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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, a Canadian high school teacher describes a senior English independent study program requiring that each student become involved in a topic through experience. From previous teaching experiences, the teacher realized that the curriculum was secondary to the method of delivery, that learning happened when a teacher instilled in students a desire to learn, and that every meeting of students with their teacher and peers should have personal meaning. Ontario's senior English curriculum mandated an independent study project developed from students' special interests and literature readings, and culminating in formal oral and written presentations. This independent study unit added the requirement that students become personally involved with their topics and bring their experiences to life for their classmates through an oral presentation. One student took a part-time job in a local nursing home, read literature on gerontology and services for the elderly as well as a novel about an institutionalized elderly woman, and interviewed nurses and residents at the nursing home. For her oral presentation, she came to class in the character of an elderly infirm woman and described her daily experiences and the realities of old age. Another student merged the life story of Michelangelo with a slide show of his art and her own efforts to imitate his style and technique of oil painting. A third student combined his interest in physics and engineering with the novel "Don Quixote," and developed a presentation that addressed humanity's mechanical and metaphoric use of the windmill. (SV)

Chapter 2

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Gail C. Simmons

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Gail's story is appealing because of the vividness with which she describes a peak experience in her classroom. Gail goes on to reflect on the processes by which she found out how to implement experiential learning in the English curriculum. She describes her role, after starting students on their own paths, as one of supplying support and confidence. Here, a neglected aspect of teaching is articulated, namely, the importance of the teacher instilling confidence in students who are about to embark on risky ventures into the unknown. Author Mary Stewart, in her Arthurian trilogy, says that a leader is one who, with a word, can confer or withhold confidence. Gail's story shows that a teacher is the same.

Silence fell as she entered the classroom; wheels clicked as veined hands clawed for the elusive chrome rim. Head shaking, she haltingly rolled to the front of the class and fumbled with papers, eyes downcast, searching for just the right order before starting her speech. An outlet to plug in her tape recorder was stubbornly out of her grasp. "Here, let me help you," I offered, springing to life. As if in slow motion, her head lifted, heavy with age, and I was paralyzed by the strong, steady stare of eyes that denied her years. They defied me to ignore the magnificence of the person trapped within the body which was confined to the chair. Stunned, I returned to my seat like a scolded child, and waited.

Taking what seemed like forever to shuffle and re-shuffle her papers, the silence persisted, and this class of usually restless senior students was still. "Let's get on with it!" my teacher's mind pleaded, eyes on the clock. Finally a strong, clear voice, a foil to the woman's failing body, freed her listeners with a question: "What did you feel when you realized that an older woman would be talking to you today?"

Students fidgeted self-consciously.

She began again: "When you first looked at me, did you think I'd be feeble-minded and forgetful, and that youth is the most desirable thing? You know," she added, "we are all in the process of aging."

The eyes of all students were, like mine, downcast, avoiding the truths we were hearing.

"What do you think of me?" she asked, with calculated accusation in her voice. Teacher-like she waited for a response from some reticent student, and I looked up to see who she had singled out. Panic gripped my insides when I met her stare straight on.

"That you are old," I blurted.

I couldn't believe my stupidity at replying in such a shallow, no-mind manner. At least it was the truth. Surveying the young people before her, and lingering purposely on each syllable for effect, she said, "I feel I am wise, open-minded, alert, and very good at getting things done. So, you see, the way *you* think of me and the way *I* think of me are very different."

Now, with every eye on the visitor, she explained how frightening it was when her body would limit what her mind wanted to do. She spoke of the frustrations of relying on others to do what she had

always been able to do for herself, and of the impatience of sharp-tongued young people who viewed her more as an imposition than as a human being. With that, she leaned forward to impart what we thought would be another frustration of old age. Lined lips hissed: "Sex! Yes, well, I don't know how it is nowadays, but when I was a little younger, this was a personal interaction with another person; something you shared with someone you cared about." With that same accusatory tone creeping back into her voice, she continued, "Younger people seem to think that this doesn't matter any more in a person's senior years."

The woman paused at this point as though to catch her breath. I wondered if she were about to single me out again. But then she hardened her jaw and announced, "Well, let me tell you people. I'm a person too, and if I wish to spend some romantic evening with some tall, grey, handsome man, I do not wish to broadcast it!" Convinced that she would explain further, we waited silently while she composed herself. I marvelled at the bittersweet passion in this small person before us, and wondered, only for a moment, if she were about to cry. Then, lowering her voice, she assured us that when someone wishes to spend some time alone with someone else in a residence, there is a facility provided. "There is a room . . . *one* room . . . designated for *all* residents who wish to spend some time alone." Prompting each and every one of us to think deeply about her next question, she asked, "Do you realize how humiliating this is?" I was just trying to imagine what it would be like when she snapped, "How would you feel if somebody, the whole world, could tell you what time you were with whom, and what you were doing, and for how long?" Uncertain laughter rippled through the room. Was this comic relief? Nervous energy resulting from having to face the indignities suffered by a generation who was well aware of our narrow-minded view of the elderly? It was almost as though she knew us better than we knew ourselves—as though she had not lost contact with the young woman she had been.

