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ABSTRACT

For teachers, demonstrating that the classroom is a safe environment for all students, and that respect is expected at all times, is vital. For these two things to occur, open lines of communication between the teacher and students are key. While preparing lesson plans as a first year graduate teaching assistant in composition, an instructor begins to reflect about the tone she had established in her secondary classrooms, especially when she was a student teacher. This paper recounts her student teaching experiences at Highland Park High School (a predominantly black school) in Topeka, Kansas in 1998. The paper also considers what a composition teacher needs to do for her students' writing to improve, for example, "allow them to make mistakes." It recounts several things that happened in her university writing classes when she taught a mini-grammar lesson followed by oral discussion. The paper concludes by returning to a statement from its opening paragraph: Four items must be established on day one in the classroom--trust, respect, communication, and discipline. It contends that it is vital that all four be maintained throughout the semester and/or academic year, and that, moreover, students must sense that teachers not only care about them, but want them to succeed. Lists 10 works cited. (NKA)

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# Okay, Kid! Don't Make Me Hurt You: Negotiating Student/Teacher Relationships in the Tumultuous Classroom.

by Marilyn Riddle

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Marilyn Riddle

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# Okay, Kid! Don't Make Me Hurt You : Negotiating Student/Teacher Relationships in the Tumultuous Classroom

Memories of my days as an education major and student teacher came flooding back through my mind as I prepared my lesson plans as a first year, second semester, graduate teaching assistant in the English department at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. I recalled my education professors' words that in order for teacher-student relationships to work, four items must be established on day one--trust, respect, communication, and discipline. Demonstrating that the classroom is a safe environment for all students, and that respect is expected at all times is vital. In order for these two things to occur, open lines of communication between the teacher and students are key. They must sense that teachers not only care about them, but want them to succeed. Without trust, respect, and communication, the fourth item, discipline, will be more difficult to establish and maintain. As one of my former education professors states, "It's easier to get easier than it is to get tougher." Reflecting on his words made me stop and ask myself a few questions.

What type of tone had I established in my classrooms? Was I the strict, authoritarian, military type who never smiled, or, was I authoritative, but reasonable? Did I demonstrate to students that I was in charge, that I expected respect for oneself and others, and that my classroom was a safe one? More importantly, was I able to maintain a calm and cool demeanor when confronted with rowdy student behaviors? In other words, a "never let them see me sweat" appearance?

While the ideal classroom would consist of 20 well-behaved students who always paid attention and completed their assignments on time, the reality is that there is no perfect classroom. As Mike Rose points out in his article "I Just Wanna Be Average," "you'll be thrown in with all kinds of kids from all kinds of backgrounds, and that can be unsettling" (28). However, it does not have to be a disaster. Rose also suggests that teachers "reject the confusion and frustration by openly defining yourself as the Common Joe. Champion the average. Rely on your own good sense" (29).

As a former secondary education teacher, I agree with Rose. And as stated above, if the four key items essential to teaching are established on the first day of class, encountering, and dealing with, challenging situations will be a little easier. The goal, according to Stephen North, is "a shared commitment to our students, our professions, our communities" (North 135). North also writes that "the positioning that discourses do is experienced by each of us differently" (133). Reading North's "Rhetoric, Responsibility, and the 'Language of the Left,'" reminded me of the various tools I had been taught as an undergraduate education major.

In addition, I found myself once again reflecting on my student teaching days at Highland Park High School in Topeka, Kansas, in the fall of 1998, as I read Rachelle Smith's "Teaching at Ground Zero," Stephen Newton's "Teaching, Listening, and the Sound of Guns," and Rose's "I Just Wanna Be Average." The narratives are similar echoes of my experiences at HPHS. Like the three authors, I, too, walked into, and taught, at a high school where its students are predominantly black. For the first time in my life, I was a minority. It was a new experience for me.

While it was not one of my choices on my student teaching request form because I wanted to teach at Topeka High School, Highland Park is where I was placed. Reflecting back on those days, I realize I am glad that a miscommunication occurred and I student taught there instead of Topeka High. Although there were a few difficult days, and I was a little nervous at first, overall, my experience was wonderful. Three class periods stand out above the rest, though. Perhaps I remember these times because in each incident, the end results surprised me. The first one occurred about two or three weeks into the semester.

Sixteen-year old Keona rolled her eyes as I asked the students to discuss the three or four questions with their group members. After all, it was Friday. She could have cared less about the story we had just read. Instead, she wanted to describe her plans for the weekend. "Keona! Please discuss the questions with your group members. Each group will be asked to share their responses in about ten minutes. Therefore, your weekend plans will have to wait until lunch." Her sigh could be heard throughout the room, but I ignored it. I continued to walk around the room, listening to students' thoughts about the story. Laughter from Keona and her friends rang out. "Keona! Pick up your book, pen, and notebook, and return to your desk, please."

