween print. In my subversive, under the radar way, I made a happy jack-o-lantern who was smiling; and I made a skeleton that was waving and saying “hi.” I thought that this was okay
because neither of my creations were scary, evil, nor hurting anyone. However, when I
took them home I was told in no uncertain terms that what I created was still a part of the
evils of Halloween and I shouldn’t have made them.

**Breaking Away and Starting Fresh**

We went to the Foursquare Gospel Church for 5+ years until a great change in
the leadership structure occurred and the senior pastor wanted the associates and other
lay people who helped him to step down because he felt like God was telling him that he
needed to lead by himself. At the time my dad was moving his way up the leadership
ranks, filling the role of one of the eight elders and cell group leaders, so this change in
the leadership structure affected him. More seriously, though, it put a large fracture in
the church, and as a result, some of the congregation moved to other church
communities in town.

I was 11 years old when all of this occurred, and my parents, along with four
other couples decided to do something entirely different: *they left Foursquare and
started their own church*. In the weeks leading up to the big break-up, my parents
instructed my brother, sister and I to not speak about it until the formal separation had
occurred. Eventually the move happened, and we held our first church meeting in the
basement of one of the other separating family’s house. It wasn’t simply going to
someone’s house as a church home group; rather, it was going to *church* in someone’s
house. That first Sunday, there were 13 people present and this was the first meeting of
the church that would be officially known at that time as Wooster Christian Community.
There was even a large wooden, yellow and blue sign made that would be hauled out to
the end of the family’s driveway to let everyone know that this was not just a house, but
it was a meeting place for a church community, and visitors were welcome.

Eventually we moved to another house as we grew and had members who had
bigger homes. In that move, we had to purchase green plastic and metal folding chairs
and heavy wood and metal tables—as well as a portable PA system to set up each
Sunday morning to aid with the service.

After bouncing around from a few peoples’ basements, we made our way to
Melrose Elementary School gymnasium. The gym floor was where we set up chairs for
the congregation to sit, and the stage was where the musical instruments and worship
team set up their items to aid in the worship service, and a small lectern was set up for
the pastors to preach. We used an overhead projector to project the songs we sang that
were written out on transparencies, so everyone in attendance could follow along and
each member of the congregation was encouraged to choose a tambourine, bongo drums,
rhythm sticks, triangles, or finger cymbals to play during the worship portion of the
service.

At Melrose, our Sunday school space was divided into two locations: for the kids
below 6 years of age, they met in the front hallway, on a large red carpet that was spread
out on the floor. The older kids, on the other hand, met in the PE teacher’s office, which
was a tiny, white room that was half an office and half a ball, rope, and equipment
storage room. Furthermore, for boys, if they wanted to go to the bathroom, they simply
walked behind a curtain within the storage side of the room (at times while Sunday
school class was going on) because there was also a toilet in the room for the class to
listen to. Girls were able to go down the hall and use a very small toilet near the janitor supply closet.

Melrose Elementary fit our needs nicely; however, there was a clause that stated that a church group (or other kind) could only rent Melrose for a limited time period, so we had to move to another location after a few years. The next location was a showroom storefront filled with aluminum siding and replacement window samples. We moved here because the senior pastor also worked as an insulation and window salesperson during the week, and he had access to this building, and if we cleared out all of the samples and building supplies from the middle of the floor, we could move our tables and chairs into the space to set up the sanctuary and large group meeting area.

When I Became a “PK”

It was at this storefront where my dad was ordained, in 1989, as the associate pastor of what was then called Heartland Christian Church. The ceremony was quite official, filled with a liturgy-like quality with all of the rites and promises that my dad had to agree to, as a pastor apart of the organization that the church was affiliated with at the time.

That morning was the first time I heard someone call me a “PK” (preacher’s kid). I resisted this title, perhaps more than other PKs, because I didn’t see my dad as a preacher. I thought there were other things he had to do to get this status, such as more seminary work, and a more formalized procedure of becoming a pastor. I knew he had the heart of a pastor, to help provide leadership and feed people and serve God, but his situation just didn’t seem like other people I knew who were pastors.
Not only that, but my dad still had his day job, as he juggled his responsibilities as a microbiologist in Plant Pathology at Ohio State University during the day and worked as a pastor during the rest of his time. I can only imagine how my dad was feeling at this time because, for me, it got increasingly harder to deal with what and where I found myself as I wrestled with my mom and dad’s involvement in their church. To use Mike Rose’s (2005) words in a very different context, I said many times to myself, “I just want to be average.” Why couldn’t I just be a regular ‘PK’? Why did my parents have to create their own church? Why did they have to have so many meetings?

After meeting in the storefront, we even spent a few weeks in the Wooster Masonic Temple. That proved to be a move that caused a lot of controversy and the departure of some members who felt like it was inappropriate for a church community to meet in a Masonic temple. Many of the departed members felt that the Masons organization was too closely aligned with Paganism and the New Age Movement. As a result, we eventually made our way to Triway High School, which was (and is) located outside of Wooster. There, we utilized the auditorium to conduct our services and used, once again, the hallway and cafeteria area for Sunday school classes. It was a bigger space, but the same strategy that was used for Melrose was now used at Triway.

As a teenager going through these experiences, I had a rough time with all of this because I didn’t know who I was or how to explain my parent’s church. I couldn’t articulate why there seemed to be so much tension among my grandparents, aunts, and uncles because of this shift in my parents’ church. All of this really confused me.

I tried to downplay my affiliation with my parent’s church community; perhaps that is where my struggles I outlined earlier in this work were heightened, as I screamed
out for attention because I was trying to be just like my classmates at school, being a part of a more traditional church community. I tried to relate and/or compare my church experiences to my classmates and then to my parents and church friends. However, there was a distinct disconnect in many of these discussions from classmates of mine who worshipped accordingly to more traditional formats.

Moreover, when I discussed with my parents my friends’ experiences or traditions at church, I always felt like there was the overtone that what was going on at our church was the only “correct” way and everyone else was wrong or just “playing church,” which meant they only thought about God on Sundays, but then the rest of the week continued doing secular things. I’ve always had a problem with that statement. Subsequently, at the end of my high school senior year, at the age of 18, I did my best to drift away from my parents’ church. I tried to find ways to not have to go to meetings, participate in youth group, and find my own way. I even found a job, where I would work on Sundays so I wouldn’t have to go to their church.

Looking Back through the Rear-view Mirror

It has been over 20 years since those moments when I decided to not participate in my parent’s church. I’m neither proud nor sad about that fact, but it shapes who I am today. When I left, I stopped going anywhere to church from the ages of 18 to 32. I continued working every Sunday, especially when I was in college and graduate school, and I did not make it a priority to find a church community to attend. I felt as if this was the only way it had to be: a complete separation. Call me a “back slider,” “someone who
has fallen away,” or whatever euphemism works for someone who was raised in a church and turned away for 14 years, but that was me.

It was much more than just not liking the way my parent’s church worshipped, what they believed, or the way they ordained their ministers. As my mind was enhanced with more reading and experiences, their church, to me, lacked an emphasis and interest in intellectual rigor and voices from the secular world. I don’t say that out of disrespect, but, to me, their beliefs seemed to exceed into ways of not allowing the congregation to discuss their mission and focus; rather, it seemed, to me, like too much of a top down church organization that was very judgmental, radical, and unwavering in their beliefs. Academic, scholarly and/or humanist thought was never used as a way of discussing what their church believed because, to them, the ultimate answers rested in the Bible and the way the leaders’ interpreted that word. They felt humanism left out God, which was rendered useless.

I had some problems with this because I enjoyed hearing multiple viewpoints and felt that people of the church should be informed by the world as a whole. They should read multiple texts; be informed by many other religious beliefs; and value them as not being wrong, but different. Clergy members, to me, were the ones who were supposed to be some of the best-read minds in the community. Not only that, but I felt that I had a strong mind that I was blessed with and could and should think for myself. For my parents, though, I felt like life was incredibly binary, without nuances, and not open to discussion. It was always a black and white discussion, largely based on a very literal interpretation of the Bible, using those scriptures to defend their practices, which sometimes pushed people away because of different interpretations.
Eventually I made my way back to participating in a church community, but not until I was 32 years old, along with my then-girlfriend (now wife) Kari, whose father was a pastor. He was leading a study group that Kari asked me to attend.

I didn’t jump right in with Sunday mornings; rather, I started by attending this evening study session where the topic of our meetings were wrestling with homosexuality and what the Bible has to say about this issue. Honestly, I went into this study group with the notion that this study would end very quickly; the verses from the Old Testament would be discussed, dissected, and homosexuality would be deemed an abomination and the case would be closed. That is what I was used to seeing, so I wasn’t going to be surprised if it ended that way.

However, that is not entirely the way this study went. Rather, it was quite rigorous, as we met one night a week for 13 weeks and discussed many of the positions surrounding homosexuality and the church. We read, discussed, and wrote about articles that were written by theologians, sociologists, historians, and cultural anthropologists. The readings were multi-layered and dense. In many ways, it was a graduate-level class that a person would find at a university. The dialogues that followed each text were thoughtful, sensitive, nuanced, and incredibly meaningful. The meetings were not grounded in preaching, but rather the group members formulated their own ideas and were led in a very Socratic way.

At the end of the 13 weeks, we wrapped up the study by reviewing all that we had read and discussed—and how we had grown in compassion and sensitivity to this issue. Each person in the group was invited to stand in a corner that was labeled with
characteristics along the continuum of homosexuality and the church: from full inclusion to full exclusion; and how we all felt the church should go, and the study ended there. This is what I needed to see; a study that used the Bible as an inspired text that pushed and pulled us, rather than being a literal, stand alone text.

_How I Try to Be Just Like Them_

As discussed, going to church and being involved with organized religion has been more than just something our family has participated in by attending weekly meetings and/or special events because both my father and my father-in-law are pastors.

I haven’t always understood what my parents were doing, but nonetheless, I have seen both sides of people who engage in the ministry of a church. I have seen the public version of them preaching, speaking, and teaching. But, then, too, I have seen them at home worn out from carrying many peoples’ burdens in their private time—either from people who have experienced traumatic situations or from counseling sessions. I have seen firsthand when the church’s needs have come before my family’s needs, when the phone rings with a conflict, severe sickness, or death. It brings on a striking dynamic within the family: on one level there is resentment that your parent can’t be home each night or they can’t make every sporting or school event because they are with the people from the church. However, on the other hand, there is a great sense of pride because your parent is helping so many people, giving of themselves in such a selfless way. But, with that said, there is a tremendous ebb and flow of emotions balancing resentment and pride.
Much of this get glossed over, though, as my brother-in-law recently stated, “when people hear your dad is a pastor they say one of two things—or both: ‘wow . . . really . . . we thought he was so cool,’ or ‘that’s awesome that your dad does that; what does he do with the other six days of the week?’”

Of course, that is simply not true because during the rest of the week, my dad and father-in-law feed the hungry, help the sick, counsel the addicted, the abused, and troubled. Furthermore, they engage and prepare Christians to further the mission of the church by baptizing young children, counseling and marrying couples, and burying those who pass on. All of these tasks bring a certain degree and gravity of emotions. And at any time the phone could ring and the person on the other end could be “up, down, or sideways,” as my father-in-law likes to say, and they could be right back into a new situation.

In each of these situations there is a line that my dad and father-in-law must negotiate. On some days people want a “chaplain” or minister (as a noun) who is simply someone who listens, encourages, prays, and makes them feel better. On the other hand, there are many instances where they need to be a “prophet, preacher, and teacher” or minister (as a verb), where their job is to ignite, confront, prepare, and engage people in ways that make them uncomfortable, move them to action, and perhaps make people unhappy. This last piece requires trust, communication, and incredible sensitivity, but sometimes people are surprised when this uncomfortable trait arises. It isn’t fair to make broad generalizations or caricatures (out of them or their parishioners), but nonetheless, it happens because pastors have a certain expectation.
Sometimes a Little Bit of “Rev.” Mr. Beery

As a teacher I see some parallels working with high school students. Peoples’ lives whether they are students or parishioners are complicated and full of issues that are unexpected and sometimes need some help. In my classroom there are days when students need to be praised, encouraged, and energized. On other days, my job is to be critical, discouraging, and purposefully trying to make them think. It is a give and take, and I would argue one of the greatest disservices I could do is not push on their assumptions and only reinforce their strongly held beliefs. My intent is not to embarrass or harass; rather it is to push them into new ways of thinking so that perhaps some new learning will take place.

This, too, is a complicated line.

I make these divisions and complications in my teaching widely known to my students and colleagues alike. To illustrate my nurturing “teacher” persona (as a noun) I read from To know as we are Known (Palmer, 1993) to show what I believe and how I see myself as a teacher:

[There is] another kind of knowledge is available to us, one that begins in a different passion and is drawn toward other ends. This knowledge can contain as much sound fact and theory as the knowledge we now possess, but because it springs from a truer passion it works toward truer ends. This is a knowledge that originates not in curiosity or control but in compassion, or love—a source celebrated not in our intellectual tradition but in our spiritual heritage.

The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to the love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entertaining and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own. In such
knowing we know and are known as members of one community, and out knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community’s bond. (p. 8)

Palmer continued after this quote to discuss how his concept of love can be tough and no always full of such positive outcomes and contains “tough love.” Nonetheless, after I read this quote, I explicate this a bit for my students and tell them that this sums up who I am and why I am their teacher. I tell them that I truly love what I do for a living and I feel like being a teacher is a fantastic profession. I love reading, writing, and speaking with them each day. Furthermore, I tell them that I love working with them. I am an advocate for their learning. I will be their greatest cheerleader. This illustrates me as the teacher who wants all of my students to feel a part of the community, loved by the group, and made to feel like they belong.

Nevertheless, there is another side of teaching, and for this I read from Cornels West’s *Living and Loving Outloud* (2009):

As the twentieth century, the bloodiest in human history, came to an end, I saw our market-driven, hypermaterialistic, consumption-craving culture in sorry shape. Right-wing demagogues were galvanizing their power and spreading their venom on the airwaves with ever-growing influence. For all its serious imperfections, the Clinton era would soon look good next to the Bush Ice Age. Fear would freeze our hope. Fear would dominate American politics during the illegitimate regime of Bush the Younger. Small-minded bigotry, insensitivity to the poor, self-delusional arrogance in foreign policy, misguided overreaction to terrorist threats, a horrific war based on blatant lies, strategic miscalculations, and a frightfully xenophobic world view being perpetuated by an administration whose heartless neglect of its very own people in the face of natural disaster... the early years of the twenty-first century would challenge whatever hope we could muster. It seemed as if the dangerous dogmas of free-market fundamentalism, adventurous militarism, and myopic authoritarianism were strangling our fragile democracy at home. (p. 210)

At the end of this passage from Cornels West, the students notice the huge shift in tone and in thinking. From going from Palmer’s quote of love being the most powerful tool to
find knowledge; to West’s critical and not so loving view of the Bush administration, but I insist that West’s views are written because he too loves his life and our country.