Then, she caught us again with an account of a married couple being "allowed" to live in the same room together but having to sleep in separate beds. With incredulity in her voice, she asked, "Do younger people feel that these two people are not responsible enough? After all, these are the same two people who were

responsible enough to get married, raise a family, and take care of mortgages and bills. Are these two people all of a sudden unable to be trusted? Think about it!" she encouraged us.

I could feel a heaviness come upon me, a sense of hopelessness at the magnitude of the wrongs that seniors faced every day. The gentle hush in the room assured me that I was not alone with these feelings. It was this wonderful woman before us, Ethel Sherman, who set our minds at ease, assuring us that our time would come when we, too, would face the prejudices of the younger generation. She went on: "Old age is not a time to be agreeable but, rather, a time to be a rebel; a time to get out of life what you are willing to put into it." And again she illustrated that youth and age share similar experiences: loves, regrets, and plans for the future.

I had never really thought about an older person having a future. In fact, I had to confess that I hadn't given much thought at all to the realities of old age. Ethel's talk was good for us. As though we were coming to the end of an intense journey together, Ethel said, "We have touched hearts today, and for a few moments our minds became one." We knew that her time with us was about to end, and I felt, as I know others did, the heaviness which comes with saying goodbye to someone you care about. She reached haltingly for her tape recorder, and explained to us that before she went she would like us to hear a poem that was written by a friend of hers; a poem found on her closet floor after her friend had died. The tape recorder clicked on and, with gentle music in the background, Ethel read an intensely personal poem.

At this point, tears streaming down her face, tears mirrored in the faces of each one of my English students, Ethel Sherman took off her hat, reached for the elastic binding her powdered hair, and shook it free with a youthful flip of her head. With steady hands she peeled off the mask of age from her face to reveal the 18-year-old Penny Burnham, a member of the class. Her seminar complete, Penny waited, not knowing what to do next. Her classmates sat stunned by the intensity of the last hour. As her teacher, it was all I could do to contain the emotions which Penny's presentation had stirred within me. I, too, watched, waiting for the spell to break.

Suddenly, applause. Some students cried openly, or rushed up to hug the friend who had touched them so deeply; others remarked to

anyone who was listening that Penny had really reached them, that she had certainly brought her experience to the classroom.

It was the singularly most powerful moment of my teaching career.

On first reflection, I couldn't believe that Penny's gripping presentation had anything to do with me or the changes I had made in my English curriculum, but it did. I marvelled at her passion and her commitment to her topic, and wondered why I had not had a similar experience during my own high school career, or university career, for that matter. I also wondered how I had learned to teach in such a powerful fashion, so different from my own experiences as a student.

I had decided early in life that I wanted to be a teacher, and I had experienced high school with that goal in mind. I could have observed my own teachers' successes and failures and tried to remember those methods which worked. After five years of university, I faced my first classes of Grade 10 students, thinking I knew quite a bit about teaching, and was shocked to learn that the students knew far more about effective and ineffective teaching methods than I did.

Paradoxically, it was teaching a geography course (not a strong subject of mine) which showed me the path I eventually followed in English teaching. Being a new teacher in the early 1980s demanded flexibility and willingness to teach out of your subject area; hence, I found myself struggling to teach a geography course which contained a unit on marine life. The challenge was to find a way to connect these young people, in the centre of the continent, to the bounty of the sea. Somehow, I knew that the textbook wasn't going to do it.

Inadvertently, I stumbled on the basis of what I now know to be experiential learning by asking the students to each choose a sea creature that we might eat, and then to find a recipe for serving it. The results were marvellous. Parents helped with recipes and volunteered to purchase the sea food at a nearby market. Students researched origins and market value of their fish in preparation for written and oral presentations. When the fish were delivered to the classroom, there was a wonderful hubbub of questions, suppositions, and explanations that I had never observed when working

with the usual question-and-answer of textbook work. The next day, we feasted and made connections between the food we were eating and the places the food came from.

That was all very well for geography, but would it work in my English classes? The challenge was to figure out exactly what could be gleaned from my experiences with the geography class that could apply to a curriculum of literature and language, so I asked my students what made a lesson or a unit work for them.