"What? You're crazy! You can't tell me what to do. I ain't movin'!" As she and her friends laughed, I felt the steam coming out of my ears.

"Now, Keona!" Silence filled the air as I stood there with a stern look on my face. I could feel the stares of her classmates, but I did not care. I was the teacher. I was in charge.

"Now! Now! Now!," Keona mimicked as she glared at me. Every discipline tactic I had been taught the previous semester flew out the door.

"Young lady! Do not mock me! I asked you to return to your desk, and I expect you to comply to my request."

With a huff and a "Oh, f--- it!," Keona returned to her desk. Disbelieving gasps and shocked whispers could be heard, but I ignored them. I walked over to Mrs. Rowe's (my cooperating teacher) desk, opened a side door, and took out a disciplinary referral form to complete. Foul language and disrespect for teachers are two items that are not tolerated at Highland Park. Class was over by the time I had completed the form, but it would be waiting for Keona on Monday.

And when she walked into the room the following Monday, I asked her to take the form and herself to her division principal. She did as I asked her to, and returned to class fifteen or twenty minutes later. I am not sure what happened, but Keona never smarted off to me again. In fact, she was respectful, participated actively in class discussions, and completed the assigned activities for each unit. She smiled at me periodically, and wrote "Thanks for teaching me. I hope you will come back next semester" on my good-bye card. I was both surprised and shocked by her kind words.

The second incident occurred in my class within a class (regular and special needs students) with a student named Gerome who enjoyed playing the role of tough guy. He was disruptive and his antics were exasperating. He disliked working in groups because "no one understands my thoughts." I was persistent, though, and eventually he came around and worked with his peers. And while he did not like group work, he enjoyed reading, was a good reader, and expressed his creative talents through his work.

I was impressed with his improvement in the activities and assignments, and told him this on a regular basis. He tried to pretend he did not care, but I knew better. Evidence of his improved attitude and behavior was apparent during class and continued to show as the weeks passed. While his antics did not stop completely, he was more respectful toward me. However, I began to question his sincerity a few days later because once again, Gerome would test my patience.

The students and I had completed reading the short story "The Three Wishes,"and were in the middle of our discussion. I was pleased with their efforts and attitudes, and commended them. I felt as if I had gained their trust with my firm, but fair, teaching style. Little did I know that my thoughts of being a good authority figure were about to haunt me.

"I don't blame the father for locking the door and refusing to open it when his son knocks. But on the other hand, I feel sorry for the mother. She really wants to see her son," Misty stated.

"Yeah," Shanelle agreed. "I mean I'm sure the father wanted to see his son, but he knew he had to keep the door closed."

"The dad in this story is a wimp! He's afraid of his own son. That's stupid!," Gerome replied. "I'm not afraid of anything."

John whispered something to himself and Tonya giggled. Her giggle caught Gerome's attention and he turned around. "What'd you say, man? You makin' fun of me?" John did not respond. Tonya, who had overheard the comment, shared it with her classmates. "Hey, Gerome! John said you are the one who's stupid."

Before I had a chance to comment on the inappropriate remark, Gerome had jumped out of his desk and headed toward John. Two empty desks were knocked over as the young men stood facing each other, prepared to fight. "Wait a minute!" I yelled! All eyes in the room were focused on me as I began to plea with Gerome and John. Could I, as the teacher, "interject comments and suggestions at the point where they are most relevant?" (Hanson and Vogt 576). Knowing that the next few minutes were crucial ones, I thought quickly about what to say, and hoped that my words would be convincing.

"I only have three weeks left at Highland Park, and I do not want a fight on my record as a student teacher. Plus, I'm fairly sure that neither of you want 18 points and five days out of school suspension for fighting. Please, pick up the desks and return to your seats." I waited calmly as the two young men looked at each other, then back at me, and proceeded to pick up the desks before returning to their own. Although I could hear grumbles from both, Gerome and John remained quiet the rest of the class period.

"Okay, I believe we were discussing 'The Three Wishes.' Misty and Shanelle stated they feel sorry for the mother, and can imagine how torn the father must have felt about keeping the door locked. Gerome believes the father is a wimp. How do the rest of you feel about the ending of the story? Who would like to share his or her response?"

Although I appeared calm and cool on the outside, the phrase "never let them see you sweat" ran repeatedly through my mind as I continued the discussion. I did not allow myself to think about what could have happened between Gerome and John. As soon as the bell rang and the students had left the room, I collected my breath and sat down, relieved that the class was over. Both Jan, the special education teacher, and Mrs. Rowe praised me for my quick thinking and creative tactics. While I was delighted to hear their kind words, I could not help but wonder if they suspected that I was actually a little, make that a lot, scared. If they did, they never admitted it. Instead, they relayed the story to other teachers and to Mr. Darting, Division Three Principal.