Inevitably, there are some horrified students, particularly with the students who identify themselves as being conservative. Some of these students vocalize their opposition to these statements and question where I fall by saying, “do you believe this Mr. Beery?” To this, I respond, “Let’s talk about each of these ideas.” Many times, we learn just as much about what we agree with as we do with what we disagree with. Both of these passages have the power to move students.

Passing Time Interlude

At the heart of this chapter was the way I was brought up in a religious community. It may be out of the ordinary for many people, but I feel like as a result of this path, I am more sensitive and understanding of what other peoples’ beliefs are and how they practice their faith. In retrospect, I still ask questions about what would my life have been like if my family would have stayed in one church community? What would have happened if my parents and other families did not start a church? What would my family life have looked like as I grew up if church was not such a big part? All of these questions dance around in my head, but the fact remains that I would not be the person I am. These experiences have shaped who I am and for that I am grateful.

Certainly, this chapter deals with a lot of issues that I have struggled with, yet make me who I am. It may be the most vulnerable and sensitive chapter. It shows me as curious, confused, resistant, and shows what class my family was/is as I grew up—as is depicted in what we held true, conversations at dinner, groups and causes we were
involved with on a daily basis. This is all very telling. Again, Patricia A. Sullivan (1998) guides me, as she stated: “The personal is the only way in which class can speak itself in the academy and be heard. Class will remain suppressed, and whole classes of humans oppressed, so long as personal accounts of lived experiences are devalued as knowledge” (p. 243). It’s with all of this in mind that I decided I had to write this piece because it does all of that (and more).

In addition to highlighting who my family was, it also shows that I was taught by example by my parents the importance of faith, compassion, and service to others. What I do with this essay and selections from this chapter is to help students begin to identify what their belief structure look like. Where do they fit in with the world? How is the way they believe different/similar from other people. And as an extension of these pieces I have students write an essay describing who they are and what they believe—and then put themselves in the role of a teacher. Who would they resemble: Parker Palmer or Cornel West? The findings are interesting, yet we keep coming back to the idea that context is a huge part of our lives and the experiences we have lived through shape us in meaningful and powerful ways.

Classroom Practice Using Personal and Social Perspectives

1. After reading these quotes we talk about the two quotes and explicate them. We begin with Palmer and I have students go through and point out the salient features of this quote. Freewrite about what had the most energy in Palmer’s piece; then move to West’s work. What language moved you? Where do you see yourself in this piece?

2. Beliefs/Values/Community/Context
a. What is the conflict in Palmer’s quote?

b. How would Palmer’s quote be different if love didn’t exist?

c. How would West’s comments be interpreted in the George W. Bush administration? How do you know?

d. What language in West’s quote did you find particularly volatile? Why?

3. For homework, students do two things. First of all, using a personal perspective, write a narrative pretending that you are a teacher (choose your favorite topic). Take me through your first day, keep the pen moving with the detail of who you are; who you teach; what you are like in the classroom; what activities do you do with your class. Make sure you discuss what type of teacher would you be—Palmer or West? Then, in the next paragraph, from a societal perspective, answer how would you be viewed by society as being this teacher? Who would appreciate your teaching style? Who would hate your teaching style? How do you know people would feel this way about you?

Reflections from the Field

This essay is probably one of the hardest (if not the hardest) for me to share. Discussing religion, tradition, and doctrine like this is very uncomfortable me because I feel as if my family did not conform to traditional religious practices (i.e., ways other people may understand). More than any other essay, it really does feel like I am out there on the wire, riding a unicycle, trying to not to fall. Generally, students are receptive and kind, but since religion is such a prickly topic, it still feels uncomfortable to me. I don’t want to be preachy or insensitive, but this topic does get plenty of reaction.
The tension that exists with this essay is that students will share their experiences with religion, church, and spirituality. Many students will share the “horror stories” of what their family has been through all in the name of religion. I have had students share how they go to church but don’t believe in God, but feel like they have to go through the motions for their parents. Each of them say, “Don’t call my mom; she will die.” Or, I have had students who hear my experience and that is exactly what they believe, and feel like I have turned my back on the TRUTH. These students tell me, “You’ve lost your fire, Mr. Beery.”

In short, this is a powerful lesson about belief structures, diversity, tolerance, and acceptance. Of course, it drifts into some philosophical conversations about the existence of God, so it is an essay and conversation that a teacher must be ready to have and find the moments of learning that can come out of it. It can be uncomfortable, but again, I always learn more about myself as I have it, and hopefully, my students take something away from it as well.
CHAPTER VII

TEACHING WITHOUT A NET (WITH COLLEAGUES WHERE THIS COULD GET LOUD)

Introduction

This chapter revolves around how no two colleagues see the world the same way and have the same pedagogical ideas in mind. This chapter revolves around how I try to exist in a world with colleagues who think certainty can be attained with the proper curriculum ideas—and other colleagues should work together to believe what they do. What makes this challenging is that teaching is incredibly personal, so when a colleague doesn’t agree with you, a teacher could feel personally insulted. That was the case with me during a English department faculty meeting, which prompted me to write the essay that exists in this chapter, titled, “High School English Teacher Culture and the Complexity of Emotions.”

I use the essay that appears in this chapter to discuss with students the ideas of disagreement, debate, conversation maxims, and being able to work with someone even if you have differing ideologies. Again, Dewey (1938) guides me with my colleagues, as he wrote:

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a *forked-road* situation, a situation that is ambiguous, that presents a dilemma, that proposes alternatives . . .[sic] One can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching. . .[sic]
To be genuinely thoughtful, we must be willing to sustain and protract that state of doubt which is the stimulus to thorough inquiry. (pp. 14-16)

Even though these moments of tension with colleagues exist at certain times, it forces me to think “reflectively” and to “endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching.” It’s not pretty, but it does allow for growth.

Talking to our Colleagues

The talk about Mr. Beery’s assignments and methods started out as whispers among my colleagues in the hallway, classrooms, and behind closed office doors. The conversations usually began with,

What is Matt doing with these writing assignments? Is this what they teach at college? Is he allowed to do such a thing? I’ve heard some students say they were excited because Mr. Beery was letting them use “I” in a portion of their research essay. What is he thinking? Where did this come from? And also I heard he was having his student’s interview people as a way to do research. That’s not research; research is housed in a library.

At first, these comments were not stated to me directly, but I was ultimately accused face to face of teaching a “soft assignment” or something that was going to “hurt” my students because it would not get them ready for college. “Sure Matt, your assignment is fun and the students will be able to write about topics that they enjoy, and they will be able to learn about something new, but what is the point in doing that?”

I was stunned and shot back with, “Are you kidding me?” And in the next breath, this same colleague asked me if I would help them brainstorm new ideas for the research essay because they were tired of getting too many “book reports.” Huh?

The grand finale to this discussion occurred as we were debating two things: (a) what format we should require for note cards and, (b) how many note cards should we
require juniors and seniors. As the battle ensued and ultimately fizzled out because we weren’t getting anywhere, one of my colleagues changed the topic by saying, “Ask Matt about his ideas about a research essay. Note cards aren’t even the issue. In fact, I’m quite sure his students aren’t even required to use them.”

At that moment, as a transformative-minded educator I was surprised and happy all in the same motion, as I was now had the opportunity to argue that I thought the traditional research essay was limited, narrow-minded and quite frankly an antiquated assignment that needed some revamping in the age of the Internet. I stated with certainty that, “we need to stop being on the defense and start developing assignments that make our students think and act like writers—not good copy and paste technicians.”

Overall, I was pleased, yet apprehensive, being, at the time, one of the youngest persons in my department; however, I was adamant that what I was doing was empowering my students. Nevertheless, what I kept hearing was, “I hate seeing ‘I’ in any kind of student writing. It drives me crazy; they don’t know what they are doing.” My rebuttal that we receive bad essays because we create bad assignments was not received well either with many groans and eye rolls.

I finished by telling the department that I firmly believe that writing is a process. Moreover, it is our jobs to model good writing practices by writing along with our students, by showing them our mistakes and struggles. To push this point well past the point of no return, I asked how many of my colleagues have written a research essay in the last 5-10 years. I asked point blank, “how many of you have written the assignment you are asking your students to write, with today’s technologies—with the use of copy machines, the Internet, and web based databases?”
The room fell silent.

My question came as a surprise (even to me), but I felt it needed to be asked because most of my colleagues who were combating my theories kept prefacing their arguments with, “This is what I used to do” Or, “in college, I would write this way.” I may have come off as a snot-nosed, know-it-all brat, but I wanted to know what they do now in an age of the Internet and other electronic databases—as well as— copy machines and other tools that make it very easy to duplicate materials. To this challenge I received more eye rolls and the reputation of doing some “weird things” in my classroom.

My stock didn’t seem to increase with them either when I told them about the essay I had just written based on my reading of May Sarton’s (1961) book The small room. However, I gave an open invitation to everyone in the room to read my essay and then let’s talk. I told them that I wasn’t about to treat them like one of our students, but once they were done I had some questions I wanted to ask them, just so I could listen to what they had to say. I wasn’t going to try to preach at them, but simply learn.

High School English Teacher Culture and the Complexity of Emotions (Written May 2007)

Introduction

One day at lunch there were five of us sitting around the rectangle table in our conference/lunch room discussing an essay that a friend of mine gave me when I taught as an adjunct instructor at The University of Akron, titled “You Win Some, You Lose Some.” In the essay, the student discussed how when he was 12 years old he lost his
right nipple as a result of sliding down a wooden, picket fence, while trying to retrieve a home run in a wiffle ball game. The essay always struck me as unique, funny, and a good piece of writing, so I decided to share it with my colleagues. After all, it was my thought that English teachers enjoy seeing writing that uses language in new and interesting ways.

I brought multiple copies of the essay and I read the piece out loud as we ate. By the time I was halfway, though, I started to get nervous as I read the word “nipple” to three females and one male colleague of mine. Generally I feel pretty confident about responding and justifying interesting student writing, but as I read this essay out loud I felt confused and unsettled as my colleagues started questioning me—not the subject matter—but the personal component to this essay. They began asking, “What was the writing prompt? Don’t you find this essay offensive? Isn’t this just so typical of a touchy, feely personal narrative that a college professor would assign? What was his point? Was it meant to be funny? Do you think it is really true? How did you let him turn something like this in?” Instead of looking at the essay, my teaching was on trial because I was new to high school teaching, fresh from working with college students.

After wading through a few more questions, I told the group that this essay was in response to a narrative prompt: “Write a three- to five-page essay describing a situation that changed or made you who you are today.” The essay clearly showed that quality, which calmed everyone down; however, the prompt seemed to initially attract the criticism—but now the attention turned to my teaching unexpectedly.

As my colleagues dissected this essay, the comments were less than positive. Each person responded to things negatively about certain stylistic choices the student
made and commented on the lack of such things as symbolism, metaphor, and
categorization. Or, they simply stated that an essay like this is “easy” or “soft” and
writing this way doesn’t require a lot of thought. In short, my colleagues ripped it apart
and began making value judgments; initially about me, and then about the student, on
what they thought should be accepted and written about in an English class.

As a writing teacher who values many aspects of Expressivist pedagogy, I was
irritated at my colleague’s dismissal of this essay. However, I realized that high school
English departments (cultures) have hierarchies and value systems in place. As Stuart
Hall (1981) wrote in “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” there are three
definitions of “Popular Culture” that are tension-filled and full of the constant struggle
for power. I would argue that Hall’s term “Popular Culture” could be used to discuss
“high school English teacher culture” too. Hall wrote:

> The school and the education system is one such institution—
distinguishing the valued part of the culture, the cultural heritage, the
history to be transmitted, from the ‘valueless’ part. The literary and
scholarly apparatus is another—marking-off certain kinds of knowledge
from others. (p. 189)

More specifically, the portion of the text I want to explicate and put pressure on (in
regards to the essay I shared with my colleagues) is the phrase “marking-off certain
kinds of knowledge from others” and “the history to be transmitted.” I find Hall’s
comments captivating and useful for this situation. First of all, he could mean that
certain knowledge is kept separate from other types of knowledge—as in keeping the
English and social studies away from the math and sciences.

However, I would argue that Hall is stating that certain knowledge, such as
particular pieces of literature or writing topics should not be taught. Furthermore, I
suspect that Hall’s quote suggests that students who are not affiliated with the “value class” will never achieve the status of great literary geniuses. Based largely on what class the students belong to, their writing is not to be valued on the same level as canonical literature.

Hall’s statements ring true with me too because schooling and the education system cater to people who appreciate or make their living through it. People who do not fit into the institution of schooling look at it as something unachievable—many times because their family sees no financial reasons to contribute to a system that leaves them out. Unfortunately, I see schooling systems as embracing “value” and rejecting people from the “valueless,” unless they can serve the people of value.

Education has to keep certain knowledge in, and keep certain people out to perpetuate and strengthen their system. This is true within English departments too. Is this fair? No, but it is the truth. In a culture where we make seemingly meaningful statements about equality, a disruption in schooling hierarchies are problematic because they convolute peoples’ lives and expose certain knowledge that might pinpoint what is happening in other areas of life. At first glance this revelation could be perceived as good, but the insight may destroy many romantic myths associated with formal education; just as I was confronted by my colleagues about an essay about losing a nipple, as it disrupted their notions of what an essay should say.

To create an English department culture that would accept all forms of writing as being “equal” would undercut English studies’ love affair with all of the white canonical literary figures that we continue to teach year after year. If schools did not teach certain authors (knowledge), or worse yet, put student writing on the same level, it would
radically reconfigure an English teacher’s job, which is something that makes people uncomfortable.

Philosophically speaking, my colleagues’ statements are very traditional, as their “vision tends to view the schools as necessary to the transmission of the traditional values of U.S. society” and “traditionalists believe the schools should pass on the best of what was and what is” (Sadovnik, 2006, p. 29). For me, Traditional/Essentialist views make my job more challenging, as I am consistently trying to push against the hegemony of distanced, third person writing—and not to mention—only reading white male European writers.

