

The Student Teacher's Tale

My background in working with students comes from two arenas. The first one is from nearly three years of teaching: I taught third grade, and eighth grade Language Arts on an emergency credential, and currently am student teaching in ninth and twelfth grade English classrooms. This year is the first year that I have had any training in how to be an effective teacher; I am enrolled in a one-year intensive secondary credential/master's program.

The second arena from which I draw experience comes from extensive volunteering as a mentor to junior high and high school students, often through church youth groups. This activity is also one in which I am still involved. My tale is a case of a student teacher in her mid-twenties who wrestles with the contrast of these two arenas that of her personal faith and being a public school teacher.

The Setting:

The class I teach at Foothill High School in the San Francisco Bay Area is called Society, Politics and Literature. It is one of three different seminars from which the seniors can choose; there are also two other sections of a tracked senior Advanced Placement class. Society, Politics and Literature, referred to on campus as SoPol, is a class that has been emerging in themes and context over the last five years. The class is a composite of other courses that Jan Meyer, the department chair and my Cooperating Teacher (CT), has taught over the years. Therefore, when I arrived in August prepared to begin the year, the curriculum for the most part was set out; virtually all of the material was new to me.

My class of thirty seniors has an equal number of males and females. There are four Latino, thirteen Asian, and thirteen Caucasian students in the class. The boys in the class tend to be more vocal than the girls are. For the first quarter, I co-taught with Jan. Second quarter, when I began teaching alone in the classroom, I was not prepared for the issues I would face in teaching *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood.

The Goals:

The goal of SoPol is to look at how society, politics and literature, otherwise known as "text" (films, books, magazines, music, speeches, advertisements, etc.), interrelate. The graphic organizer that we introduced on the first day of school was a Venn diagram with three intersecting circles that corresponded to the three topics in the course's title. The area in which all three circles overlap, is the place of the individual. Some of the common themes include prejudice, racism, sexism, and the power of society, politics and texts. The focus of the class is to discern the intent of the author (or creator of the text), and what he or she wants the audience to know and think. Secondly, we ask the students to respond to these messages personally. We related these same questions to each piece of material we have studied as it allows the students to see a consistency in our course goals. Hopefully, the same questions will arise in the students everyday interactions with films, television, music, etc. Our goal is that our effort of a condensed approach to text will transfer to students' long term fund of knowledge. (Heller & Gordon)

The Book:

As second quarter commenced, we began reading our first novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, together as a class. Set in the near future, in Puritanical Massachusetts, the Republic of Gilead is a mono-theocracy at war with the United States. This society employs a particular interpretation of the Book of Genesis, the Bible itself and its rules. The story is told in the format of a diary of one of the Handmaids in this new order. Because of this style, the reader only knows as much as the main character. It proves to be an effective method to hook the reader and create a sense of loyalty toward the protagonist. Atwood's writing is descriptive and evocative; the students often remarked on her use of detail to set the scene and create images in one's head. Essential questions are raised in this novel, which are tied to themes of our course. Atwood explores the loss of individuality in an oppressive society, and the resistant responses that each individual has, regardless of his or her position of power in the new order. However, the manner in which Atwood addresses these issues is sometimes disturbing (graphic sexual scenes hangings, etc.)

This text fits perfectly into our course objectives in that it explores the interrelationship of government, society, and the individual's responses. In a testimony to the unquenchable human spirit, Atwood encourages questioning authority, media and one's self. I believe that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a provocative look at the power of ignorance, discrimination, and freedom.

The Instruction and Analysis:

The role of this text in our course curriculum is clear to me. However, I found that teaching this text was a challenge for me because of my own beliefs and morals. One of the surprises in teaching this book came at the beginning. I personally was affected by this book more than I anticipated, and therefore I believe that my presentation of the material was altered. I felt Gilead's leaders (as perceived through the eyes of the Handmaid) misquoted and misrepresented the Bible. However, I was unsure whether my students would take this Gileadean approach to religion at face value, or if they would question this representation. The approach I took in presenting the material to the class was to juxtapose the Gileadean leaders' perspective with my own beliefs. I decided, subconsciously, that one of my goals would be to show that perhaps Atwood used the Bible to further her own views; this approach obviously raises the question of whether I was then doing the same thing. I believe that the role of a teacher is to present all sides of an issue to students and encourage them to then make up their own minds as to what they think or believe about a subject. However, I wonder whether this actually happened in the course of my teaching this book.

As we read the book, I pointed out different references that Atwood made, so I could help provide the students with a fuller understanding of the allusions. One example of providing background stems from the day when we discussed in detail the three quotes Atwood places at the beginning of the story. The first is from the Book of Genesis: "Then she said, 'Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Lie with her so that she can bear children in my stead, and that through her I may build a family.'" The title of the novel stems from this quote I asked if anyone knew the story of Rachel and Jacob (Rachel is the speaker in the quote). A couple students had vague notions of the story. "Jacob was married to her?" "And wasn't her sister a part of it, too?" I added to what the students had attempted.