It appeared as if my "cool" approach to the tense situation that morning had given me my 15 minutes of fame. I discovered later that coaxing Gerome out of a fight was a big deal. How had I, a student teacher, managed to talk him out of fighting? Was it because I did not pay attention to the label of troublemaker that he had been given, but took the time to demonstrate that he, like the other students I taught at Highland Park, mattered to me? Had he been listening to me when I expressed how impressed I was with his reading skills on a regular basis? What, exactly, had prevented the fight that morning? Even though I never learned why, I was glad that Gerome chose to listen to me that day. He seemed to view me in a different light for the remainder of my time at HPHS. The tough guy image had almost disappeared.

The next two weeks passed without any incidents or repeat performances of the "near" fight. Gerome and John were civil to each other, and the CWC class continued to progress nicely. Once again, I was pleased with the atmosphere in the classroom that Thursday morning. Students were reading silently. Fifteen or twenty minutes of class time remained. As I prepared for the next in-class activity, I was startled by the sound of Gerome's voice. "Ms. Riddle? What are we going to do now?"

I told him that I was planning to read aloud a short story. He asked if he could help select one and then read it, promising he would do a good job. Unable to resist his request, we chose a story and walked to the front of the room. I announced that for the remainder of the period, Gerome was the teacher. He was beaming. His smile lit up his face. He looked around the room and began his "teach."

"Good morning, students. My name is Gerome Davis. Please call me Mr. Davis. Today I will be reading a short story to you. I expect all of you to pay attention because I will be asking questions along the way. Are we ready to begin?"

And for the next fifteen or twenty minutes, Gerome took charge of the room. He read for a few minutes, stopped, and asked questions about the reading. If one of the students appeared not to be listening, he would stop, look at the student, and say, "L'tasha! Pay attention!" or "Robbie, tell me what I just read." One of his female peers reminded Gerome that "Now you know what Ms. Riddle and the other two teachers have to put up with. It's not easy, is it?" He shook his head and continued reading. Mr. Darting's presence in the doorway went undetected by Gerome.

When the period was over, he looked at me and smiled. "I really liked teaching the class. Did I do a good job, Ms. Riddle?"

"You did well, Gerome. Thanks for helping me teach." He smiled again, picked up his books, and walked out, beaming the entire time. Jan and Mrs. Rowe both told me that they were impressed with my decision to allow Gerome to teach. I smiled while thinking that I was glad it worked out considering the fact that Gerome's teach was an unplanned activity. Mrs. Rowe stated that she asked Mr. Darting to come over and observe Gerome. Later that day, Mr. Darting congratulated me on ***my*** student teacher. I laughed. Knowing that I had reached Gerome, the "tough guy," made me feel good about myself and my abilities as a teacher.

The remainder of my time at Highland Park High School seemed to pass quickly. Saying good-bye to students proved to be more difficult than I imagined, especially since I taught on a block schedule. As a result, I spent two days hugging and telling kids good-bye. Although I opened my card at my going away party, I had to wait to read students' comments until I was alone. I did not want to cry in front of them.

As stated earlier, being placed at Highland Park was the result of a miscommunication. While I was a little disappointed and scared at first, it turned out to be a great experience for me. The eight weeks not only gave me the opportunity to meet, and teach, a nice group of students, but proved that their reputation of being wild, tough, and unteachable is misleading. It is ironic, however, that although forty-eight years have passed since the 1954 Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education lawsuit, we are, sadly, still dealing with the same issues.

My experience also echoes Sandra Sellers Hanson's and Leonard Vogt's views in their article "A Variation on Peer Critiquing: Peer Editing as the Integration of Language Skills," that "as their communication skills grow, students gain self-respect, self-confidence, a sense of cooperation, and the ability to take responsibility for their own learning" (578). I, too, learned a great deal in those eight weeks. Perhaps one of the most important things I learned is to start with the idea that students are willing to learn and are motivated (Lyons 179). Moreover, engaging them in the activities, encouraging them to share their ideas, and listening to what they have to say, are helpful practices in the classroom, thus maintaining the open lines of communications with students. These ideas are similar to what Rose suggests in his "I Just Wanna Be Average."

He argues that "a major skill in academic writing is the complex ability to write from other texts--to summarize, to disambiguate key notions and useful facts and incorporate them in one's own writing, to react critically to prose" (113). In addition, his "Preparatory Program's 'Revision Scramble'" (112) helps develop critical thinking and writing skills, and helps connect students to the real world and gives them an opportunity to help others. Students seem to enjoy activities that link them to an environment outside of school. The important aspect to remember is to emphasize and encourage writing.