I’m reminded of May Sarton’s *The Small Room* (1961), and how the people in this fictional account would react to “Win Some You Lose Some” in the same way, if not dismiss it totally. The Appleton English department is fixated on the same authors, such as Blake, Donne, Emerson, Keats, Kipling, and Thoreau, which my colleagues still embrace and hold up as being “fine literature.” I find this disheartening, because *The Small Room* was written in 1961, which means we haven’t really made much progress. However, I intend to compare the similarities between the Nordonia English department and the Appleton English department and provide possible alternatives and shifts that could occur to make English and the teaching of writing more progressive and transformative.

*The Small Room and Nordonia Emotions*

*The Small Room* (1961) is viewed with an emphasis on the five senses of Lucy Winter as she negotiates her first year of teaching. In many ways she represents the
innocence in education and plays the role of the impressionable teacher trying to survive her first year. At the beginning of the novel, young Lucy Winter is a woman who recently earned her Ph.D. from Harvard, yet is unsure of why she has chosen to be an English professor or what is involved in even becoming one.

While taking the train to Appleton College and thinking of her recently broken engagement to her fiancé, John, Lucy sees a reflection of her face in the train’s window. It seems as if “a stranger had loomed up out of the New England landscape to stare at her” (p. 11). She wonders to herself, “What had she got herself into? What indeed?” (p. 12). Clearly, Lucy had a difficult time trying to sort out who and what she was as a teacher. And to complicate issues further, the central conflict appears as Lucy is forced to deal with a student who plagiarizes an essay.

Subsequently, upon Lucy’s arrival, Appleton College was described to her by Hallie Summerson (the iconic mentor and voice of experience) as being “a close community” where the “personal element counts” (p. 13). In my opinion, the major pedagogical issue that arises immediately is whether or not the “personal” fits in an English class? I would put pressure on Hallie’s statements because I would argue that “the personal element [doesn’t] count” between the faculty and students. Even as the faculty takes part in the countless martini cocktail parties, the students of Appleton are discussed as commodities and not as brilliant young ladies who are individuals. Even when Jane’s cheating is discovered, Lucy is the one who wrestles with it the most and is visible sickened with what she should do.

The delineation between “emotion and reason” was drawn very early on. As Lucy states, defensively, after telling a personal anecdote on the first day of class, “It
was an experiment and at that moment I can only think that it failed” (Sarton, 1961, p. 39), which prompted Hallie Summerson to say, “You’ve given a piece of yourself away, even if it is only a certain amount of nervous energy” (Sarton, 1961, p. 39). It is her statement, again, that leads me to believe that at Appleton, emotional responses should only be used in the classroom when all else fails. I find the idea of teaching with such a focus on content and only sterile rapport with the students to be antithetical to establishing relationships and getting students to think critically and produce excellent writing. As Patricia A. Sullivan (1998) wrote:

That our academic surveillance at the borders of the emotionally permissible is entwined with our anxieties about class. That these anxieties run deep, so deep that they remain hidden and disguised even to a self whom life has prepared for the shock of the real. (p. 243)

As Sullivan’s quote suggests, personal writing that expresses emotions reveals “the shock of the real.” Not only that, but it reveals the class of students, such as Pippa, Agnes, and Jane. The class of the writer can be problematic because scholars are used to seeing objective pieces that only stimulate their abstract intellect—not their everyday lives. Perhaps, too, another conflict with personal/emotional writing in the classroom forces everyone involved to reconsider themselves in a new way.

To argue Sullivan’s point even farther, if everyone at Appleton really knew Lucy, they would see a young woman in her late 20s who just broke off an engagement with a man named John; she is unsure about her teaching and everything else in her life. Teaching requires a certain distance, and her descriptions of her life would have given every student and faculty member some insight into what kind of person she was. In doing so, all of her personal characteristics could have had the potential to affect
people—even in a positive way. Unfortunately, Appleton and Nordonia sound the same, which leads me to ask: Can’t teachers have both—emotions and reason? I would argue, yes.

The English department at Appleton embraced canonical literature and held it up as the only pieces of literature worth reading. Now, I realize that this is largely because of the time period in which the novel was written, but beginning with John Donne’s “Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,” even before the prologue, the book reveals a lot about the philosophical perspective and positions the Appleton English department will embrace. Moreover, even Miss Cope’s reputation came with a William Blake allusion, “Tiger, tiger, burning bright” (Sarton, 1961, p. 16).

Through each of these references, the philosophical position of Essentialism is very much present. Each professor discussed what each of the girls will need or should have when they leave, as they used phrases like “foundations of knowledge,” or what they will need to be “functioning” adults. With all of that said, the section that I have the most disagreement with is stated by Hallie Summerson, when she says,

You see, girls will respond to feelings always; what is hard is to get them to think. Carryl may have disciples, but they do not become so without learning a great deal about mediaeval history, a great deal more than they will ever know about Carryl. (Sarton, 1961, p. 41)

My contention with this passage is visceral because I feel that this statement is insular and limited. If students are required to explicate pages and pages of text and then demonstrate in writing their understanding and resistance or acceptance, it is imperative to begin with how they feel about it. Clearly, Lucy should not have settled with this as
the final product, but certainly, initial “feelings” should have been honored and investigated.

Nonetheless, Lucy listens to Hallie’s comments that “feelings” and “thinking” are mutually exclusive and, in my opinion, was dealt a great disservice in her pedagogy. As Janet Bean (2003) wrote:

To recognize emotion as a potential means through which students might generate critical resistance, we need to discard binaries that oppose feelings and reason. We might question our own resistance to emotion as intellectual work and consider whose interests we are serving when we exclude representations of pain, anger, obligation, and love from academic discourse. (p. 209)

Furthermore, Lucy should have related the subject matter to her students by using their emotional aspects from life to get them involved—much like John Dewey suggested. As Steve Fishman and Lucille McCarthy (1998) wrote:

One of the appealing features of Dewey’s philosophy of education is that he shows learning to be natural, not a process confined, as it was for much traditional philosophy, to special schooling or a particular social class. It is not a product of leisure of wealth or divine inspiration. To the contrary, for Dewey, learning is rooted in biological life, not above the earth but embedded in it, emerging in the very process by which life evolves and is maintained. (p. 19)

As Fishman and McCarthy suggested, learning is not something that should disregard emotions. As human beings, we feel certain impulses, and to dismiss that option from Lucy’s students when they walked into her classroom does not make sense—and I find Hallie Summerson’s comments unfortunate. Students are rooted in biological life, so why shouldn’t their learning grow out of the same type of environment?
To Hallie’s defense, emotions complicate academia, which is why, I suspect, she set up this binary with the students of Appleton. As Patricia A. Sullivan (1998) wrote:

Is our prevailing anxiety about narrative in the academy—the “personal essay” in composition, the case study in social science, the first-person account wherever it appears—really about narrative’s status as knowledge, its reliability, its representativeness, its applicability to other cases? Or do we fear what the personal might be about? What an I might have to tell us if granted the same epistemological standing as an it or a them. (p. 240)

The last part of Sullivan’s quote is where, I think, Hallie Summerson would position herself because the “personal essay” scares people because of the power that the first person pronoun “I” holds. A writer using “I” might describe emotional situations that make people laugh or cry. More importantly, though, it disrupts traditional conventions by making the reader identify the text with an actual person—instead of a set of abstract concepts.

Most of the English teachers at Appleton and Nordonia High School would agree about many of the Essentialist pedagogical issues I have discussed. Their teaching reflects an Essentialist perspective that is unable (or unwilling) to move away from that position. Sadly, I would say that the Nordonia teachers are much more rigid and uncompromising. Their transmission is based upon what they think each student should know based on the hegemony of the Ohio Graduation Test. Overall, they would argue that the motivation for their Essentialist pedagogy rests in the standards and what they feel they must teach.

At Appleton, however, the teachers were focused on transmitting the correct type of information to their students so the young ladies would become doctors, lawyers,
teachers, and influential women in the world. Given *The Small Room* was written in 1961, I am more sympathetic to their motivations. In fact, at the time, the Appleton department could have been perceived as radical. In my opinion, Nordonia and Appleton transmit the same messages because each department would feel that “the purposes the American schools have generally served are those of preserving and transmitting the so-called essentials of Western culture and acting as a conserving civilizing force” (Brosio, 2000, p. 62).

**Conclusion**

As I indicated, both departments see English studies as a transmission of information, or as Dennis Carlson (2002) pointed out, exist in a “safe harbor where people anchor themselves in what is comfortable, in a fixed sense of who they are, either as members of the dominant culture or as the “Other” given a space at the margins” (p. 2). *The Small Room* is a fictional piece of literature, which comforts me a little. However, the Nordonia English Department is very real.

In fact, Nordonia is where I spend 186 days of my life each school year and where I have been criticized and confronted. Consequently, I plan to continue to make strides towards a more progressive pedagogy that will eventually leave my classroom and infuse itself into the rest of the department. I realize this revolution will be slow, but even slow change is measurable and worth the effort.

As I indicated, I want to start with writing because it *needs to* be the major component in a progressive, transformative English pedagogy. Too many of my colleagues use the Ohio Writing Standards as a crutch or justifications for teaching
vacant, sterile, antiquated writings assignments. I’m tired of hearing certain colleagues complain that we are merely “teaching to the test,” or that their pedagogical creativity is stifled because of what they have to teach. And then they do nothing to change the position they are in. That’s where I hope to change the way we envision writing instruction at Nordonia High School. It is my goal to show that progressive writing instruction can emphasize authenticity, creativity, voice, details, truthfulness, honesty, intellectual rigor—and meet the Ohio Writing Standards.

As Jonathan Kozol (2000) stated in an interview for NEA Today,

The most beautiful discoveries students make are not like mountaintops that can be charted with maps, they’re like crevices you won’t really see until you are standing on top of them. The trouble with the standards movement is that you’re so busy looking toward the next exam, you miss the crevices. The good news is that most good teachers find a way to deliver skills without reducing classrooms to boot camps. (p. 27)

Unfortunately, the task of having standards hanging over our classrooms (in the form of posters and administrators) is daunting. Standards could be viewed as our own “mountains” to climb, but it is our job to find ways to teach with them—even in subversive ways—to help our students become successful writers and thinkers.

I like the challenge of looking for ways to teach the standards, without “teaching to the test.” However, it takes dedication and work to keep up with contemporary theory. As a result, I will constantly use what the late Wendy Bishop (1999)—that everything is research—even though I don’t think many of us “understand just how deeply research is part of every writing project” (p. 91). No matter what we present to our classes, we should research it as much as possible, to make sure that each lesson is pedagogically sound, and the subject matter is going to meet our students where they are. Perhaps, each
lesson won’t reach every student immediately, but it is my goal to make sure that some
tension exists in what I am teaching (in my students and other teachers), so they will be
curious—and speak up and want to discuss what does impact their lives.

Lastly, I’d like to end with a long, but motivating, quote from Cornel West
(1999) that sums up my philosophical position nicely and a mindset that I bring into my
classroom each day as I plan, present, and assess my student’s works. West wrote:

The school in a democracy should take no part in delivering to children the
ancient message of the family or the local community: Become like me. It
has a bigger job—to equip children with the means to think and to stand
on their own two feet, bringing the ideas and experiences of far away or
long ago to bear upon the understanding and criticism of the here and now.
The school should examine possibilities of imagination and of life that the
surrounding society is unable or unwilling to countenance. It should be the
voice of the future—of alternative futures—within the present, and it
should recognize in children, the future workers, and citizens, little
prophets. (p. 322)

Until the day I see all of West’s ideas accomplished, I will continue to work for change.
I realize to understand my department and the teaching of writing, I must love it. But, to
love it, I must, in a sense, accept the state it is in. However to properly accept it, I must
betray it and revel in what it might become. In my opinion American Schooling is a
shrine to the genius of extraordinary teachers and students, and it is the place where
dreams can be fulfilled; making no into yes, but it needs me to remake it, one student at
a time.

Passing Time Interlude

When I read this chapter, I still can envision the moments I discuss. It was a
moment that definitely drew some lines in the sand and set of particular “camps” within
the department. I did not intend it to do that, however it did. After that meeting I was still
able to be professional, kind, and understanding with my colleagues who I disagreed with their ideas and/or accusations. I tried to communicate that I respected their position, yet disagreed with it. I was not attacking their principles as a professional; I was merely trying to have an active discussion about their position. I thought (and still do) that dialogue is healthy; however, what I felt was that my colleagues were feeling as if I was accusatory, which caused them to be defensive. Lance Svehla (2001) articulated this nicely when he wrote:

Too many [teachers] portray opponents to current theory as [teachers] who have not “kept up” with the reading. In doing so, they have blinded themselves to other more legitimate sources of opposition.[...] The demand for theory into practice is also a defense against exploitative working conditions, a response to the hypocrisy and arrogance found in much current theory, and a valid intellectual response in its own right. (p. 384)

I was not intending to come off as a teacher who thought others in my department had not “kept up” with the reading. I subscribe to and use current theory, but not in a way that is demeaning to others. That is not how current theory should be used. I was simply trying to investigate, question, and critique what we did and see if, perhaps, we could try a new approach, to meet our students where they were located. For the most part, the business of teaching and learning continued in our department, but there was always a smoldering sense of what occurred that day. I hate to say that that changed when some of those people retired, but it did.

I use this essay and selections from this chapter to get students to begin to investigate what it is they believe to be true in the ways they learn. What was their best learning experience? Why did they feel as if that was their best environment? For this assignment, students are forced to think about these ideas from a different perspective.
Instead of being the person who receives and gathers information—and then is asked to report back on what they know—I want students to think about what the best way they learn is. And then in the next section, pretend that they are an anthropologist and what would that person say about how they learn and behave as a result of what they find useful.

Classroom Practice and Colleague Discussions Using Personal and Societal Perspective

This section can get very sensitive, so these essays have to be handled with great care. I have read to my students the narrative about the department meeting. Immediately, students tried to figure out who was saying what to me. Of course I don’t divulge names in a harmful way, but that is usually a good way to get at stereotypes, ideology, and why student come to certain conclusions about teachers.

1. Personal. Write a narrative about how what makes them unique? How do they approach life? What do they find true? How do they learn? What is their ideology in learning? What is the most effective way for them to learn? For homework, students write their own ideas and are prepared to share with this during the next class.

2. Social. Based on what you wrote in the first prompt, what would someone say about you, based on societal norms, historical and cultural contexts, conversational maxims, etc. This section could be a nice piece for colleagues to read—either on a one on one basis or in a department meeting setting. These essays could get at what English teachers value in teaching reading, writing, and researching and how we need to make
assignments that are engaging and have kept up with technology. Where are the challenges in teaching this way? How will we have to shift our thinking?

