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ABSTRACT

The comments of a student new to Advanced Placement courses convinced a teacher of Advanced Placement English that opening up her class to all students was not enough--the teacher had to learn how to teach an untracked English class. Three basic strategies for teaching the class took shape: the teacher spent a great deal of time modeling tasks; once a task had been assigned and understood by the students, the teacher stepped back and let the students take charge; and, most important, the teacher used classroom talk as a vehicle for making all students feel good about themselves as learners. Some of the changes in the teacher and her teaching philosophy were quickly accomplished, but others required major shifts. Some of the minor changes included setting strict deadlines, teaching mechanics and grammar, and restructuring the use of textbooks. A major change involved collaborating with the students and sharing responsibility with them. The teacher discovered that students with combined SAT scores of 690 can learn with students with scores of 1350. Eighty percent of the students passed the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Test, and 25 of 28 students passed the University of California Subject A test. (RS)

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April, 1992

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Untracking Advanced Placement English: Creating Opportunity is Not Enough

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"I'm in the wrong place," Paula told me. "This is the wrong class for me. I can't talk like these kids."

IN THE BEGINNING

I started the year in Advanced Placement English with a discussion of *All The King's Men*, a book my students had read and written papers on over the summer. My perception of that first discussion as a success was not the perception of at least one of my students, Paula. At the end of the period she came up to me. "I'm in the wrong place," she told me. "This is the wrong class for me. I can't talk like these kids. Especially Neil—I don't even understand what he says."

"You'll be okay," I told her, "you'll be okay. I promise. Stick with us." She left the room close to tears. The next day as the majority of the students argued and debated excitedly about the book, Paula sat silent, agitated and angry. As she left the room I called her back. "Are you okay? Was it better today?"

"I can't talk like them. I can't. I understood this book but I can't say anything. If we get graded on discussions, I'll flunk. Tony told me to take this class but I shouldn't have. I've got to transfer out." The rest of the day I could not get the anguish in Paula's voice out of my head. Here was a girl who had enrolled in the class because her boyfriend, a brilliant student from the year before, had recommended it, and now everything was falling apart for her. She was the only Latina in the class, she knew few of her classmates, she was

overwhelmed by the verbal competitiveness of some students, and she was terrified by the articulateness (and occasional arrogance) of the forensics stars, especially Neil, a nationally-ranked debater.

A few days later Paula spoke out. I had finished assigning the first long paper of the quarter—a reflective essay on a moment of enlightenment—and was modeling what I wanted my students to do by telling them about an epiphany I had had in my graduate studies at UC Berkeley a few years before. And as I often do, I got sidetracked in a digression about the inequalities of education, inequalities that often give the worst teachers to the poorest students. Somewhat off-handedly I said, "But you don't know about those teachers because you haven't had them. You've been in good classes with teachers who have challenged you."

"I haven't," announced Paula, who stood up to make her point. "I've been in awful classes. When I first came here they put me in dumb classes and my mom had to get me out of them. I have had to fight for every good class I've had. This is the first honors English class I've ever been in." When she finished she looked surprised that she had actually spoken. She sat down quickly, but she was not embarrassed. She was clearly pleased with herself. She had stood up and made herself known.

That night as I thought about what Paula had said I began to think about the responsibility I had for her. Her words made me realize that the previous spring when I had opened up AP English to a broad band of students—at least one-third of whom had never been in an advanced English class before and whose SAT scores ranged from the 1300's to the 700's—I had assumed the responsibility of making success possible for those students.

CREATING OPPORTUNITY WAS NOT ENOUGH

My reading of the work of researchers such as Brophy (1983, 1986), Good and Weinstein (1986), Heath (1983), Hiebert (1983), Marshall and Weinstein (1984), Oakes (1987), Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984), and Sizer (1984) had inspired me to untrack AP English. That research, however, had not told me how to teach an untracked AP class. In fact, in the beginning I did not think the how was important. I could see, of course, from my students' summer essays on required books that there was a clear disparity in the quality of the

papers: students who had been in honors classes for three years wrote significantly better papers than students who had not been in honors classes. My concern about the disparity, however, did not lead me to analyze the differences in the writing of the two groups and then use my findings to plan a course of action. I chose to ignore the differences, confident that the rigors of the AP curriculum, my high expectations, and the example of their peers would improve the quality of the work from students who had not been on the honors track.