The main message was that the curriculum was secondary to the methods of delivery; that learning happened when the teacher instilled in students a desire to learn; that every meeting with their teacher and peers should have personal meaning of some kind. The students were right. The geography students were directly involved in the marine life unit, and because they were making personal choices and decisions, they became curious and dedicated explorers. They were learning because they *wanted* to learn, not because they *had* to learn. The traditional role of the teacher as the person who imparted information to a disinterested audience was replaced by a teacher who worked with students who had taken some control of their own learning. My new task was to adopt a supportive role that would give students the direction and confidence they needed, emphasizing the process rather than the content of the English curriculum. It was these realizations that led to the Senior English Independent Study Program in which Penny Burnham found a place to shine.

The official government curriculum for this Senior English course reads, in part:

> Students ... are at an important stage in their personal development, a stage that will continue in their university years and beyond. [The courses] refine and extend skills and knowledge in the following areas:
>
> - speaking and writing proficiency;
> - response to literature and the articulation of this response;
> - enjoyment and appreciation of literature and the development of a reading habit;
> - understanding of language, its nature and functions;

> - independence in reading, thought, and expression.
>
> (Ministry of Education, Ontario Academic Courses, Senior Division Guidelines, 1984)

Ironically, the vagueness of the mandated English guidelines provided me with the opportunity to try out some of the methods that worked with my geography class. Other than the stipulations quoted above, the document instructs that topics should be developed from students' special interests, in consultation with the teacher, and that topics should arise out of the literature at hand or from the wide reading encouraged by the course. Worth 20% of the course weight, the independent study unit is to culminate in a formal report that includes an oral and a written component. It was here that I saw the potential to make English personally relevant to my students' lives. I created a standard independent study unit—selecting a topic, reading novels, writing an essay, and making an oral presentation—but added to these was the requirement that the students get involved personally with their topics through an experience of some sort. In their oral presentations, they were to discuss the novels they read and bring their experiences to life for their classmates. Penny's wasn't the only superb response to this challenge.

For example, Mary Anne explored her Italian roots through visual art. She used literature based on the life story of Michelangelo and began her moving presentation with a slide show of his art, interspersed with quotations from the literature. The highlight, however, was when she proudly unveiled her own oil painting and explained to the class how she had tried to imitate the master's style and technique.

Then there was Trevor, a student who openly disliked English and preferred to be working with his hands. He said that he wished we could do more hands-on things, as he was doing in his physics class. He was making a windmill out of bicycle tires, pulleys, and an old barrel cut in two. Trevor was able to combine his interest in physics and engineering with the classic novel, ***Don Quixote***, and he dazzled the class with an oral presentation which addressed humanity's mechanical and metaphoric use of the windmill. He included a reading from the literature, a video of a play about Don Quixote, and a demonstration of his windmill. Here was an

unabashed, reluctant student of English who talked authoritatively about human dreams using symbol and metaphor within the context of a complex piece of literature that would have been too difficult for him had he not had the personal connection through his interest in wind power.

Finally, I come back to Penny Burnham. Penny took a part-time job in a local nursing home and reached the hearts of the elderly residents there. For her project, she said that she was interested in reading about old age in order to better understand what her elderly friends were going through. She read a novel about an elderly woman who had been institutionalized; she interviewed nurses and residents in the home; she read locally available literature about services provided for the elderly, and she made good use of local libraries to further research gerontology. Penny used her experiences with drama to create Ethel Sherman, a composite of the character in the novel and the people she worked with at the home for the aged. She learned how to operate a wheelchair and, in order to become one with her character, she chose to wheel herself to school on the day of her oral presentation. She later explained to the class how disappointed she was when one of her own classmates walked by her on her way to school, choosing to ignore the old woman in the chair who needed help at the curb.

In Penny's presentation, I saw experiential education at its best. Penny was committed to learning; curious about her world, she went into the community to learn more about old age. She contacted experts and was current in her research; she was also able to unearth the poem that had brought the house down. Penny escaped the confining boundaries of conventional methods of learning, gaining the confidence to push herself beyond the limits of her own knowledge. She used the freedom to explore her choice of literature, and her risk taking was supported by a teacher committed to the process. She was naturally taking control of her own learning and, in doing so, learning became exciting, energizing, and pertinent because she could make her own insightful connections between real life and literature.

Successes like Penny's, Trevor's, and Mary Anne's have become part of my own experiential learning process. Through them I am able to reaffirm that meaningful and lasting education starts with people rather than curriculum. It is easier now to say "No" occasionally to lists of mandatory units and to embrace the extra time and energy this kind of teaching requires. Admittedly, we all need parameters; however, within these boundaries there is still ample room to see into the faces of each of our students and to realize that

real learning for them will come when they are able to internalize facts and ideas through personal experience. Whether a student is struggling with a disability, wrestling with theoretical concepts, learning outdoors, or sitting at a desk, I am convinced that experiential education will bring to each a personal connection to the curriculum reminiscent of Ethel Sherman.