Reflections from the Field

This essay does a few things. First of all, it makes students see that teachers really are humans. When I share the disagreement at the beginning of this chapter over note cards and narratives, students are always surprised that teachers have these sorts of disagreements. For some reason, students think that all teachers behave the same way, and are drones simply looking to find creative ways to mess with their lives. Of course, their next questions are invariably for me to associate names with who said what. I squelched that immediately, but many students try to figure out who said what.

One thing I try to do is to show that disagreements are not always bad. Instead, disagreements can be really great ways to start a conversation because many times compromise and a blending of ideas can make for a better learning experience.

Another thing that I take away from this essay is that there are many times when disagreement does not occur and our department does operate in a very productive way. As many of my colleagues have pointed out to me, when we have been given time to collaborate, there are many assignments that have been incredibly useful for all of my colleagues. Many times, the disagreements are because we do care a lot about what we are doing, but feel like there is very little time for us to speak and to be heard by others.
CHAPTER VIII
THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Introduction

In this chapter, I take a step back and discuss the challenges that teachers are dealing with, in terms of funding, class sizes, and time constraints. In short, this chapter is about my anxiety and deliberations about where teachers fit into the educational landscape. So many times policy-makers, administrators, and school boards set unattainable goals that are dogmatic, rigid, and unrealistic. All of these ideas are under the guise of achievement if teachers will use particular instructional and assessment methods to attain it. And the challenges are twofold: (a) as a teacher, certainty doesn’t exist, pedagogically, because trends shift and change the focus, and (b) there are so many moving parts outside of education out of a teacher’s control, and this chapter brings up many of these issues and hopes to shed light on the possibilities.

Additionally, I compare my two experiences of teaching in a university and then teaching in a high school. I don’t always paint a picture that is encouraging for high school teachers because they are inundated with so many things that they must do within a day. Furthermore, I shed light on what a typical day looks like for many high school teachers. The purpose of this chapter is reemphasizing that high school teachers everywhere are doing really great things. However, they are tremendously busy and have
to adhere to institutional constraints, so any kind of personal and/or professional development comes at a premium.

Report Card Only Begins to Tell the Story

As a teacher, I hear comments such as, “You teachers got it made. You only work 9 months a year; you get snow days; at retirement you get a severance that I don’t get; and, you have a union that will defend anyone. Must be nice!” As egregious as I find these comments, I suspect that many of these attitudes are rooted in people who long ago (or not so long ago) were students. Teachers are easy targets because people who say such things sat in a desk and watched the educational process firsthand, and as a result, now feel they are experts on funding, pedagogy, and assessment. Unfortunately what they missed from this limited perspective is the intense training, planning, and higher level thinking that make day-to-day lessons successful learning opportunities. Moreover, in the age of standards, accountability, and security concerns, schools are significantly different.

Education today is complex and cannot be explained quickly to people who have not been in a classroom lately. However, when the Ohio Department of Education issues the State’s report cards in May or early June, newspapers, magazines, and journals will try to explain the results and many people will become self-proclaimed experts. Districts will be classified anywhere from “Excellent” all the way down to “Academic Emergency.” These terms will be dissected for certain demographics—and talk about AYP and CIP—and other educational abbreviations will be attached. Many times these concepts will be explained briefly for those not in the education profession, with web
addresses to read the full report. While it is fantastic to have community support and dialogue, many times uninformed persons quickly blame school districts for not doing enough. Inevitably, I fear, more disparaging remarks will be made about educators. Questions will abound, such as, how come more students in poor districts don’t pass these tests? Why aren’t teachers paid based on these results? Does failing really mean a student can’t graduate? Who is responsible for all of this—parents, teachers, administrators, politicians? And once again, the cyclical procedures will begin, to help underachieving districts succeed—and excellent ones maintain their achievement.

Keep in mind that the state report cards only begins to tell the story. In fact, I would argue that these statistics are released, in part, to get a rise out of taxpayers—and/or to help a real estate agent’s portfolio as having a property in an “Excellent” school district. What these statistics lack is an emphasis on dedicated professional educators who work in a challenging system. Moreover, what the public fails to recognize is that educators work all year long for 100% passage on these tests; taking courses and then sharing their knowledge with their students, no matter what funding, class sizes, and technology is available. An educator’s job is to prepare students for the rigorous demands of life as an intellectual person—and standardized tests are just one piece. I am confident that all educators want to see their students succeed. Furthermore, I am confident that most educators are not solely “teaching to the test,” even though the current version of No Child Left Behind makes it very tempting to level the playing field by emphasizing “skills and drills” and rote memorization that, many times, misses the context and applicability to students’ real world experiences.
As educators we operate in an imperfect institution that needs progressive reforms in funding, class sizes, and retention of highly qualified teachers. Nevertheless, we are the people involved in a dynamic profession that only a few dare to take on. We need to continue being good intellectual role models, by valuing multiple perspectives and listening to opposing views, but then responding when it is necessary. Educating the future is essential to preserving a diverse democratic society, and we are the public intellectuals and cultural workers that are committed to viewing the world in new and different ways in these critical years. American Schooling is a shrine to the genius of extraordinary teachers and students, and it is the place where dreams can be fulfilled; making no into yes, one educator and student at a time.

Context, Questions, Accolades

The previous essay, “Report Card Only Begins to Tell the Story” originally appeared in the Cleveland Plain Dealer on Sunday, October 16, 2008. The morning the essay hit the newsstands, my email, cell phone voice mail, and home phone answering machine filled up with messages from friends, family members, and colleagues telling me that they saw the piece.

Friends who saw it said they read it and then saw my name and did a double-take and said, “Hey, I know that guy.” Family members who read it knew that it was going to appear, but stated that they finally found the essay after digging through the front page, then to the Metro section, through Sports, and finally buried behind the ads in the Forum and Op-Ed section. And then once they found the essay, they wanted to know who said the disparaging comments I referenced at the beginning of the essay. “Was that me?” I
guess these family members were feeling self-conscious that they had uttered it and now
I had made their statements public. I didn’t say a word and let them think what they
wanted.

The most powerful comments came from colleagues, though. Most were positive
and encouraging and generally stated, “Nice job, Matt. Nicely done. Thanks for giving
us a voice and telling it like it is!” In fact, the essay found its way to the copier and was
hung on the wall in the teacher workroom in the high school where I teach, so for those
people who didn’t see it on the original publication date, they now had the time to see it
while they copied their materials. Once again, more colleagues were not afraid to share
more thoughts.

The responses that surprised me the most were the number of people who asked:
How did you think of the topic? Who did you contact at the Plain Dealer? When was the
deadline? How many words did they give you? Was the editor respectful to you? Did
you feel scared to send in a piece of writing of your own? How long did it take to write?
And where did (do) you find time to write with two small daughters?

These questions further opened my eyes to the dilemma public school teachers
have in trying to overcome the old adage, “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” I
felt this particularly strongly especially from my English teacher colleagues, because we
are the ones who are at the forefront of preaching that writing is powerful and that
students should cultivate significant practices and think like writers. However many
teachers do not write because there is no time, they are tired, or they simply don’t feel
like their voice matters.
I would argue that the schedules and demands on public school teachers set us up for failure in these areas. We don’t have a lot of discretionary time, and we are exhausted when we are in the throes of the school year, and many teachers feel like their opinions do not matter when it comes to contributing to our fields through research, reading, writing, and speaking out about their professions and positions in education. “I’m just a teacher, not doing anything special in my classroom,” some say.

As a result of these constraints, like some of my other colleagues, there are times when I feel as if I have a more demanding, yet less respected, space to occupy in the teaching of English. Perhaps, this is just normal apprehension, or I am afraid to say, “I know that I am having a meaningful impact with students furthering research in English education each day.”

On the other hand, I feel as if college professors are more respected. I suspect it is because of their advanced degrees, publications, and service to their university, which are all wonderful and move English education forward. However, I don’t know whom to blame: Is it college professors or high school teachers who perpetuate these feelings? Do high school teachers need to do some things to become more respected by college professors—or vice versa? I don’t know, but, in my opinion, the institutions of high school and college teaching need to change and this disparity needs to disappear.

I don’t have all of the answers currently. All I have is anecdotal evidence from my life. Even when I taught as a poor, part-time adjunct instructor, when I told people (outside of education) what I did, I got this elevated look and response of, “Wow, so you are a college professor? Impressive.” However, when I mention now that I am a high school English teacher, most people touch my arm and give the sign of the cross and say,
“Bless you, I don’t know how you work with those people. I couldn’t do that job if my life depended on it.” I suspect that the age of my students is part of the reason for this response, but I am suspicious that there is more to this issue.

The Life of a Public High School Teacher

On a typical day I get up at 5:00 a.m. I shower, get dressed, and drink a cup of coffee, load my two small daughters into the car, so my wife can drop them off at the babysitter’s at 6:00. A family of four out the door by 6:00 a.m. each school day.

After my 15-minute drive north, I pull into the high school parking lot at 6:15 a.m., and I am the first one on the south end of the school building. The amber security lights are still on and hit me right in the eyes as I maneuver my Honda into parking space number 11. I back the car in, turn it off with the radio almost simultaneously, look around to find my coffee cup in my dark car and climb out. At this point, I’ve been awake for an hour and 15 minutes and my mind is already racing about what I need to plan and photocopy as I grab my briefcase out of the trunk.

I teach speech, 10th and 11th grade English; three preps as they say.

I walk into the empty building where I hear the faint sounds of the heating and cooling units humming away. A few school athletes are running in the halls for early morning conditioning. The smell of cafeteria sausage and industrial cleaning fluid fills the air, as I juggle my bag, lunch box, and coffee mug.

I make it to room 512 and unlock the door and flip on half of the lights; all of the lights are way too clinical. I trudge to my desk, turn on my radio to hear the morning’s news, as I drop my bag and put my coat away in the closet. I boot up my laptop and walk
over to the dry-erase board to write the day’s agenda on the board. Then, it’s off to the
copy machine to make the copies for the day—30 for speech class; 60 for English 10; 60
for English 11.

When I get back from wrestling with the copy machine will be the only time in
my day when it is just me in my classroom. I have nearly 25 minutes to reflect on life
without hearing my name repeated over and over. During this time of the morning, the
voices and thoughts will be my own. The time will be priceless. However, this solace is
short lived, because students trickle in slowly; some eating mass produced breakfast
sandwiches from the school cafeteria, wrapped in foil. At 7:15, the tone will sound and
my work day will begin, with the sounds of the morning announcements and the task of
taking first period attendance.

Up until that point, though, I can’t help looking at my desk calendar. It’s filled
with meetings and events. I have a staff meeting on Wednesday in the IMC with the
entire faculty, where we are usually crammed in, fed potato chips, veggies, and bottled
water, and attendance is taken by the principal’s secretary. These meetings usually last
an hour, and I have already seen the agenda. We are going to talk about how technology
is getting way ahead of us and now students are using it in really dangerous ways.
Students are sending naked pictures of people from the locker room, which is a felony—or “sexting.” As a staff, we are going to talk about what we should do if we are
confronted with this situation in our classrooms.

The next day, I have an IAT meeting during my second period planning to
discuss what we should do with a student of mine named Rick. He is a junior who seems
to have hit some challenges in his life. His grades have dropped off and he is acting
depressed. Is it drugs? Is he in love? Or, does it have to do with his mom getting remarried? I will meet next week in the guidance department conference room, sit around a large circular table, and talk with all of his teachers about what we are seeing. It will be an operation of triangulation.

As I see the date staring back to me, I wonder if Rick and his mother will be there. I like it when students are there. It provides for a really nice conference filled with a discussion that is not misunderstood. Everyone present has a stake in Rick’s life and everyone is there to hear about all of the details and how the solutions we come up with will affect Rick and everyone involved.

Next Friday, on the 20th, I have to have recommendation forms filled out for 12th graders, for the local scholarship competition. Senior English teacher always gets a ton. I’m lucky, I only have 12 to write so far, to fill out and write a recommendation for these students.

I have a department meeting slated for next Thursday to discuss summer reading choices. We’ve been trying to get our summer reading program up and running the past few years. What’s challenging is that teachers can’t agree on what books we should read. Some feel that students should read “the classics;” others feel that students should be exposed to contemporary titles because the textbook is filled with “classic.”

The meeting will inevitably discuss how our jobs are to push students to see that reading and writing is a real life activity. Nevertheless, this topic has caused disruptions in the department. People are whispering behind peoples’ back and turning this book selection into a personal venue to air grievances about personal vendettas about colleagues. The meeting should be interesting.
Next Tuesday is the local Rotary speech contest, where I am the faculty advisor, so I am preparing the three contestants to practice after school. This takes about an hour after school each day. The speeches are coming along nicely, and I think it will be a good day. It is always a day when I get to meet local business leaders, shake some hands, give a nice little speech about my teaching and my students, and it is a great public relations outreach program. Then the community will see it once it is aired on the local cable access channel.

Another piece of random scribbles on my desk is an email address of a parent who wants me to contact them. I’ve been notified that this student was involved in an accident in the weight room where she dropped a 45-pound plate on her foot and crushed it. There may need to be special accommodations needed when she gets back.

Furthermore, I have an association meeting scheduled to discuss the state of Ohio teacher professional code of conduct. It is a lengthy document, filled with all of the rules and regulations that go into being a public school teacher. We are held to a higher standard, which is good and bad.

Each month the scribbles on the desk calendar look the same, only the dates and specifics change. All of it is the stuff that fills my days with the periphery of teaching. Sometimes I get overwhelmed with all of this; most of the time I find comfort in being with my students and teaching. All of this other stuff makes for a long day, even though it needs to be discussed and evaluated because I want to be an informed professional.

I do this five days a week, teaching five sections a day, 180 days a year, with 25-30 students in each class for a total of 125-130 students. With each student comes a wide assortment of responsibilities. These everyday tasks can be special accommodations that
might be a part of a 504 plan, an IEP, or simply a special request from a parent and/or guidance counselor. These needs can range from allowing a student to sit up front to hear or see me better, get the student a copy of handouts before class, or to modify each test or quiz for student success (i.e., alter the content, have someone read the assessment to them, or develop an alternate form of assessment altogether).

In some cases, a student may need extra services due to English Language Learning (ELL) issues. Or, a student may need to take his or her test in an environment other than the classroom, due to test anxiety or other concerns that do not allow them to perform at their best. Or, their writing assignments may need to be modified to fit their particular needs in terms of word count, page requirements, or content. With increased emphasis on differentiated instruction, this is a part of my job every day.

Furthermore, there are social and legal concerns as well, where a student may have a restraining order on another person in class. These students are required to be apart (100 feet), except for the one hour they sit 30 feet from one another, staring daggers at each other in my classroom. In short, the restraining order pertains to only the rest of the world, and not my classroom.