"Too many of our students come to us with narrow, ossified conceptions of writing. Our job is to create opportunities so they can alter those conceptions for themselves" (121). My role as teacher is to provide examples and in-class writing activities for students, and to encourage and guide them. Likewise, it is important for me to remember that "We have to allow our writers to be ambitious and to err. Error vigilance creates safe, not meaningful, prose" (121). If I want students' writing to improve, I have to allow them to make mistakes. Only then can I address the issues during class, and provide examples on how to avoid making the same grammatical errors.

And like Paul Freire writes, "Yet only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for his students, nor can he impose his thought on them" (216). According to my composition II and creative writing instructor, Bill Swinney, "the writer's voice is an essential part of writing. The voice in the piece should be the student's and not the teacher's." In addition, he stated that writing should not be stifled because it is a way for people to express themselves, and therefore, should be encouraged. By providing in-class writing activities, examples, and guidance, we can "help our students experience the rich possibilities of the writing process" (Rose 112).

However, as I prepare my lesson plans for my college composition classes, the "familiar caricature of the composition teacher" (Kroll & Shafer 208) pops into my head, and once again, I have to ask myself if I am the authoritative, military type teacher who never smiles, and is more focused on grammatical and spelling errors than the students' voices and contents of their essays. If I apply the error-analysis theory that Kroll and Shafer suggest in their article "Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," then perhaps I can gain an insight into the "cognitive strategies the learner is using to process information" (209) and emphasize to students that "errors are good for the learner" (209). While I believe that writing is power and that "as Heidi Dulay and Marina Burt state, 'You can't learn without goofing,'" (209), how can I demonstrate this effectively to my Composition II students?

After reading students' argument papers and discovering a pattern of similar mistakes, I came up with an idea and taught it. Even though there were a few glitches, overall, the lessons went well. I conducted mini-grammar lessons, focusing on Joseph Williams' statements that

> "it is this unreflective feeling on the nerves in our ordinary reading that interests me the most, the way we respond--or not--to error when we do not make error a part of our conscious field of attention. It is the difference between reading for typographical errors and reading for content" (164).

My first step was to discuss the common mistakes and/or patterns in their essays--the use of second person 'you,' misuse of 'their, they're, and there,' and weak, repetitive verbs. In an effort to help my students, I discussed these patterns with them. Instead of a typical grammar lesson, however, I polled both classes and asked questions such as "Why should we avoid using 'you' in our papers?" and "What verbs can we use to strengthen our essays?"

Students in my 8:00 class responded quickly and provided answers to my questions. They stated that hearing their mistakes proved more beneficial than simply seeing the circled errors on their papers. Also, one of my male students thanked me for using a pencil to correct mistakes, and added that his high school English teacher uses red spray paint when he grades papers.

Unlike the 8:00 class, however, the 11:00 class hesitated with their responses. After a little prodding and rephrased questions, they began to offer a few answers. Unsure of whether or not the second group understood what I was trying to do, I provided an oral explanation. "I hope the mini-grammar lesson and oral discussion proves beneficial for you. One of my goals is to help students become better writers because writing will not end once the course does. No matter what your career choice is, writing is an essential part of it."

Williams' statement that "value becomes a consideration only when we address the matter of which errors we should notice," (171) reinforces the idea that while error-free writing is the ideal, this will not always happen. And as an English teacher, I should continue to assist my students to become better writers. According to Kenneth Bruffee, author of "Writing and Reading as Collaborative or Social Acts," communication is a key factor in doing so. "Language is a social instrument that 'shapes' action by affecting our relations with other people: our 'ability to control another person's behavior' through language 'becomes a necessary part of [our] practical activity" (Bruffee 567). In addition, Bruffee also states that "when language becomes instrumental in work--social speech is inextricably involved in learning and in active thought" (570). Engaging the students in class activities and inviting them to own their work is essential.

As stated in the opening paragraph, four items must be established on day one--trust, respect, communication, and discipline. It is vital that all four be maintained throughout the semester and/or academic year. Moreover, students must sense that teachers not only care about them, but want them to succeed. We have to convince them that they have something to say (Bartholomae 88). Demonstrating this through our actions as role models and the activities that we teach, will prove beneficial to students at all levels, and better prepare college students for success in the classroom. My scholarly reading, student teaching experience at Highland Park High School, and college teaching experience at Emporia State University have confirmed these ideas.

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| Signature: Marilyn G. Riddle | Printed Name/Position/Title: Marilyn G. Riddle / Instructor / MA | |
| Organization/Address: Emporia State University<br>1200 Commercial, PO Box 4019<br>Emporia, KS. 66801 | Telephone: 620-341-5564 | Fax: |
| | E-mail Address: mgriddle2002@yahoo.com | Date: 4-9-03 |