

The Secret Realizations of an Okay Teacher

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A PERSONAL NARRATIVE BY MICHELLE BARNEY

The Mighty Winds of Change

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Hollywood Dreams

There are far too many movies about teachers who go into teaching with absolutely no experience and end up as amazing fountains of knowledge and excitement. In the movies, you simply have to wait a couple of weeks, show the students you are passionate, talk a little of the street lingo, and you are well on your way to being a success.

In the movies, teachers don’t care if they break the rules. They do what they know is right and good and cool, and the kids love it. In the movies. That is what I expected when I walked into teaching.

I was passionate. I loved my content; I wanted to show those kids that they could love it too. I had a picture in my mind of me shouting, “You can make a difference. You need to question the world around you. Your thoughts count!” That is what I wanted when I walked into my classroom that first year.

I knew, of course, that many, maybe even most of my classes, would not be this way. I knew it would be work. I had been warned in my college classes of the importance of discipline, the handiness of a good worksheet, the legality of teaching, and all the other stuff most people tend to forget. But I knew this wouldn’t count for me. I would be a natural. I would be like one of those teachers the movies were written about. That is what I thought, hoped, wanted to happen.

Theory

Earlier in my education, I was forced to learn the theories. What (and this has been proven—by whom I am not sure) good teachers need to be doing. We sat for hours in classes about writing perfect lesson plans proven to make you a better teacher. We sat in classes about reading.

The point is: I learned theory. I learned that following the teaching theories will set you free/change your life/ insert exaggeration here. I had a professor actually tell me to speak to my students in a lower voice because my natural voice made them disrespect me. (Wouldn’t someone who can talk so high that only dogs can hear them command your respect? Exactly.) Those who don’t teach say teaching is simple. But it is not.

Anything will work for someone. And when it does, you can bet that yahoo is gonna write a book on it. And the problem is when most of those people write their books, they don’t write

their ideas as an idea that may work for you, but *the* idea that will revolutionize the way we all teach.

Most of the time they get enough people who build them shrines to pass it on as fundamental to classroom education, and so it is perpetuated. On and on and on. I think that is the reason some theorists (like Freud, for example) are still being talked about even though ninety-nine percent of people are not in fact in love with any of their parents but desperately despise them or turn out acting just like them.

The good thing (okay, sometimes not-so-good thing) about theories is you have to try them and see. This is what got me walking around in my classroom with my chin just about touching my chest to try and get my voice as low as possible. That one, not so good. I think I tried it once for thirty seconds before I decided it would never work.

In the Beginning

At first, I was scared. Student teaching proved to be a lot different than I expected, and after experiencing a class where 80% of the students were male sixteen-year-olds, I was humbled. Teaching was not the center for knowledge and passion I had hoped. And with that in mind, I began my career. Too scared to try anything that might rock the boat. Too worried about the outcome of anything unpredictable in any way.

I did what I saw everyone else doing. It was safe. But as I collected the little writings we did every day, I realized something. These kids were good. These kids had style, voice, and something to say. And I was holding them back.

The Mighty Winds of Change

So, I set out. A woman on a mission. I threw out my old lessons where I stood in the front all day and told them about things they “needed” to know, and I started over (horrifying I know).

The first thing I did was write down what I hoped would happen. I hoped that most of my students would find one thing. One thing they cared about. One thing that they thought enough about to express it through beautiful or dangerous or passionate words. That was the goal. Everyone can be a writer.

Then I made the plan. How do writers come about? Writers write. Good ones write everyday for hours before they are satisfied. Realizing I could not really expect my public school students to write like professionals, I gave them time. I set out specific times students could explore any kind of writing they felt inclined to try. Oh joy. This, I thought, would make my students passionately toss roses at my feet. Boy was I naïve.

The Horrible Truth

What did happen, of course, was a little different (okay, who am I kidding, a lot different). Complaints. Endless, mundane, mind-numbing complaints. And questions. (I thought my four-year-old was bad.) Every question that could be asked was brought to my attention. Not once. Not twice. But so many times that I could tell by the way a student slithered over to my desk what they were about to ask me (were they not listening the other 999,999 times I explained this?!), and I would play a little game. Teachers have to have fun somehow. I would shout out

the question and in detail (or so I thought) give the answer. This sometimes sent a student to his/her seat. Sometimes.

Mostly what happened was this:

Student: What are we supposed to write about?

Me: (Long extended sigh, followed by a glance around the room) What did I just say?

Student: Idunno.

Me: Was *anyone* listening to what I just explained to the class? (Crickets chirp, pins drop, but no one speaks up.) Why would I say something if none of you are listening? (They are almost certainly thinking the same thing.)

Trapped

Now I seemed to be stuck between what I wanted to happen and what they expected to happen. They needed structure, routine. They needed me to tell them what to do. I yearned for the day they would feel the urge to write without rules, but that day never came. Now it was up to me to figure out what they needed. How could I combine my philosophy on how an English class should go with what the students needed the class to be like?