This scenario has happened to me more than once. These restraining orders were brought on by altercations that happened during the school year, so it was better to just keep the student’s schedules the same rather than making more out of the situation and moving them. That fact makes my job even more challenging. Moreover, many other students know of this conflict, which promotes a sense of heightened awareness (and sometimes encouragement from other student, keeping this conflict alive) that extends into the halls, lunchroom, but is ultimately heightened in my classroom and
accompanied with me having regular conversations with local law enforcement officials, parents, counselors, and left to me to moderate the combatants when they are in the same room. It is an interesting dynamic, trying to carry on while keeping my eyes and ears sensitive to what is going on in the underlife of the classroom.

Cell phones are a nightmare. If these devices were not invented, most of my day would be vacant without seeing and or hearing students trying to text each other all day long; trying to sneak a text to their friend in study hall, in between classes, or in the bathroom. The high school love note rarely exists anymore; now there is texting.

The really technically advanced students put their phones in the pockets of their hooded sweatshirts and push the buttons on the phone without looking. Then, casually, they look down a few moments later to see what response they get once the message comes back. Texting and phones are rampant—and zero tolerance rules fill my day with being a police officer, looking for phones, listening for the buzzing of a phone on vibrate mode, and then taking the phone when it is disruptive. When a phone is confiscated, there is always a confrontation.

In terms of dealing with the rest of my students (i.e., the ones who work hard but may get lost because they do not have any special situations), my life feels as if it is on display while I am at school. Parents and other community members can email or call me about book titles that offend them or go against their beliefs because of content, language, or reading level. Whatever I say in my classroom, I know will be discussed in the high school halls in between class, or over cell phones, or via email, or simply at the dinner table answering the question, “What happened at school today, honey?”
Many times my English content is left out of these answers, but my personality or teaching method is emphasized: “Mr. Beery was in a bad mood today. Mr. Beery stood on a chair and lectured today. Or, Mr. Beery told a funny story about his cat.”

Certainly, all of these aspects are a part of my teaching on particular days, but not the only thing. I feel as if I have been invited into the community’s life via the students, which is great, but I have to be personally accountable for every word, gesture, or piece of writing I share.

One concern I have is without a full scope of my classroom and pedagogy, my actions may leave district administrators and community members with questions such as: how does the book title I read from fit the district’s Continuous Improvement Plan? What State of Ohio standard does my cat story fulfill? How does standing on a chair to illustrate a point differentiate my instruction? Ultimately how does all of this fulfill the district’s mission statement?

As my pedagogy extends outside of the classroom, it becomes challenging as well. Each individual assignment and grade for each student is posted to the Internet for parents to keep track of their student grades, with a small comment section for me to fill out. Comments can be made about homework, tests, quizzes, projects. Unfortunately, there is not space (or time) for elaborate narratives about student progress; rather, these observations are short and to the point, “does not do homework”; “slept in class”; “needs to come to class prepared”; “good job and keep working hard”; “student is making great progress.”

What these small comments fail to do is explain what really occurred with the student. More seriously, I do not feel as if I could effectively and regularly give
constructive, thoughtful feedback about each student’s progress. This is extremely demanding given the current institutional constraints. Certainly, all of these modes promote communication between teacher and home, because parents can call me throughout the year and schedule a conference, email me, or speak briefly about their student’s progress to voice concerns about classroom practices and course objectives. All of this is productive and great when it works, but it is very limited.

Sadly, too many communications only revolve around problems. Perhaps it is a sign of our society and exists in every workplace to focus on the negatives be not as many calls refer to about successes and/or gratitude. I have heard from colleagues that some parents call with demands and statements such as, “I pay your salary, so you should be available at my convenience. It’s your job to figure out how to get her grades up.” These are exceptions, but they exist.

Communication between home and school is a huge part of my job. Many times, some of the most interesting conversations are with educators’ students. Since education is such a dynamic profession, each educator has a little different perspective on how they see educating high school students. The debate is typically provocative, yet can be very enlightening to see how other professionals see education. The progression of education, especially from elementary to college—with high school at a crucial moment—can lead to some energetic discussions.

High school teaching is interesting because many people think they know exactly what and how to do my job. At one time people were in a classroom and watched the educational process firsthand from the student’s perspective. As a result, people remember what it was like for them, so now they interject. Either they had a good
experience or they had a horrible time—and now they want to further this successful relationship with school or inflict injury on teachers as a result of past scars.

In many ways this is inaccurate because I suspect that many of these attitudes are rooted in people who long ago (or not so long ago) were students. Teachers are easy targets because people who say such things sat in a desk and watched the educational process firsthand—and as a result—now feel they are experts on funding, pedagogy, and assessment. Unfortunately what they missed from this limited perspective is the intense training, planning, and higher-level thinking that make day-to-day lessons successful learning opportunities. Moreover, in the age of standards, accountability, and security concerns, schools are significantly different.

Professionally speaking, I can be evaluated up to three times a year; beginning, middle, and end of the year, based on the State of Ohio standards. My objectives need to be clearly stated to justify how what I am doing fits with what the students have done and where they will go for the rest of the year and the rest of their high school experience. After the formal observation, within a week the administrator and I will sit down and discuss what happened the day they came in to see me. Formal paperwork is filled out, which is sent to the board of education, which is then reviewed and a decision is made whether my teaching and professional acumen is acceptable—and I keep my job and I am eligible for pay raise, where my salary is public knowledge and can be accessed and discussed at any point.

Another concern because I work with a sensitive population (i.e., people under the age of 18), is that my students are required to get paperwork filled out (by parent or guardian) to give them permission to use the Internet, have any of their work posted in
school publications, and whether or not their work can be referenced to the public. All of these pieces of paperwork are filled out separately and need to be filled out and recorded accurately.

Once the paperwork comes back, the next step for me is to enter the specific decisions that were made for each student. This work is time consuming and must be done with absolute accuracy. Depending on what is signed off on, students will be (un)able to access the resource that their parent/guardians have deemed as appropriate for their student. If this is recorded inaccurately and a student’s work is published without prior consent, that leads to a whole host of other issues.

In addition, I have to make sure students on reduced or free lunch programs are given the opportunity to take advantage of such programs without embarrassment. I do not want to make the announcement, “Who needs a reduced lunch form?” for the whole world to see and hear who needs special assistance. High school is hard enough without adding embarrassment due to economic strife to their life.

Furthermore, as an English teacher my classroom is interrupted more than any other subject in the school. Days are lost for school pictures, blood drive information, school counselor career discussions, test prep information, character education programs, “make good choices” and say no to drugs and alcohol seminars, and anything else that needs to reach all of the students. When asked why, the reason is always, “all students need four years of English; we know where we can find all students.”

And colleagues? What colleagues? There are many days when I don’t even see the people I see near me because we are all buried in our classrooms with too much to do and unable to speak to one another.
College Days and Students

The typical day when I was teaching college students was very different than the high school day that I just discussed. In fact, it was a horrible disruption to my life, coming from college teacher. My central anxiety, I think, from teaching college students and moving to high school students was because I felt like in addition to teaching; there was now a greater sense of responsibility with my high school students. I had to keep track of everyone and everything they did in the halls, in the cafeteria, in their cars, and at home. And high school students can have messy lives, as they try to negotiate the terrain between childhood and adulthood.

That isn’t to say that I didn’t care about the lives of my college students; however, in my college classroom, the students had a choice to attend or not and I didn’t need to chase them down if they were not in class. And my college students were adults so they could manage pretty well independently. Also, I was not constantly notified by administrators, guidance counselors, and colleagues about specific issues my students may have been dealing with on any given day. Certainly, since my high school students are children who need all of this is a huge factor in my classroom, but it was quite daunting for me to go from close to zero information about students, to full disclosure about students from multiple sources.

The first exposure I had to teaching college students was as a graduate student. For those two years, I taught one class that was capped off at 20 students; talk about a dream and a situation that I didn’t fully realize it at the time. The first time I collected 25 essays, I thought it was a crazy amount, but now, as I some years collect 125 at one time, I dream of the days of grad school. Of course, in addition to teaching I was required to
take a full load of graduate seminars. I was busy with both teaching and taking classes, but it was a great experience and one that has had a huge impact on my teaching.

Initially, after finishing my master’s work, I was unsure about what I should do: continue with PhD work at another university, get a job in writing somewhere, travel abroad to teach English, or I even had the thought of going to law school. While all of these avenues danced in my head, I kept thinking that all I really wanted to do was teach; however with a MA in English Composition I did not have a state teaching license, so if I wanted to teach, it needed to be as a part-time adjunct instructor, teaching freshmen English composition at a college or university.

I entered into the part-time teaching pool, but I had many people telling me to only teach this way just as a means to an end, either as I sent out applications, took a break from school, or took classes towards something else, which is what I did, earning my state teaching license.

Quickly, I realized that the part-time adjunct pool of instructors is truly the intellectual working poor. I am not going to go into the horrors of what people do to themselves, I guess, to have the prestige and academic freedom of teaching college students, but these dedicated people are incredibly underpaid and overworked. During my term in the part-time adjunct pool, I spoke to many people, mostly women, who taught six to eight sections (at three or four different campuses) with 25 students per section—and being paid mere pennies per hour (and no medical benefits) for their hard work. In the recent years, I am happy that part-time adjunct instructors are starting to have more of a voice in some collective bargaining agreements to help resolve these huge disparities. However unfortunate that colleges and universities do this to people,
these institutions prolong this practice because part-time instructors continue to work in these situations.

As far as my experience, I taught two sections (2:15-3:55 and 8:15-9:25) on Mondays and Wednesdays. I generally got to my office at 1:30, checked my mailbox, grabbed the materials I may have needed, spoke with a colleague or two, and then made my way to the building and the classroom where I taught.

My strategy was to stroll into the classroom at exactly 2:15, marking that class started the moment I got there. It wasn’t that I thought I was that important, but I didn’t like the awkward moment right before class. I liked my students and was friendly to them, but didn’t want to engage in a lot of extra conversations. It may appear to be antisocial, but, it was my way of keeping the line drawn between teacher and student, since many of my students and I were doing the same thing: going to school full time, taking classes, and working. Certainly, since we were engaged in many of the same activities, if we talked enough we could find many commonalities and probably could become “buddies.” Sadly, that would have complicated matters enormously because at the end of the semester, I would have had to put down a grade for them.

Another variable was having students who were older than me. At first I was scared of having such a dramatic age difference among students in my classroom. I was prepared for teaching (and keeping at bay) 18-year-old college freshman, but I was unprepared and petrified of teaching and being around 53-year-old college freshmen who were 25+ years older than me. It wasn’t that I had anything against older students. They just took the hit as I was trying to negotiate my new role as teacher. Intellectually I kept telling myself that they may be older than me, but I had more experience in a
classroom, but in my heart that didn’t comfort me a whole lot because I felt like I needed to treat them differently, so at first, that meant, I kept my distance.

Nonetheless, the older students I had were very kind and determined and eventually changed my thinking forever. One day I remember well was while a class and I were working in small groups giving each other feedback on our essays, and a couple of young members of a group were off topic talking about what kind of subwoofers they were going to put in their cars. One of the more mature freshman group members quickly and not so quietly informed them that they were paying for this class and didn’t appreciate them screwing around during class. The car stereo enthusiast quieted, and at that instant, the class and my thinking changed dramatically, and my anxiety with older students eroded—and from that moment on I looked forward to seeing mature students in my class. Generally when I had older students in my classroom, I had built in classroom management authorities, keeping the peace, and keeping wanderers on the straight and narrow.

Now that isn’t to suggest that I didn’t have strange moments in my classroom after that pivotal moment in my teaching. Again, those unexpected moments in our classrooms are what make us better teachers. However, even after close to 10 years, I can’t think of many moments that radically altered my classroom environment—or can’t think of moments I was overly engage with the personal lives of my students. Of course, there are a few.
**Mascot Girl**

One such moment was a student who sat in the back corner of the room, sometimes at a table situated back there and sometimes on the floor. This young lady frequently showed up to my 2:15 class wearing pajamas, slippers, and her high school letter jacket, with disheveled hair and her thick brown-rimmed glasses crooked on her face. The first day of class of class I suspected we had an interesting character on our hands when she told the class, at considerable volume, that her career goal was to be a professional sports mascot. She didn’t care what team, she said, she, “just wanted to wear a furry head and do handsprings, cartwheels, and jumping jacks on the sidelines.”

A few days later the class and I began the class by writing for 10 minutes on the topic, “My most embarrassing moment was. . .” Many of the students started writing very quickly, but one student in the front far corner of the room was clicking his pen as he was trying to think of a topic. The first time I heard it, it went without notice, but immediately after the third click, “mascot girl” (as she came to be known by her own prompting) began, shrieking and yelling while holding her ears, “Oh my God, stop that clicking; the noise is deafening—aghhh.”

Mascot girl ran out of the classroom, leaving all of her stuff and the entire class bewildered. She showed up for the next class as if nothing happened. However, the next week she dropped my class and I never saw her again (at least I don’t think so, as I watch various sporting events on TV).
The Gambler

Another moment was with a student who showed up to class late and he stood outside the classroom door; just standing there and he wouldn’t come in the door; he just stood in the doorway. I went over to the door and asked if all was well and invited this young man in to join the class. Curiously, he said while appearing to be out of breath, “I’m good Mr. Beery, and I’m fine right here.”

I went back to teaching while this student stood quietly just outside the door and the rest of the class continued to question, snicker, and wonder what was going on. At the midpoint of the class, during a 10-minute break, this student finally came into the room to speak with me. I asked, once again, “Are you okay?”

To this, the student answered, “I lost $7500 in last night’s football game. I thought it was a lock; now I have a bunch of guys who want to kick my ass.”

As I got closer to him I noticed the pervasive smell of alcohol and told him that he should go back to his dorm room. Two days later, I was notified that this student dropped my class. His friends told me that he moved to Las Vegas and enrolled in a school where his new major was a “BA in Sports Handicapping.”

James

Both Mascot Girl and The Gambler stand out to me, but another student almost haunts me. James was a tall, slight, quiet, blond-haired young man. At first impression he was very polite, friendly, and harmless to everyone in my classroom.

However, during a small group exercise for an essay where James was supposed to write three to four pages on an “experience that changed who he is or how he sees the
world,” I noticed the three people James was working with, moving from him, trying to get away from him. Immediately I went over to one of the girls who moved away. As I approached this young lady, she said, “James is scaring us with his story.”

At the end of class I stopped James before he left and asked him what his essay topic was. He was shaking a little bit and seemed nervous, but he informed me that it was the story of how he was put in jail for killing four people when he was 16. He was high on marijuana, driving a car, and he turned around to reach another can of beer from the backseat of the car, and as he turned around, he lost control of the car and careened into a bus stop, killing the four people. In the essay, James went into graphic details about the sights and sounds of killing four people with a car and then the ensuing jail time he had to endure.