"Jacob went to this town, Haran, to find a wife and he fell love with a woman named, Rachel. When he asked her dad for permission to marry Rachel, he said 'Yes, but you must work for me for seven years first.' So, Jacob worked for seven years and was all excited on his wedding day. It was traditional for the bride to wear a veil over her face, like some brides do now, to show their innocence, or purity. When Jacob went to kiss his bride, he lifted the veil, and it was Rachel's older sister, Leah!" I continued to tell them how Jacob worked for seven more years to marry Rachel because he loved her so much. Additionally, we talked about how polygamy was acceptable in that society.

For some of the students this story was a review of a Sunday school lesson, whereas for others it was brand new information. In reading this novel there were a large number of references that students with a Sunday school background could

draw from, whereas the majority of the class did not pick up on these references. Norman asserts that prior knowledge influences how a student learns; did those students without such a background feel disadvantaged in reading the text?

I think perhaps; one of the more philosophical students raised his hand the second week into the unit and said, " This book only really makes sense if you know the Bible, and if you do, then you probably wouldn't like it very much." It is true that in order to understand much of what Atwood refers to in the text, a basic knowledge of the Bible is helpful. I wonder if I emphasized that aspect because I was concerned about it being misrepresented.

One day particularly stands out in my mind. We came to a chapter in the book where Atwood rewrites the traditional Lord's Prayer from the perspective of the Handmaid. In looking over Jan's materials for this book from previous years, I found a photocopy of this prayer. I asked her about it, and she told me that she had had the students compare the two versions-- Atwood's, and the one from the Bible. I was surprised because this exercise seemed to me to be treading on thin ice for a public school classroom. As we continued to talk about how to possibly guide the students in close reading of the text, she suggested that after they compare the two versions, Atwood's and the Bible's, they could mimic Atwood's style and write their own response. She admitted "it was a little dicey for public school." I was surprised by her suggestion, because it seemed to me there could potentially be room for students' misunderstanding the purpose of the assignment. But, I trusted my CT (ignoring the fact that she was more practiced than I at presenting newly created lessons) and went into the class ready to do a line by line comparison, followed by student imitations of the text. While in the back of my mind, I knew that I needed to be very careful about how I set this assignment up, I did not stop and plan the steps explicitly. If any subject can be taught to any child at virtually any age in some form, I obviously could teach my seniors how to imitate an author's writing style, but that's not what happened. (Bruner, 47)

I walked into class; it was a block day, and proceeded to tell the students to turn to page 257 where the Lord's Prayer was replicated. I asked how many people knew the Lord's Prayer, or the Our Father. A third of the students raised their hands. We recited it together while I wrote it on the overhead. Then, we proceeded to dissect the Lord's Prayer, line by line, determining potential meanings, just as one would a poem. I passed out a printed version of the prayer and had the students pair up to analyze and record where the two texts corresponded. Ignoring the advice to "spend time thinking carefully about how the wording will affect" student responses, I delved into the next segment of the lesson. (Mark Ellis, 7) After sharing their answers as a whole group, I casually asked the students to then write their own

responses to the text. Thirty faces looked up abruptly and stared at me questioningly. Was I asking them to write a prayer? I balked, blushed a little (something very rare for me), and then remembered the need to scaffold this assignment. I tried to backtrack a bit in order to set them up for this next exercise. "I am not asking you to write a prayer; I want you to take a piece of literature that has been used as a template in the novel, and to practice doing what Atwood has done." They were a look of slight relief, and most of the students bent their heads over their desks in order to begin the activity.

A bit flustered from my presentation, or lack thereof, of a sensitive subject, I walked over to three Chinese students who were whispering to each other. One of the girls turned to me, "I don't know how to do this. It's not my religion." Slightly rattled, I asked her to look at how Atwood had the Handmaid recite her own version of the prayer, and then to do the same. She looked at me slightly annoyed and then began writing. As I moved away I reflected on the fact that I had not prepared the class for this activity; we had not discussed how to copy an author's style, a technique which is not easy. We had not looked at other examples of imitation; serious or jocular (Weird Al Yankovic, for example).

Mark Ellis says in his case, *Demystifying Pi*, "that students need to have a sense of where they are going in order to put the pieces of a lesson together in their minds." (Ellis, 6) Clearly, not only do the students need to know where they are going, but so does the instructor! I think the reason the goal of the lesson did not seem clear to the students, and only vaguely to myself was because I personally had another goal.

