

A Tale of Three Students: Meditations on My Craft in Dark Days

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Let me tell you about three of my students. The student whom I will call Paulena was an average senior, earning respectable Cs and on track for graduation. She was tall and statuesque, a member of the dance team who kept a good attitude in class and did her best, though English was a struggle for her. Around late November of her senior year, Paulena vanished from class. I tried calling and talking to her friends. They told me that her father had pulled her out of school to work at Staples in order to make his truck payment. I got the legal wheels in motion to try and counteract this, but over Christmas break, Paulena turned eighteen and the law was helpless. Last I heard, Paulena was still working and hoping to get back to school someday.

The student whom I will call Marisela was also a senior, like Paulena, low in English skills but with a good attitude and always willing to try her best. Marisela liked to run and was a pivotal member of the cross-country team. In November of her senior year, Concordia University in Irvine, California offered Marisela a full ride athletic scholarship. Her father opposed her going. She was a girl, after all, and why couldn't she get a job after high school. With tremendous difficulty, Marisela disobeyed her father and took up her scholarship at Concordia. I attended her college graduation. Her father at that point had to admit it wasn't such a bad thing.

The student whom I will call Diana came from a very poor family, but she was bright and hard working. In her senior year, she took AP English Literature from me. She earned quite a bit of scholarship money. At least three University of California campuses and as many California State University campuses made her offers of admission. But Diana's heart was set on UCLA. I recall the day she opened the letter of acceptance from UCLA. She almost exploded with joy. AP instruction briefly stopped in my class for a celebration. She started at UCLA two years ago and is doing well.

All three of these young women are Mexican-American from poor immigrant stock. We could launch into long discussions of their families, of cultural expectations and attitudes regarding education among poor immigrants, of cultural expectations of girls in regards to education. There would be a lot to say about such things and I have no doubt several books have already been written on the subject.

A lot of personal conclusions also might be drawn from these three true stories: beyond what there is to say about cultural expectations and the role of young women in Mexican-American families, one might remark on how under NCLB, all of these outcomes are somehow my fault. All that is on my mind as I recall these three young women. But other thoughts are foremost to me.

And the first thought that strikes me is that if under the present law teachers are blamed and praised for what is beyond their control, it is because we have become behaviorists to the point of absurdity. We opened the door for NCLB to come crashing down on our heads when

education writers and speakers began talking as if every student were somehow programmable. We have darkened counsel with unthinking reliance on BF Skinner because it made us feel there was no challenge we couldn't overcome, nothing that couldn't be fixed. I see this as an honest error, born of our burning desire to serve every student and overcome obstacles such as Paulena and Marisela faced. But we made a bargain like Faustus, and the bargain is costing us. By writing and talking as if all educational problems can be fixed with the right spin, the right lesson plan, we set up the expectation that all students can, necessarily will succeed. We told politicians and "experts" who never taught in a real classroom that we could be universally successful, and so they expected it of us. For some schools like mine, those same experts and politicians believed us, and have instituted policies that threaten the careers of skilled teachers who happen to work in lower socio-economic areas.

What we forgot is right before us in our every day reality in the classroom. And that is, that free will is still alive and kicking. We forgot that outside influences can be and often are more powerful than our clever lesson plans. In our zeal to sound positive and determined, we forgot that for the kid that is being abused at home, the kid that comes from an illiterate family and has been frustrated for years reading in English as a second language, for the kid dazzled by some video world of escape via television, the movies, the computer, even our best lesson plans are rather cold porridge compared to the sensory feast they are offered elsewhere, or the all-absorbing tragedy of their lives. We forgot that it's entirely possible for a teenager not to care because they simply don't see the point, don't want to make the effort or feel that all the authority figures in their life are pushing them around and they are going to rebel. All these choices are theirs and we can't control their environment except in the 55-minute-a-day spaces we are allotted, if then. We talk as if our lesson plans can program success. But, even if we are behaviorists, we would in honesty have to admit that our influence on our students is very limited and that other influences are far more powerful. We have fallen into the generalization fallacy that just because some human behavior is changed by outside influences, all human behavior is changed by outside influences. And we've defined ourselves in a way that let the politicians come to the conclusion that education is the cure for poverty and therefore if low socio-economic schools aren't performing at the same level as affluent schools, it has to be the teachers' fault, because we teachers assured the politicians that all students can learn, after all.

And we're paying for it. We put our faith in Skinner and embraced the behaviorist model and now we're finding that the state has used this as a pretext to appoint those of us who teach in low socio-economic schools as de facto social engineers who were supposed to cure poverty at a cheap price. They have assumed education was the road out of poverty and we assured them all students can learn, and now it seems we haven't produced as promised. So some of us are going to be scapegoats

for our collective error. We're the "failed teachers" in "failing schools" who will be shown the door.