I told him that some of his classmates were a little bit upset about hearing about this episode, and since he seemed nervous and shaking, I asked him if he was okay with writing this story. To this James said, “Sure, my doctor, therapist, and pastor think it would be good for me to write about it.”

To this statement, I explained further how some of his classmates were feeling. James was adamant about this topic, because as he said, “It fits the topic, right?”

I said, “Yes, but let’s write this in our own group (you and I) in the next class.”

James left the classroom happy that he was going to be able to write his story with me, his teacher.

During the next two weeks James was missing from class. He caught up with me at the beginning of the third week on campus in front of the library and wanted to show me his progress with his essay. After digging his crumbled essay out of his backpack, he
pointed to the second page. He said, “You see where the essay drops off to nothing?
That is where I stopped; fell on the floor, crying, and my mom found me curled up under
my bed.”

I nearly vomited and said, “Oh God, James, we can’t write this if you are hurting
yourself.”

To this, James said, while shaking three prescription bottles, “No, Mr. B, as long
as I have these in me now, we will be just fine. I’ll have another draft for you next
class.”

I was not fine, so I contacted colleagues, composition chair, and psychological
services for James and myself. A week later I received in my mailbox James’ drop form
and I never saw him again.

During my four years of teaching college students, these are the three of the
stand-out moments where I was confronted with my students’ personal lives and the
challenges they face each day. Certainly, as an English teacher I read a lot of essays
about what students did with their free time, experiences that shaped them, and what
they value in their lives, but it wasn’t the constant barrage that I have each day in my
high school classroom. Again, the age of students does make a huge difference, but it is
still incredibly emotionally taxing on a teacher, just the same.

My Teaching in the College Classroom

Pedagogically speaking, I felt I had more choice and the flexibility to be
experimental in my college classroom, since I taught two class periods a week and had
an hour and 40 minutes each day. Generally speaking, each day started out with some
kind of large group activity in the form of either a discussion of a reading, a topic of
general interest, and of course, a time for writing—either from a prompt or as a
freewriting exercise. During this time, as a large group of 25 people in the classroom, we
would read, write, speak, and listen about a particular subject or concept pertaining to
writing.

After 25 minutes of introducing and discussing the topic of the day, I would give
my students 25 minutes in a small group of three or four students that I designed to do
something with the skill we have just discussed. In these small groups, students needed
to participate and produce something to share with the larger group when the class
resumed after a 10-minute break. After the break, we would spend roughly 30 minutes
discussing their experiences with the concept and our findings from the small group
session. And with the last 10 minutes left in the class, I would talk about what we would
be doing in the future. This lesson plan played out quite nicely each day.

In terms of the content of the class during the hour and 40 minutes I just outlined,
I felt like I was able to discuss many kinds of topics without the fear of having a
tremendous amount of parental involvement. I realize that my experience is a very
limited one, but I only had a handful of parents who contacted me and told me about
special situations with their students. In my brief time, I did not have a parent call and/or
email me about grades or assignments. I have heard recently from friends of mine,
however, that parental involvement with college students is increasing in terms of
commenting on assignments, assessment, and/or grades.

Also, since a university is so large there isn’t the constant comparison between
teachers who are teaching next door. Even the constant comparing between what one
class does with the same teacher. That isn’t to say that it doesn’t happen at the college level, but it is less likely that within one self contained high school building with many more students.

After I taught that class, I had close to 4 hours until I taught my next class. During this time I held my office hours where students could come speak to me either after or before their class. Typically I met with my students in a common area in the student union, in the library, or near the food court. This gave us the opportunity to get something to eat, discuss their writing and/or the class, but if students were not scheduled for my office hours, it gave me close to 4 hours to plan, grade, or read. After meeting with students, planning, and/or grading, I would go to my second class of the day and do the same lesson plan and I would leave campus around 9:30 p.m.

Collegial and Academic Freedom During My College Teaching Days

The close to 4 hours between the end of my first class and the start of my second class each day was glorious. While I was on a college campus, I enjoyed the energy—and especially the dialogue and excitement of reading, writing, and speaking about contemporary theory with colleagues and experts in the field. English professors and instructors are adept at recognizing and using literary terms as a part of everyday existence. In many cases, they aren’t afraid to discuss gender representations, hegemonic relationships, and the master narratives that may or may not exist in life. To that end, I had wonderful discussions about the symbolic meanings of advertisements, music videos, or movies. In fact, many times, to the chagrin of people of family members, the resounding complaint was, “why can’t you watch a movie to enjoy it—not over analyze
it like you would with your professor friends.” Or, why do you always ruin the experience, looking too deeply into it, whether it is a song, a poem, a movie, a TV show, a piece of news, or political speech. These comments were made to me after having wonderful conversations with university faculty members.

It makes sense to be, because for English professors, language is powerful, and they thrive on ambiguity and enjoy peeling back the layers of arguments, popular culture, politics, and social institutions. Digging beneath the surface of life to see where ideas originate and what makes them so intriguing and influential is one of the goals. Even the way sentences are constructed (as grammar is the hallmark of most peoples’ perceptions of an English professor) are studied at great length. Writing style guides are filled with rules, conventions, and purposes that are constructed and argued about; countless literature anthologies with every genre imaginable are produced and used in classrooms all over college campuses and these were all fodder for conversation and preparing for being a better teacher.

*Sorry but I’m Picking on Professors*

I realize that I only got to see a limited glimpse to what college teaching contains. I am sure that college faculty members have far more challenges throughout their professional lives than I ever saw. They are pressed for time, underpaid, overworked, doing committee work, serving on thesis and dissertation committees, advising, navigating publication and tenure concerns, budgetary matters and meeting after meeting discussing college and university goals and programs—in addition to
having busy personal lives, too. Of course, too, professors have graduate students
burdening them with theses and dissertations picking on them.

Their life is jam-packed.

I would argue, though, that a college professor’s professional life is not
consumed with as much day-to-day responsibilities to their students or with the teaching
tasks that grind at them each and every day. I realize that they teach adults and that is
incredibly different; however, how much do college professors deal with the possibility
of their students taking high stakes tests that could impact their careers? How much do
college professor’s deal with licensing and certification to teach their subject? How often
are they students themselves taking new coursework to help in their teaching? How
much do college professors have contact with students’ parents about grades, classroom
procedures, and assignments? How many college professors teach five sections a day,
every day? How many college professors have training in classroom management and
how to present a lesson—in addition to the theory of their discipline? How many
professors have to keep track of all of their students’ attendance?

I’m only guessing here, and I know many of these questions are broad brushes,
but I would suspect that many of these questions are not a part of every professor’s
working life.

The reason for my questions of college faculty members is not to disparage them
or to set up a straw man argument, or to even suggest an “I work harder” scenario.
Furthermore, it isn’t to win over the high school teaching audience (i.e., kiss up to them).
Rather, it is to point out common perceptions.
Let’s be honest, I think a university professor’s schedule sound great, but I wonder why there is such a lopsided perception between high school teachers and college professors? What can be done to close this gap—to eliminate high school vs. college and making it one educational institution? Is it based on the fact that most college professors have Ph.D.s? Does “professor” have more prestige than “teacher?” Does an advanced degree automatically make professors more respected in our culture? Does professor suggest a scholar who works in unchartered waters where only the intellectually superior and delicate geniuses go—and teacher suggests someone who works in an environment we all know with children?

There are many questions here because how many times some college professors are accused of being brilliant, but can’t teach? This gets at the institutions of universities; are they only concerned with publications, presentations, and patents? Where do brilliant, thoughtful and reflective teachers who reach many students, but do not have “Dr.” in front of their name fit in? How much is their talent worth? Can a phenomenal teacher be respected and tenured without publications? I would argue to answer these questions we would need to investigate all of the different institutions to see all of the different situations. And even then, we would come away with different ideas.
CHAPTER IX

THE CLASH BETWEEN COLLEGE AND HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH

Introduction

In this chapter I try to dissect the differences between teaching high school English and then what it means to teach college English (that I illustrated in the previous chapter). This chapter is my attempt to compare two institutions that are quite different and have many uncertain and little changing attributes. And then I discuss the teachers and students who occupy each space as they negotiate this tension because both high schools and colleges have unique characteristics. Finally, I address the issues that surface in what it means (and is perceived) in teaching in both environments.

My attempt is to show how each of these environments study many of the same pieces of literature and teach the same skills; however, the way it is accomplished is very different. Furthermore, there always seems to be a struggle between high school and college about where should students learn skills they “need” to have to succeed in college. Is it the high school English teachers responsibility—and college professors should assume that all of their students have the skills when they come in the door? Or, should college classrooms be another place for teaching certain skills, even if it means derailing schedules and not getting to as much material? I finish this chapter with a discussion about who takes priority—teachers or students—in each of these institutions. And then how that translates into doing the business of teaching and learning.
English Studies Broadly Speaking: The Differences and Possibilities

English is a dynamic discipline that can extend into many other disciplines because of its study of the language. Generally, high school English teachers and college English professors want students to think like English scholars and to see the world through the eyes of a reading, writing, and person, where the surface may be just the beginning of the analysis no matter what level or what the content is.

The content of an English class is the process of reading, writing, and thinking about language. That means the text in an English classroom could be a book, film, television show, podcast, newspapers article, or website. This propensity makes some English colleagues uneasy, forcing them back to an approach of “what we do best,’ the teaching of poetry, drama and novels ‘in and of themselves’” (Spellmeyer, 2003, p. 169) because that is comfortable for English teachers, and to a large degree, it is the place people outside of English feel we need to be.

What makes English challenging is the class content could be a nonfiction selection about a mathematician, or a fictional piece about a geologist, a dramatic screenplay about a historian, or even a speech given by a psychologist. All of these genres could fall into English studies and have varying degrees of merit and complexities. Not all disciplines can work with such flexibility and broad stretches into other disciplines. Even though this is unique, this fact also makes English studies problematic, and many argue, too subjective, soft, and uncertain. In that vein, some could argue that English studies contain everything; however, in certain contexts, this “everything” could mean “nothing,” which could leave English as a vacant catch-all that is hard to categorize.
As English teachers we value “foundations, traditions, and canons, whether we wish to preserve them in amber or subversively explode them” (Spellmeyer, 2003, p. 242). Both high school and college faculty members value fiction, nonfiction, and drama. Their classrooms involve reading these texts; dissecting them for meaning; synthesizing multiple pieces of material and creating responses to these texts with informal or formal writing assignments; and hopefully re-envisioning the text and what they originally thought about themselves and the world around them.

The separation between high school and college is fascinating. As a high school teacher I hear from colleagues the phrase, “we need to get our students ready for college.” The problem is I am not sure we, as high school teachers, are fully preparing students because of many of the pressures I outlined earlier. Furthermore, there is still a sense of rigidness in English departments, where colleagues are tentative about trying new ideas and teaching without a net. That is one of the challenges to not so much change the minds but perhaps change the hearts of these colleagues.

What we are actually in charge of is giving them more experience and more play with our discipline because “most students in college composition classes nationwide do exactly what they did in high school, writing about short stories, novels, poetry, and plays—literary pseudo-scholarship masquerading as something else” (Spellmeyer, 2003, p. 244). The task for college should be to go in-depth with something, perhaps, students have seen. Or, expose students to different ideas and activities.

Nonetheless, there is a divide between what high school teachers think students should be able to do when they get to college—and expectations that college professors have for their incoming students from high school. In my experience, high school
teachers drill the widely held “basics” of English studies—grammar, five-paragraph essays with properly placed thesis statements, no first person writing, and canonical pieces. College professors, on the other hand, want students to do more with these ideas—use grammar in thoughtful, creative, perhaps “wrong” ways, experiment with essay structure and thesis statements for rhetorical sophistication, use interesting, smart first-person writing, and being exposed to and able to think critically about non-canonical pieces. There’s the rub; high school teachers doing one thing and college professors wanting another.

This divide between high school and college is unproductive and harmful to teachers and professors. It ultimately trickles down to students and the way we think and feel about our profession. The bottom line is teachers and professors need to understand each other and the differences in each of our arenas. This would require compromise and change on both parts, and I would argue to utilize what I outlined earlier in this work: giving high school teachers the opportunity to teach without a net, to better prepare teachers and students.

Throughout the rest of this chapter I will explain the differences I see in college and high school teaching in terms of content, political pressures, academic freedom, accountability, and student demographics. The point of this outline is not to disparage any of these educators; rather, it is to highlight the differences and then bring to light the possibilities of where high school teachers could learn from college professors—and where college professors could learn from high school teachers. In both areas, it would mean teachers and professors writing their own experiences and using them in their classes to push students to construct their own knowledge.
A college English curriculum typically revolves around a certain time period or type of literature with particular “attention to every traditional historical period in English and American literature” (Menand, 2010, p. 90). Within those strands of the curriculum also contain seminar courses in composition, women’s studies, gay and lesbian, African-American, multicultural, or combinations for interdisciplinary purposes in mind. At the graduate level, students can specialize further, to go deeper into one of these areas of study; however, “if doctoral education in English were a cartoon character, then about thirty years ago, it zoomed straight off a cliff, went into a terrifying fall, grabbed a branch on the way down, and has been clinging to that branch ever since” (Menand, 2010, p. 143). Unfortunately, this shows how our market driven economy doesn’t value reading, and writing. Sadly, I’m sure we could find other disciplines in the humanities that have suffered the same fate.

As a result, students entering English graduate programs are told that they are entering a lottery of uncertainty and should prepare themselves by “turning [their graduate training] in the direction of some practical skill with which it is already associated. English departments can become writing programs, even publishing programs” (Menand, 2010, p. 55) which creates a certain tension, making it more practical to answer to job market concerns, while still keeping it a liberal arts field full of historical and theoretical pieces.