Though I would not admit it, I believe I did want them to write a prayer. I knew from journal entries and conversations with the students that at least half of the class had some sort of vague belief in a faith. I was curious how they were reacting to this novel, whether they were picking up on the Atwood's representation of certain texts. I wanted to know whether they were affected by it.

When I reviewed their "prayers" that afternoon, I noticed a few different things. The first was that only two students in the class actually took the template of the prayer and created a personal response in its style; my first clue that the assignment had not been adequately primed. Some of the students went line by line saying if they agreed with the assertion or not (e.g. "Our Father, who art in heaven -- I believe in a God but I don't know if he's only a male), or they responded to the prayer as a whole (e.g. "This is hard, I believe some of it, but not all of it; There are a lot of questions I have about Catholicism; Can't everyone go to heaven" etc.) Students who had had some exposure to the Christian faith seemed more at ease responding to the text; perhaps this was because the primary writing was more or less familiar

to them (incidentally, there are no Jewish students in my class). Students who followed eastern religions, or no religion at all, were less inclined to mimic the poetic style. Mostly, their responses were along the lines of "I don't believe this; I think there is a God, but we are all responsible for ourselves; religion is for people who are weak; I don't believe in something I can't see," etc. The Chinese student who was confused by the assignment was also confused by the book, as she did not have the Judeo-Christian background that some of the other students did. This difference makes my instruction and providing contextual background important, as it sets the students on the same plane. Instead of giving a lesson on the ubiquity of particular texts and how to engage in literary analysis, I ended up opening a Pandora's box of age old theological questions. Questions that would not be discussed in our seminar; questions which I did not feel prepared to answer, even if we chose to delve into them. Questions which answered my personal inquisition as to where my students stood theologically.

Despite these bafflements, one positive interaction stands out in my mind. One of my students who had never shared with me personally stayed after class that day. She told me that this was her favorite day in class so far; "When my mother died, when I was four, we had to come here to America from the Philippines. It was really hard. I started going to church when I was younger and this prayer has always been helpful to me. It was neat to combine my religion with school." I was moved by her response.

However, after reading the students' papers and reservedly responding to their beliefs and/or questions, I determined to abandon this theological pursuit. I felt that there were other issues that we could spend time exploring, such as the loss of individuality, the role of resistance in society, or the ambiguity with which Atwood ends the book. We focused on these topics for the remainder of the unit. Keeping in mind that understanding performances, such as this one, allow student learning to go beyond the rote and routine, my CT and I were pleased with our final. (Perkins, 42) At the end of the semester, the students were given the project of comparing two texts from the semester, and through the use of three skills we had specifically focused on, had to answer the questions cited in the beginning of this paper. What does the author, or creator of the text, want their audience to know and think. And, what is the student's personal response to these messages.

The students who chose to use *The Handmaid's Tale* as a part of their final project addressed such issues as stereotypes, the defining of one's self through his or her profession, the power of knowledge/literacy, the role of missionaries, and the need to be true to one's self. Only the students who compared the novel to Annie Lennox's song *Missionary Man*, addressed any of the religious overtones we had discussed in class. These students

focused on the need for missionaries to be deferential and tolerant of other civilizations. Now, as a class, they joke about wanting to reread *The Handmaid's Tale*, or a sequel to it instead of any other activity in class. It is almost as if our mutual disregard for aspects of the novel have bonded us together. These interactions raise a number of questions.

Concluding Thoughts:

How do teachers gauge what material to address in the classroom and what to leave out? Are there books or topics that teachers cannot or should not teach because they cannot teach impartially? Is our goal to be impartial? Do students benefit from a teacher's impassioned views on a text or issue (and I am not talking here about proselytizing, but other, universal topics such as racism, sexism, etc.)? Are only certain values to be brought into the classroom? Who determines what those values are? Because they are there whether they are "supposed" to be or not.

If given the choice would I teach this book again? Probably not. But I have learned some thing through this experience. When reading a text that I have particular feelings toward, I need to be markedly careful how I go about planning. I have to be able to think not just one or two steps ahead, but four or five. I need to be sure to provide adequate scaffolding. I need to be honest with myself about what my goals are, and whether they are appropriate. I need to be sensitive toward the diversity in my classroom.

Teaching in a pedagogically neutral way is not a technique that is realistic. It is impossible to be objective; we are always informing our thoughts and actions by our worldview. Through this case I have learned and relearned the essence of being explicit with my students. "The teacher is an immediately personal symbol of the educational process, a figure with whom students can identify and compare themselves." (Bruner, 90) With this truth in mind, shouldn't students be granted the respect of knowing with whom they are comparing themselves? I have spent too much time with students in the last nine years to believe otherwise.

a

.

,

1

,

,

)

.

,

e

l

d

:

t

)

ie

;

o

ie

.

t

f

s

it

,

s

,

:

ie