Paula's words, "I can't talk like them" and "This is the first honors English class I have ever been in," however, told me I could not teach the class as I had taught it before. Creating opportunity was not enough—I had to learn how to teach an untracked English class. That night as my students thought about their epiphanies, I began to work out my strategies for teaching AP English in a way that would allow all students—particularly those new to honors classes—to succeed.

BASIC STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING THE CLASS

Early on three basic strategies for teaching the class took shape.

First, I had to spend a great deal of time modeling tasks. With writing activities, that meant that I had to demonstrate how I would perform the task (talking out my essay, explaining my reflective process, reading my first draft) and how others (like E.B. White, Maya Angelou, Richard Rodriguez) had performed the task. With response groups, I had to demonstrate effective feedback and appropriate behavior and give my students time to role-play revision suggestions. In discussion groups I had to listen attentively, respond respectfully, make sure I did not take control.

Second, once I had assigned a task and my students understood what was required of them, I had to step back and let them take charge. When they came to a problem in their response group—a disagreement about a specific paper or about the workings of the group, I did not solve the problem. I joined the group only as a facilitator to assist them in working out their differences and then returned to my desk. In discussions, when awkward silences occurred, I forced myself to keep quiet and wait for a student to ask a question or bring up a relevant point.

Third and most important, I had to use classroom talk as a vehicle for making all students feel good about themselves as learners and contributors to others' learning. Talk became the essential ingredient in creating our class as a community that supported experimentation and questioning and public making of meaning.

By the middle of the first quarter, Paula was no longer talking of transferring out. And I no longer had the scary feeling that I had begotten something I could not nurture.

CHANGES IN MY TEACHING

When I began this research, I thought my study would focus on the changes that would take place in the work of my students who were new to a high level English class. During the first quarter, I realized that the focus had shifted. It was not the changes in my students I was looking at, it was the changes in me and my teaching. Some of those changes required little rethinking of my teaching philosophy and were quickly accomplished. Other changes—the most essential ones—required major shifts.

Setting Strict Deadlines

Early in the year I noticed that a number of students, most of them new to honors classes, were not handing in assignments on time. Late papers, incomplete revisions, and missed assignments told me I had to set down strict rules—stricter rules than I had ever set before with AP students: students who came to class without their required drafts could not work in their response group; late papers would be given credit but no grade; when students were absent, they had to call a classmate to get the day's assignment. To show that I was serious about deadlines, the first quarter I gave credit for every assignment. Sometimes I read through the papers, sometimes I merely stamped them to show that I had seen them. Establishing strict rules paid off. Students came to class prepared. If they were sick the day an assignment was due they had their parents or friends deliver their work. Occasionally a student would come to class and say, "Don't mark me here. I'm absent. I'm going home after this class." As the year went along, there were, of course,

times when students missed deadlines or class, but those times were exceptions. Basically, late papers and absenteeism became non-issues in the class after the first few assignments.

Teaching Mechanics and Grammar

While their first essays showed me that my students could write long papers on real issues in their own voices, they also pointed out the wide diversity in my students' problems with grammar and the mechanics of writing. To teach to their diverse needs and competencies, I began using style sheets, lists of common mistakes or problems I culled from student papers, mixing complicated points with basic points, so that the list was directed at the most competent writers as well as the least competent. I encouraged my students to review the style sheets frequently and to refer to them when they were in the editing and proofreading stages of their writing.

Restructuring the Use of Textbooks

Because I saw the need for talk as vital to my approach to teaching a wide band of students and because talk takes a great deal of time, I knew I could not use our basic textbook, Cooley's *Norton Anthology of Short Prose*, as I had in the past. Instead of having my students read and discuss every essay of every type modeled in the book, I had them read two or three essays in the chapter, write brief summaries or reactions to those essays, and discuss their comments in class. After they had read and discussed several chapters in the Norton, I had them choose one type of essay to write and take through various drafts. Working through the Norton this way took one-third the time my previous method had and still exposed students to a variety of essay forms.

COLLABORATING WITH MY STUDENTS

Those were the easy changes. The more significant ones developed as the year went along—as I grew increasingly conscious of my need to change and excited about what was happening in my classroom. These major changes

involved collaborating with my students and sharing responsibility with them.