In terms of college, students “take the teacher and not the course” because the teacher makes all of the decisions and controls the content. I suspect that to a certain degree cultural perspectives expect professors to be eccentric and to use unorthodox
pedagogy or extreme content that is filled with their own politics and ideology when they teach their subject. That is why professors enjoy teaching—and that is why students take or steer away from their classes. “Professors enjoy social authority, they virtually monopolize the business of knowledge production in many areas, and they have intimate and largely unsupervised access to developing minds” (Menand, 2010, p. 129). This, I would argue, is what John Dewey along with Arthur Lovejoy envisioned in the idea of “Academic Freedom” when they founded the American Association of University Professors in 1915 to separate the teaching within a college classroom with a professor’s research and scholarly inquiry without fear of begin punished. Menand (2010) continued:

Professors’ politics are usually a low-level issue in higher education. They become a high-level, and sometimes inflammatory, issue during times of public anxiety: during turn-of-the-century debates over immigration, for example, or when the United States entered the First World War. The politics of professors was an issue during the McCarthy period in the early Cold War, and at the time of protest against the war in Vietnam. They became an issue in the so-called culture wars in the late 1980’s and again after the attacks of September 11, 2001. (p. 131)

This was seen recently during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008 when his relationship and affiliation with scholar, teacher, and former member of the Weather Underground, William Ayers, was scrutinized. Ayers’ Vietnam era exploits were then translated into his feelings about the current conflicts the United States is involved in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. And more seriously, Ayer’s ideas and relationship with then Senator Obama were then used to discredit Obama’s character, ideology, and patriotism, inferring that these are his positions on these matters as well. Dr. Ayers has
been cited many times in this work; will that translate into people questioning my ideology? I guess only time will tell.

In terms of accountability, college professors are far less impacted by this issue on a day-to-day basis, in terms of standards. There isn’t the push for students to perform on state mandated tests. Certainly college professors must deal with accreditations and association concerns. For colleges and universities to receive recognition of reaching this honor, as well as federal funding as a result of these affiliations, “an institutional self-study team visit every ten years became standard procedure among degree granting colleges and universities” (Thelin, 2004, p. 265). I’m sure these institutions make these changes, but I am guessing there is more emphasis on faculty members making these changes, which will translate to student learning and achievement.

What college professors must deal with is personal accountability (attaining tenure) based on the merits of their research and writing. This meritocracy and focus on the professors contributions to their field forces them to always show their influence within the college as well as the field as a whole—as well as—the respect they bring to their university. As a result, as Clark Kerr (2001) pointed out, there is a “threefold class structure of what used to be ‘the faculty’: those who only do research [and publish], those who only teach (and they are largely in an auxiliary role), and those who still do some of both” (p. 32). As a result, some students feel honored (or discouraged) because they get to take a class with the expert they really wanted to work and study with on their degrees. However, it isn’t a guarantee in the current system.

This system sets up an interesting dynamic for professors too. On one hand, it gives them the opportunity to do many things within their discipline, albeit while being
over worked and underpaid; however, it creates, “faculty members [that] are less
member[s] of the particular university and more colleagues within their national
academic discipline groups” (Kerr, 2001, p. 33). This is a double-edged sword because
it allows professors to associate with other individuals and institutions to fully
understand their discipline. However, this dynamic doesn’t always allow professors to
collaborate and teach with people within the same campus, to build community.

The student-professor relationship in colleges and university could be perceived
in a couple ways. On one hand, a college or university is a business and what they sell is
credit hours and students are simply clients or customers—and professors are service
providers who help students get the credit they need, so they can take the next class and
ultimately finish with a degree that will get them a job. Of course, that is the cynical
view and perhaps only largely true for general education classes before students have
declared a major. I recognize that this view is inhumane and not wholly true.

Conversely, on the other end of this continuum, students represent the future of
the field that professors teach. Students take classes, particularly upper-level classes,
because they are engrossed in it and hope to further their studies in it. For professors this
is wonderful because they have dedicated a lot of time into this study and the hunger and
enthusiasm of young students to the field energize and remind the professor what they
love about it. This keeps professors full of vigor, energized, and teaching. The impetus
of this involvement between professor and student falls largely on the student. For a
student to have these conversations with a professor they must initiate contact with the
professor and seek them out to discuss and discover the possibilities of the field.
High School

A high school English curriculum strives to give students a good basis in English studies, or if a person is cynical, it gives students four years of a required course. Certainly there are different approaches, but what I am going to suggest are experiences I have seen or what other public high schools in my area do with their curriculum. I am not suggesting that these ways are the only (or desired and best) ways, I am simply outlining.

Generally, high school English content is geared towards a grade level of students. And along with that, high school English departments divide students into more specific ability groupings: Advanced Placement, Honors, College Preparatory, and Basic. Of course, there are many names given to these ability placements between other schools, but these are the central, mainstream levels of English instruction.

Within each of these instruction strata, there is a particular type of literature in focus for the school year. A 9th and 10th grade curriculum is generally an introduction to many genres of literature. The school year is set up thematically, so students can be exposed to a few examples of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama. A typical 11th grade curriculum, though, revolves around American literature and a twelfth grade curriculum focuses on British literature. Both of these courses follow the emergence of each of these types of literature in a chronological fashion, basically following a timeline and covering the canonical writers of the time.

In the high school English classroom, many of the book titles I teach haven’t changed in years. “The literary canon structures an imaginary shared culture, perpetuated cultural models accepted by and passed down from teacher to student from generation to
“generation” (Bender-Slack, 2010, p. 188). The textbooks are filled with the same canonical writers each time the books are renewed. I’ve heard comments from parents, “Oh, dragging that one out again, huh?” However, when I present different titles, a new set of challenges emerge.

In terms of a high school teacher showing his or her politics or making their teaching an overt political act is very challenging. There is too much at stake and too many variables at play within a high school community. The messages that a high school teacher conveys in their classrooms goes throughout the building immediately, down the hall to other students, teachers, and administrators, and to the dinner tables at home. Since a high school community is relatively small, teachers’ messages turn into a “telephone game” throughout the day where what is said is repeated and many times distorted and lacking context.

In addition, there is a feeling that high school teachers should not be indoctrinating students into thinking and behaving in certain ways. Challenge them, yes, but do not preach to them and certainly do not make certain ways of thinking part of their grade.

As a result, academic freedom in a high school is very much controlled, since parents, other teachers, administrators, and other community members have such easy access to teachers by way of email or telephone. What comes into their homes from the classrooms falls right back on the teacher, sometimes with the reminder that tax payer dollars pay a teacher’s salary.
A public high school is relegated by a massive amount of standards, goals, and plans that are attached to students learning, but more interesting, to funding and public notoriety. As Diane Ravitch (2010) argued after being on the leading edge of testing,

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the leading reform ideas in American education were accountability and choice. These ideas were at the heart of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind program, which he signed into law in January 2002. No Child Left Behind—or NCLB—changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality. The rise or fall of test scores in reading and mathematics became the critical variable in judging students, teachers, principals, and schools. Missing from NCLB was any reference to what students should learn; this was left to each state to determine. (p. 15)

As a result, high school teachers are expected to straddle the line of neutrality, staying with a safe curriculum that would not rock the boat on the state report card according to NCLB, while not seeming too conservative and not acting too liberal. Extreme behavior from a high school teacher scares the community and is cause for excitement for administrators, board members, and the voting public. The reason to test in many schools is not to measure how much students have learned; rather, it is to achieve high scores. This has become the American education strategy.

The one thing that can’t be overlooked is the fact that high schools contain people who are young, between the ages of 14 and 18, and are very impressionable. As a result, the reasons for some of these institutional constraints are safe guards for teachers, students, administrators, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, high schools are designed to prepare young people to operate on their own.
The Main Divergence

The biggest difference I see between high school and college is the priorities that each of these institutions put on teachers and students. A college or university seems to be more of a teacher (professor) friendly environment. I realize that some of my professor friends and mentors may take exception to this statement; however, professors are in charge of their content, they have the freedom to teach what they know, and they can do it without a fear of being subjected to too punitive measures. Furthermore, their students are forced to take ownership for their learning, and are forced to seek the professor out if they have a problem, question, or concern.

On the other hand, high schools (and K-12 institutions in general) are set up with an emphasis on the student. I understand that this is critical and very much needed because younger students and parents need this type of guidance. Not only that, but K-12 school districts are vital pieces of local communities and must put forth a positive, active message to the local voters too. For example, the school district that employs me has made their motto that is placed all throughout the community the acronym P.A.C.E for “Pride, Attitude, Community, and Excellence” (Nordonia Hills City Schools website). There isn’t a school function, led by the superintendent that doesn’t include this phrase, and it always said as, “setting the P.A.C.E for the rest of the state.”

Closely behind in district rhetoric, comes the district motto, “where individual student learning and achievement is our core business.” On the surface, I think both of these ideas sound fine because trying to achieve greatness and having a common purpose is needed. Not only that, but that is what my job (along with my colleagues) is: to teach students and allow them to achieve far more than they thought they could.
However, I take a few issues with “P.A.C.E.” and the corporate sounding motto. For starters, I don’t like using business models and catchy catch-phrases for education. It lacks humanity and individuality; we are not simply churning out products as each class graduates. To me, though, it seems to promote a sense of mass production and efficiency, just as the Ford Motor Company, where “Quality it Job 1.”

Furthermore, I would argue that “P.A.C.E” leaves out all of the thoughtful, creative teachers who get students to learn and achieve. On one occasion, I shared my reservations about the district motto, and I was told that this was a district that focuses on the children (i.e., students) and not the adults (i.e. teachers), so that leaves me, along with other teachers asking: where do we fit? What is our role? And how can we shift this perception a bit? Sadly, these are all questions teachers will be forced to think about as they continue to negotiate personal and professional spaces. And, it may be a long time until we fully understand all of the answers.
CHAPTER X

TEACHING WITHOUT A NET: MOVING FORWARD

Introduction

This chapter is the final chapter of this work. In it, I try to discuss how teachers occupy an incredibly uncertain space in society that gets scrutinized, underfunded, and people always have a solution because they sat in a desk (as a student) at some point. Even with that said, teaching without a net starts in a teachers’ lives, and then moves into and transforms our classrooms, if we become reading and writing in all aspects of our lives. What comes out of those wonderful moments is informed advocacy and being passionate about our professions.

This chapter addresses the latest high stakes assessments and the impossible task of trying to measure with absolute certainty how students and districts will be evaluated with such metrics. The tension exists because there are some people who feel as if specific tests can measure and provide certainty to what students are learning. This chapter discusses how teaching without a net could coordinate with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and how I hope teaching without a net will influence English education.

Furthermore, this chapter looks to remind colleagues that these moments of teaching without a net can occur many times through our lives. It is, in some ways, a rallying cry for English teachers to get engaged in what they teach by, reading, writing,
and sharing these narratives with their students. And the best news of all is teaching without a net is something that a teacher can do with state-mandated standards. Teachers can do it all—nurture themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers and then collaboratively work with colleagues for student achievement, even across course boundaries to create meaningful moments of teaching and learning.

In the Trenches

During the first 3 years of my high school teaching career, I had the great fortune to befriend and work closely with (until he retired) a 35+ year teaching veteran named Dave. He gave my transition into high school a wonderful foundation. In our interactions at school, Dave was smart, practical, relaxed in his demeanor, and serious about his teaching, and he seemed to embrace the cyclical nature of education. He was extremely professional and positive too—even after 35 years being in the classroom. Dave loved teaching literature, talking about his bowling league, a good round of golf, and a Manhattan with just the right amount of crushed ice. He was my mentor, friend, and colleague, as we talked in the halls in between classes or ate lunch in his room each day discussing our families, our teaching, good books, the current New Yorker or politics, and how we would fix the world.

Each day, as we went into our classrooms for yet another teaching period, Dave would say, “Here we go, Mr. Beery, once more into the fray.” And every day, whether it was sunny, snowing, hot, or warm, Dave, at some point in the day, would always say his day was going “smooth as silk. If I was any better, I would be you.”
After 35 years, Dave had a theory that high school teachers go through certain phases during their careers. According to him, the first three years, a teacher is very rough and quite unskilled, even in the best scenario and has no idea what has hit them. They plan each day without really thinking about what they are doing. The name of the game is survival and moving on to the next unit. By their fifth year, or so, a teacher begins to get good at what they do in their classrooms with their students, but they begin to see what is going on with the school board, the administration, and the politics of his or her colleagues. By the seventh year, according to Dave, a high school teacher gets frustrated (read in his words: pissed) and either tries to fight the system by becoming an active member in the teacher’s union, or by joining the ranks of an administrator as a principal, curriculum director and/or superintendent. After the seventh year, things go this way for another few years, until it finally lets up around year 15. Then it is smooth sailing.

After the 15th year, Dave feels like a teacher has very few major surprises. They have seen a wide variety of student behavior in their classroom; they have seen levies pass and fail; they have been a part of negotiating multiple contracts, even tangentially or just by association; they have had multiple experiences with administrators, guidance counselors, parents, and other community members; and along the way they have gotten even better at teaching their material.

Accordingly, Dave impressed upon me to stay active in my learning; stay active in the way education is moving, and voice my opinion when I thought something needed added. Don’t be afraid.
Where I Am Professional and My Voice

What follows is, in large part, an essay I wrote for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Some of it has been created for this work, but the crux was published.

Currently I am in that middle area between the 7th and 15th year. Part of me believes that my entire Ph.D. program has been because of my ability to use my life experiences, yet to see outside of myself and comment on where public education needs to go. Subsequently, when I hit year seven in high school teaching, I decided to become active in our union as a building representative; helping people with the issues that come up between the administration, being an advocate for our teachers, and forming wonderful relationships. It was my goal to form a team and work together to find commonalities and strive for amendments, if needed. That was a very small part for me, but it made me feel like I was contributing. As a result, the idea of seeing outside of my classroom and school is a part of my normal repertoire, as I look around my world and think about how what I see impacts my career as a teacher. Then I write it and/or share it through this teaching without a net I have been discussing.

The only problem is, I think I annoy my family because I will verbally freewrite sometimes, just as I did on a summer evening walk, just because throughout our neighborhood, we were confronted with so many of the yellow Gadsden flag, with the snake ready to attack and the phrase “Don’t Tread On Me” written below it. One of the problems, already, is that both of my daughters know this as the “Bad Flag.” I realize some could argue that I am indoctrinating my daughters into a certain belief, or as my conservative neighbor stated, “That’s the way extremists are made.” Nonetheless, my daughters are going to have to listen to a lot of teacher talk as they grow up.
As many know, the Gadsden (Bad) Flag is the symbol and mantra of Libertarians, Tea Party members, and other people who are disgusted with the U.S. government and its tax policies and interventions. The Gadsden flag in its various forms seeks to express rebellion and a statement of “We are fed up and ‘taxed enough already’ and aren’t taking it any longer.” These sediments are generally followed by talks of our founding fathers and tyranny and how they counteracted the government with actions that promoted liberty and freedom. To this, my soon-to-be-3-year-old daughter, Emerson, asked, “Why is it bad, daddy?”