Becoming a Rebel

These were the thoughts swimming through my head as I took my nightly I-need-a-minute-to-relax bath. Writing workshop wasn't working, but I was not about to go through my teaching career handing out worksheets and calculating the exact ratio of volume to teaching content which will cause students to fall asleep.

So, what to do now. Settle? Continue with what I knew wasn't working? Start over? None of these seemed acceptable. So I made a commitment. Learning has to be fun. Learning this stuff has to be something they might actually want to do, even just a little.

Now I am not about to dress up in a wizard costume (not at school anyway) and run around shouting magic spells at my students. I have never really enjoyed making a fool of myself no matter how often I do it. Costumes were out, which automatically canceled out gimmicks. I am not that girl.

I really had no idea past that. So I slept on it. And, despite the obvious cliché, it came to me. I couldn't stand up each class period with a fresh comedic routine, but there were little things here and there I could do to make learning fun.

I loved the writing too much to let it go, so I snuck it in. I gave them an optional topic to write on, and they did the rest. I modeled it at first. But often, on writing days, I simply told them what to do, and they did it. Success. This was what I wanted, what they needed.

The Schedule

That's why I made the schedule. Students love schedules. They love predictability. They need to know that there is a reason to the madness; that they are not just spending time doing what I say so I can sit in the faculty room cackling, "And they actually did jump when I told them to. Mwahahahaha."

So, here's what I came up with: Mondays, we would always write. No matter what. We would take something, in some part of the process, and work. Tuesdays, we would write also, unless we were deep into a text and needed extra days to finish before they wanted to set the textbooks on fire. Wednesdays and Thursdays, we work on reading something or doing something as a class. We read short stories, poems, novels, plays, and so much more. These days also involve writing, but it is often done as a group or done quickly. If I need an extra day to finish *Romeo and Juliet*, I take it. And Fridays, we spend reading independently—any book.

Now this was something I could work with. Setting aside time for each specific task made my job easier, but it still gave me the freedom to explore what I wanted. It seemed ideal.

Wrapping It Up

At the end of every year, I have my students write an essay: What I have learned this year in English. They are to report to me what they think is working, and what did nothing for them. It is a way for me to assess what I can do and for them to analyze how exactly they prefer to learn. This year the results were definitely interesting.

The number one best thing I did was give them an extra day to read. Countless students mentioned this as essential to their success, and none wrote it as a negative of the year. I had one student who had never even finished a book read over five-hundred pages in one quarter. This extra time gave them an opportunity to succeed.

Our time spent working as a class was great. We laughed, we danced, we read, and we loved it. The small writings we did in response to texts aided my students in gaining understanding in something otherwise inaccessible. They groaned with *Romeo and Juliet* and reasoned why people their age could not find love in such a way. It made sense.

Writing, though not quite as powerful, also improved. Students became excited about the small writings we did as a class. They shared their pieces. They gave advice. And overall, my classes got better. However ironically, this was the area most students decided they would have liked more from.

As I read over these essays, my jaw dropped in the shock. The thing they had so readily pushed aside, refused to even consider was the one thing they missed. "I just wish we could have written more big things, like short stories," one student mentioned. Reading this I almost let myself fall into that hole of regret again. Why had I changed it? Why had I let all those little things get to me?

But then I realized. Changing from writing all the time gave them an appreciation for when they did have the chance to write. Before, they dreaded each piece. Moaned with each word. Now, they were saddened by the missed writing opportunities. They looked forward to it. They had thoughts, something to say, and they questioned the world around them.

Happy Endings?

Okay, you know that's a joke, right? It never ends. That is the difficulty in our profession. But that's the best thing. I get to be spontaneous. I get to change, make it better every day and still give my students a structure they can rely on.

We have to change. We have to be ready to just bag it if it doesn't work and admit to the students that we are not human encyclopedias. We cannot be those teachers who have our filing cabinets labeled by day, pulling the worksheet out on the same day year after year. You can never have this thing perfected. There are too many factors spinning in different directions to be able to predict. Too many people involved. And all we can do is realize that all we have learned, all they know, is nothing compared to what we experience.

This year has changed the way I look at education. It made me see my students for their potential and realize that my job is to help them have the confidence to realize that. And their feedback is instrumental to me; I cannot help them if I don't know what they need help doing. Looking back, I think I'll do things differently once again. Nothing drastic, just a few minor changes here and there.

I will give them more days to write. And more things to write about. I think next year I will pull back a bit again: give them a bit of that freedom. Find some sort of middle ground between the writing workshop and the fun. But in doing this, I won't lose any of the richness. I won't cut those activities that actually got them laughing about English. Somehow I think those go hand-in-hand with the writing. I have to help them see they have something to say before they are forced to say it.

I think, now, I've almost got this thing down. But I am sure next year come June, I'll have something else to try. A new idea. And that's important to me. Because once I lose that, I become one of those teachers who no longer cares.

Each day I experience something new that makes me realize I can do better. That makes me want to start all over. Makes me want to try again because I owe it to the students. I owe it to those kids whose lives depend on what I can show them. And I owe it to myself to keep striving to be my best, to improve. Every day I change a little. Turn a little into the teacher I want to become. The teacher I never realized I could be.

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