My second thought is that there is good news and that is that free will is a gate swinging both ways. Yes, it does mean that students can refuse to learn in spite of our best efforts. But I like it better this way, despite the frustrations that reality routinely causes. If I really thought of my students as programmable, teaching would be not a lot different than teaching dolphins to jump through hoops for a fish reward. If I wanted a job like that I would have applied at Sea World. But I'm not in the business of programming facts into the heads of students in a uniform manner despite the best efforts of districts to apply the state standards in this fashion. I'm an English teacher, and therefore I teach Humanities; I teach kids just a little bit more about how to be human. Sure, literature and writing are my tools, but don't mistake the tools for the thing to be created. We want intelligent, literate and free human beings to walk out of our classrooms, not automatons that can parrot back standards, or dolphins who will jump through the hoop for rewards.

Now let no one mistake me here. I do believe fervently that there are best methods and that research makes a tremendous difference. I was a 1991 fellow of the UC Irvine Writing Project and could not begin to tell you how much I learned, continue to learn from that experience. We must pay attention to the research and use the best methodology for the best results. To do otherwise would be unconscionable. But the standards as presently constituted and tested fly in the face of what research tells us is effective. As Kelly Gallagher has said, they are a hundred miles wide and an inch thick. This semester I have been tasked with drilling figurative language, irony and other literary devices into the heads of ninth graders. They usually remember them for a day or two and then we start back at square one. But the real problem isn't my methodology. The real problem is these young people don't like to read, and therefore don't read, and therefore don't improve, and therefore don't like to read. They are caught in a downward spiral of illiteracy. If they don't enjoy reading, why would knowing literary devices as the standards demand even matter? What does it have to do with any reality they know so that they might even recall the concept when the test is over? But the feverish demand to address the standards leaves little time to address the real problem of getting past what Carol Booth Olson calls their "affective filters" and lighting the pilot light of their literacy.

In this second issue is an aspect of education that almost no standard test can touch on or begin to measure. If in twenty-six years of teaching I've discovered anything, it's that students learn what they are ready to learn, when they are ready to learn it and not before, and almost no two students learn the same things at the same time or speed. And sometimes they learn what no one had intended. About five years ago, I taught my seniors the poetry of John Keats, as I usually do. As extra credit on my final exam, I offered my seniors the chance to respond to the following prompt: "What of importance did you learn in senior English this year?" I have learned to keep the question vague because I often discover things that direct questioning would miss. I probably made it vague that first time because I was tired and didn't think the

prompt through adequately. But I'm very glad now that I had that lapse, or I would never have known the extent of my reach. The first time I posed the question, as you might expect, some of the answers were self-serving, or servile. Others entailed serious attempts to recall the plots and characters of poems and stories they had read. None remembered much literary terminology. After all the days and hours I spent on what the state test prescribed, they found literary devices too dryly analytical to remember. But one student told me that a beloved family member had died and they had been seriously contemplating taking their own life until we read Keats. Somehow Keats gave that particular student the courage to face existence with death as a part of reality. I doubt this student scored very high on state tests and may not have impressed any examiner of the standards. But this student learned something no standards can ever test. If that makes me a "failed teacher" and the state or district shows me the door, for that kind of result, I'll gladly go.

So here I am in these dark days, probably looking foolish and lonely for standing up by myself against the majority of the educational psychology establishment in my refusal to bend the knee before BF Skinner and the behaviorists. But I'm not alone and I have hope. At very least John Steinbeck is standing with me. I'm teach *East of Eden* to my AP English literature and composition class and they are loving it. The book's theme is free will, *timshel*, the Hebrew word meaning that one can choose evil or good. In a world of free will, students, like all human beings, are messy and unpredictable creatures. But they are humans, with freedom and dignity, if you please Dr Skinner. And I like such a world far better than working in an "educational success factory" that turns out automata that have the standards memorized. Sure, all students can learn, but will they? Will they? In the end is a matter of their will. I'm sure I helped Diana, but Diana did far more to help herself. And I think I helped Paulena, though she didn't have what it took to stand up to her father and demand an education as Marisela did. I had no control over these choices made by these young women.

I will tell you about a fourth and last young woman. I will call her Jessie and she's like the others and she's graduating this year. In her exit interview she told how she was a poor student for her first two years of high school and then at the beginning of her junior year, the light came on for her and she realized she really did want an education. Here work thereafter and in her senior year in my English class has been stellar. She is planning to go on through doctoral work and become a clinical psychologist. And she has what it takes to do it. So I have hope. We are performing miracles, when students permit us to. So I will not beat myself up when students don't want to learn after I've tried everything. It's not personal. And I refuse to program anybody. Sorry. I don't work at Sea World. Sure, I'll cover the standards, but I will go on lighting flames first and watch for the unexpected miracles.

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