At the beginning of the year, my collaboration with students was limited to writing groups. I asked my students how they wanted me to set up groups, who they wanted to work with, and how I could assist them in making their groups work. My concern with collaboration ended when group etiquette and procedures were worked out and minor personality clashes handled. This year, however, I did not stop asking questions after the third or fourth paper. I had too much to learn and I knew who had the answers. All year long—from the first questionnaire about response groups to the last reflection on what I needed to do with the next year's class—I asked students to tell me what was working and what was not and to help me figure out how to make things work. What needs to be changed in your response group and why? If you could choose a perfect writing group, who would be in it and why? Describe your revision process. Does it work? Why? Why not? What role do you play in class discussions? What contributes to that role? If you could make one change in our book discussions, what would it be? How do you approach reading comprehension questions on the SAT? Does that approach work? How do you feel about the new selection process for AP English? Why did you take/not take the national AP English examination?

This collaborative atmosphere invited students to move from reflecting on and evaluating class dynamics and tasks to assuming ownership of the curriculum. Their sharing the locus of responsibility was manifested in every activity. It started in their writing groups. For the first two groups, I chose the leader—more to make sure that all students got a chance to lead than any need to assert my authority. By the third group, they told me, "You don't need to appoint leaders. We'll do it." Then they took control of group procedures, negotiating with each other to meet the needs of the group members and the nature of their assignment. Once it was clear that I was willing to share responsibility for the class with them, they began to negotiate many things with me—due dates, numbers of revision drafts, film selections, book discussion formats.

The most exciting area of shared responsibility was the choosing of their literature. From their first discussion of which book they would buy and read, it was clear they knew what was class literary fare and what was outside reading and that, as the teacher, I had the final say. But it was also clear that I

trusted them to select challenging books and they did. Among the books they chose: *Iron and Silk, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Of Love and Shadow,* and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X.* I most vividly remember the day Venus said she wanted to read *A Room of One's Own.* There we were with three weeks left in the school year, the AP test over, the senior ditch day and prom only days away. It was time to relax and Venus was asking us to read Virginia Woolf. They'll never go for this, I thought. But they did—they read it, groused about its unfamiliar allusions and serious tone, but discussed it with real passion and insight. And they led me to see the brilliance of it—something I had resisted for years, after struggling with it on my own as a college junior and swearing I would never subject my students to it.

SOME DISCOVERIES

Opening up AP English to all students who were willing to commit to a rigorous summer and year-long regimen of writing and reading allowed me to study firsthand what happens when students are given choices in their schooling. I discovered that students with combined SAT scores of 690 and 740 can learn with students with scores of 1290 and 1350; that students with SAT verbal scores of 460 and 490 can earn a 4 and a 5 on the national Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Test; that students with SAT verbal scores of 290 and 380 can pass the University of California Subject A exam. (Eighty percent of the students who took the AP English Language and Composition test passed. Five students received a top score of 5, seven earned 4's, thirteen earned 3's. Of the 28 students who took the University of California Subject A test, 25 passed) I discovered that gifted and non-gifted students can discuss sophisticated literature with each other and can respond to each other's writing in ways that lead to thoughtful revision. I discovered that giving students the chance to elect to work at the highest academic levels empowers them to see themselves as learners.

When asked to reflect on the new way of selecting students for AP English—that is, choosing themselves—Aurora wrote: "I feel I am proof that the new system works. I have been doing well in this class and have learned how to improve my writing. I look around at the kids in class and I feel I am as good as they are. I'm earning A's too."

Opening up AP English to all students willing to commit to a challenging curriculum led me to another discovery. If I wanted to effect change in my students, I had to move away from the front of the classroom, I had to share responsibility for teaching and learning with them, and I had to give my students real choices about their education.

MOVING ON

School ended on June 10th. Seniors graduated on the 15th. In early September I ran into Elena, Aurora, and Paula at a street fair, their last get-together before heading off to three different UC campuses. We talked of their excitement about meeting new people ("men!"), their nervousness about hard classes and adjusting to roommates, and their sadness at leaving each other. We promised to write.

October 9, 1989

Dear Mrs. Cone,

What's up? This is Paula. Remember me? I'm doing well here in blond-fest '89, Santa Barbara. But seriously, I really like it. It's a wonderful place to live, the weather's great, and the atmosphere is really fun. I miss my family and best friends a lot. Aurora is doing really well at Cal and she is happy.

Hey! I'm doing well in English as far as the self-confidence goes. I talk a lot and it's funny how after we read a story she'll let other people give their opinions and stuff and then she'll pick on me to tell everyone what the author really meant. I love it! ...

Take care, love always,
Paula

Hey, I'm a college student!

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