I told her that I applauded their participation in this great country, yet I suspect that this new found obsession with this symbol and phrase is a short-lived fad and that many people do not appreciate and/or understand the enormity of this statement. This seemingly radical aphorism hanging from the flag pole or stuck to the back of cars gives the impression of something quite significant, but I would argue that it stops there. Certainly many people who promote and participate in rallies, speeches and other causes believe as Henry David Thoreau said that “a government that governs best, governs less.” Frankly, I can’t dismiss the passion, most notably, with the plethora of sediments in the recent health care debate, and all of these activities are integral pieces of living in a diverse democratic society. At this point, Emerson looked at me and asked, “Do you want a cracker?” and I was reminded of her attention span.

Nevertheless, I went on to annoy Kari, Emerson, and Olivia’s by stating that, to me, there seems to be a huge misunderstanding among “Don’t Tread on Me” proponents. It’s interesting to me, but when something goes horribly wrong, whether it is businesses fail, people lose their jobs, or disasters occur, even with the people with these ideas, the
only entity that is capable of really helping people through is the US Government. Who helps in these situations if there is no government response? Also, help me understand why I see public school teachers, firefighters, policemen, and other public employees, as well as retired persons taking full advantage of social security and other programs, waving the Gadsden flag? Of course, that is their right to support what they feel is right, but I would urge these people to get some consistency in their life and resign from their jobs or refuse social security. Those actions would speak louder than any bumper sticker or flag.

If this statement is unclear, let me help: On one hand you look to resist the oppression of the heavy handed U.S. government; however, you don’t mind collecting a paycheck from a publicly funded entity, which is something you disagree with so much. How do you reconcile that thinking throughout your daily life: “Don’t Tread on Me, but I will take my paycheck, thank you?”

In short, to my Libertarian and Tea Party friends: If you are an employee or a recipient of a publicly funded institution (i.e., schools, safety services, social security or other entity) you are part of a socialized system. I hate to inform you of that, as I am sure it is a scary idea for you to wrap your mind around, especially because, I would suspect, that you may think socialism leads right to communism.

Certainly, people should be able to do what they feel is right, but by saying one thing and doing another does three things: (a) it discredits the people who truly believe in your cause, (b) it discredits other decisions you may or may not make in your personal and professional life, and (c) it just doesn’t make sense. Do what you need to do, but don’t dread on me with your hypocrisy.
The point to the preceding note/vignette/political rant is that once you begin teaching without a net and thinking without net, ideas keep popping into your head. For me, when I am engaged, I start seeing the interconnectedness of all kinds of institutions. And to that, I would call the double-edged sword of teaching without a net.

The Elephant in the Room: Common Core State Standards

Throughout this work I have tried to outline the possibilities and challenges that could exist if high school English teachers could teach without a net and write about their own experiences, share them with their students, and make them a part of the class content to help construct knowledge for the entire classroom. I’ve written this entire work without largely mentioning the big giant elephant that looms over every teacher: standards.

Currently, teachers in 45 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands will be infusing their curriculums to fit the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Many times, when teachers hear this, some of the first thoughts that come to mind are, “What do these standards mean? Does this mean teaching to more tests? Will the standards stifle my unique qualities? How will I be measured on these standards (by student test grades?”) Or, there is another approach where my older colleagues say, “relax, in the 70’s we called it [fill in the blank]; now we call it Common Core. Old concept, new name.” Nonetheless, these are only a few of the questions and apprehensions that come with this type of initiative. In short, there is plenty of anxiety to fill a room at a staff meeting or professional development setting. And some times, these anxiety-filled statements include some truth too.
The CCSS are new academic standards that outline the knowledge and skills students should have when they leave their K-12 educational setting. As the Common Core State Standard Initiative highlights, these standards are “the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school and be able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs” (Collier, 2011, p. 6). These types of statements make teachers nervous because the statement itself sounds good, but how this will be accomplished is always the precarious part. It is precisely at that moment when people get excited, anxious, and confused because our knee-jerk reaction is to be afraid and shutter. I, along with others, would argue that the CCSS standards, however, focus on four practices: spiraling, text complexity, informational text, and teacher collaboration.

In terms of spiraling, since the CCSS are presented from kindergarten through 12th grade, there is a standard for each year. Essentially, when a skill is presented, it will not be the last time students will see or have to know and build on that skill. Rather, those skills will re-occur again the following year, but some complex elements will be introduced. And this process of spiraling will continue through the rest of the students schooling. I would argue this is a benefit; instead, of learning something and moving on (checking off the box on a pacing guide—and racing on), students will have the opportunity to revisit skills and broaden their knowledge base and extend their learning.

Text complexity is another aspect of the CCSS; however, this can be very difficult to determine. Of course, teachers and districts could quantify certain texts easily with lexile formulas, with word counts, sentence lengths in mind, and other quantifiable measures. Or, teachers could evaluate certain texts based on the complexity of the
subject matter, in terms of cultural importance, sensitivity, or other qualitative subjects that could be dense and/or difficult to negotiate. But each of these methods has its challenges. Not one option wins out, in both instances, which means a teacher should be ready to discuss these ideas with colleagues and then be ready to lead students through these tasks in sophisticated ways.

Informational texts are emphasized in the CCSS as well, which is a little bit of shift in teachers’ thinking. Fiction and other literary texts have been the backbone, in English specifically, for such a long time, focusing primarily on the English and American canons. As I mentioned before, parents like to say, “dragging out the classics for one more go at it, huh, Mr. Beery?” Instead, the CCSS make essays, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, and speeches the main focus to make these texts relevant and looked at as informative and technical texts. Again, the challenge will be deciding what texts inform and illustrate a level of sophistication that is appropriate for that grade level.

Finally, because of all of these elements that the CCSS insist upon, it will have tremendous focus on re-envisioning what we teach as well as how we team teach and collaborate. According to Anne Ruggles Gere, teachers adjusting to the CCSS should use them as a “lens for looking carefully at instruction and for planning and coordinating with colleagues” (Collier, 2011, p. 7). The obvious reason for this is since all grade levels have different levels of complexity, team planning is essential so material doesn’t get doubled up from one year to the next. The other aspect is to determine what texts are appropriate and discuss collaboratively why certain pieces are better than others. All of this becomes a challenge because it may require a lot of time discussing and planning—
and even persuading each other that a particular text is appropriate. Overall, collaboration is a good thing, but it may require some colleagues to get accustomed to it. Furthermore, I like this quote because it comes back to what I mentioned at the beginning of this work about turning the critical lens back on ourselves and our pedagogy.

Of course, these are just the bare facts from what I have been able to glean from the CCSS, mostly because of the way I see them being rolled out in the high school I teach in currently. According to Danielle Lillge, the CCSS are “just the ‘what’—what students will be expected to do, not what practices teachers will need to employ to help students enact the standards” (Collier, 2011, p. 8). To most teachers, that should bring some comfort, but there are always details that must be worked out and are hidden from many of us.

I would argue that all of the pieces you have read previously in “Teaching without a Net” could serve as “informational and technical texts” according to the Common Core standards—and that teaching without a net could be an integral part to CCSS classrooms. “Carnie Life” could expand students’ ideas about class, culture, consumerism, and careers. “Going to Church” could inform and speak to ideas of religion, beliefs, tradition, and family structures. “Cell Phone Nation” could speak to technology, social etiquette, class, status, and interpersonal communication. And, “The Complexity of Emotions” could serve as a piece to investigate ways of discussing ideology, epistemology, tradition, college skills, or a great way to have conversations about the collaboration that the Common Core State Standards expects. All of these
essays (or ones like them) could be used and collaborated with colleagues to create really nice moments in our teaching.

Building a Bridge between Common Core Standards and Teaching Without a Net

The intent of the Common Core State Standards is to get students ready for college opportunities. However, to make these standards work, administrations need to make collaboration a priority. Teachers trying to implement some of these ideas would require thoughtful consideration, a change in priorities, and a redirection in what we do when we collaborate. And it would require teachers to write about some of these ideas on their own to merge the Common Core Standards and teaching without a net. Another piece is that teachers and students should see and/or hear from college professors to make sure that they are on track—or as the Common Core initiative states, for students “to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs” (Collier, 2011, p. 6). I would argue that by allowing teachers and professors to have ongoing dialogues would demystify a lot of the grey area (between high school and college) that standards, many times, create.

As a result, high school teachers could bring college professors into their classrooms to allow students to questions them about what college is like; perhaps alleviate some anxiety and discuss what their classes are like, what they need to do when they come into that class. Also, to allow professors to share their own lives by reading their own writing with them. Instead of having this figurehead vision of what a college professor is, allow students to see a real-life person. College professors would be able to
listen to high school students in their own words, but also would be able to speak with teachers in their classrooms, in staff meetings to begin see themselves as a collection of thinkers and not a division of labor. All of these activities would help create a culture of the Common Core State Standards, but also allow teachers and students to take part in more teaching without a net.

For this, though, it begins with giving high school teachers time to plan, write, present, and have input in their work day. Giving time for teachers to plan and really think out what dynamic activities they want to plan when they bring a professor to their classes would be quite significant. Even giving them time to contact and meet with colleagues and professors to make these ideas a reality would be significant. And with this time to plan comes time to write as well. Not only writing these ideas up, working with college professors, but then sending these ideas and writings out as articles in journals and conference proposals. This would allow high school teachers to then speak from authority and working through the process a piece of scholarship that could impact students, which could impact teachers and professor relationships, and could impact the profession.

The next piece is bringing high school teachers into college classrooms using their stories about their challenges and triumphs. Certainly, this would be extremely important in education classes, but it could have long lasting impacts on many other disciplines too. High school teachers could present lessons, talk about classroom management, assignments, and assessments. Allowing high school teachers to show professors different ways of doing things would not be showing them a “better,” but
perhaps, showing them something “different.” It would codify the bond between the Common Core standards and teaching without a net in extremely meaningful ways.

Imagine high school teachers and professors working together in a classroom situation to help guide and instruct pre-service teachers. Allow teachers and professors to share their experiences and ideas through writing and then allowing pre-service teachers to write their own, perhaps to help with their anxiety, fine-tune their hopes and dreams, and illuminate the challenges and frustrations that go into being a teacher. This situation would not be high school teachers and professors ganging up on college students, but it would be giving these pre-service teachers perspective and a real-time depiction of the profession.

As I have said (repeatedly), this means, however, administrators (on both ends) need to recognize and be tenacious in really adhering to the Common Core Standards and giving teachers the power to read, write, and speak and collaborate with colleagues and college professors—and not be solely fixated on what the data says. I firmly believe the data will speak for itself later. If ideas such as the Common Core State Standards are going to be the norm and the benchmark that all schools are going to be held to, then it begins with reimagining how we educate and collaborate. And with those ideas in mind, I think great things can come of it.

Conclusion

My hope for this work was to begin (and continue) a conversation about the importance of using a teacher’s narrative as a pedagogical tool—and specifically the performative teaching style of teaching without a net that I have described in these
pages. I have defined what teaching without a net is, shared essays from my life, discussed the complexities of teaching English, and have shown how teaching without a net can meet and exceed the Common Core State Standards. My hope is that teaching without a net becomes a part of many English teachers’ pedagogy, where writing, studying, and sharing the nuances of their life stories and seeing their significant moments, they can create in their own lives, but also, their students and in their classrooms.

However, for this to happen (in addition to what I have mentioned), there needs to be a shift away from the pressure and over-dominance of trying to attain safety and security through more channels of data only. As Dewey (1929) pointed out, “Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek security” and that is what the current vision of education is trying to do by only focusing on methods of collecting data to show that we are adverting the world’s hazards (p. 1). In short, we are fearful that the rest of the world is going to achieve and do more and we will be left behind, but standards, high stakes tests, and numbers supporting our work will save us all. We need to turn inward and focus on the innovative voices of teachers, and resist the delusion that quantifiable data is the ultimate goal and only way to attain certainty.

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that all data, accountability, technology, professional development protocols, and standards are everything that is wrong with Education. Nothing could be farther from the truth. However, currently I feel like Education is an either/or proposition. A teacher either uses data-driven instructional methods or they use their own lives and personality in the classroom. I hopefully have made a compelling argument that as teachers we can do both—use data-driven
instruction that utilizes our lives. And at the heart of this union is a teacher using their narratives as instructional tools, where the qualitative quality of our teaching enriches the numbers.

Storytelling, which is at the heart of teaching without a net, is one of the most important genres in our society. In the tradition of such prominent storytellers such as Jesus, Plato, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Hans Christian Anderson, the spoken word has been one of the most effective teaching tools. And the stories that teachers tell in their classrooms are incredibly powerful because they “provide educative opportunities for citizens in democratic communities that are fraught with possibilities and limitations” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 44). All of us have a story (or two) to tell because each of us have lived unique and important lives. Certainly, not all stories have the potential to always be happy and uplifting, but those narratives need to be told in an appropriate and respectful manner too. This is why I believe so strongly in writing and sharing my own writing because “these life stories teach us and potentially fuel our imagination as we make decisions about how we wish to live our lives in the present and future” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 44). Particularly, I think these stories fuel the way we teach our classes and think about our students too. Once we begin to think about our students as people who have had particular, irreplaceable experiences, it makes for a potentially significant space for learning to take root. Of course, that comes with some challenges, too, as I discussed earlier in this work. But, the benefits far outweigh some of the uncomfortable moments.

In addition to shining a light on the importance of narratives, it was my hope to try to energize and revitalize many of us back to where we were before we began our
teaching careers; perhaps, before the times we were bombarded with too many students, essays, responsibilities, and knowing the full truth about funding and the “business” of school. For a moment, I wanted many of us to think about when we were eager readers, hiding under the covers at night (after our parents had told us to go to bed)—and in our heads, we kept saying, “one more chapter.” Or, how many of us were drawn to a piece of literature that was so beautiful and spoke to us on so many levels and changed our lives (for me, it was *To Kill a Mockingbird*.) From that instant on, we wanted to write and spend our private moments scribbling in a journal, detailing everyday occurrences, writing poetry, or writing about our latest experience we just had to capture on a piece of paper. That’s the kind of energy I wanted to create with Teaching without a Net.

And then by marrying these ideas of loving reading and writing to our teaching, I wanted to get many of us to get back to what made teaching exciting in the first place. Think about that moment when we were nervous or unsure about how lessons and readings were going to go; instead of canned plans that we have used for years, knowing full well how it would play out. Certainly, not to replace or do away with ideas we always use, but get back to what got us into teaching English in the first place, to experience that moment where we share what we love with students—and see the enjoyment that students get out of seeing their teacher fully engaged in their subject matter and caring about student success.

It has been my attempt to convey this message and to show people that the little surprises that happen in our lives can be powerful teaching moments. As teachers we are always going to be out there on that high wire looking to get across unscathed. But if we just trust in what we have built in as story tellers and lovers of language, some times
what comes out is better than we could have planned. And that may make all of the
difference.
REFERENCES


