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What I Learned From My Students

“This is going to make grading easier. Only seven out of twenty-one of you decided to turn in your research papers. It shows how little you care when I give you a month to complete your assignment, and only one out of three of you care enough about your topic to get a grade.”

Sound familiar? This used to be an all too familiar mantra in my classroom on “deadline day;” only the numbers would change. I always went into “deadline day” with the same false hope that this time would be different, that this group cared. What was wrong with them? I was hands-on; I allowed them to pick their own issues to research; I showed them how to develop a thesis, extrapolate research, cite sources – you know, all the important steps in research. I was preparing them for college. I only found out by accident that the problem was with me, not them.

“Sir, can I add a video to my report?” Brandon asked.

“Sure, but not instead of the report, but in addition,” I replied.

We had just finished reading To Kill a Mockingbird, and I wanted the kids to put a spotlight on an issue near and dear to them through a standard research report, just as Harper Lee spotlighted racism in her novel.

Brandon's average was equivalent to a freezing temperature, and the likelihood of him turning in a major project was about as likely as a kid telling me they didn't own a cell phone. But I was wrong. Brandon researched drunk driving and presented a twenty minute video that began with toy figurines role playing at a disco, leaving drunk and then crashing their car, and transitioned into real world clips of drunk driving tragedies, and ending with hard statistics about the causes and effects presented with slides and accompanying music.

From Brandon that day I learned a very important lesson: let the students have a say in the format. That year after giving options, my students rewarded me with a hundred percent completion rate -- one hundred percent for a homework-only assignment. And my concerns that the students would focus on the entertainment portion to the detriment of the research proved unfounded. Now a report on negative body image that used to appear on page would now come out of the mouth of a student filming their own talk show. Child abuse now appeared through video tape interviews of child providers and heart wrenching video montages, not through impersonal print alone.

What did I, the teacher, sacrifice? Nothing! I gained. The students still learned how to research, how to use multiple sources and cite those sources; they even prepared written transcripts of their presentations. They simply put their efforts into a medium that had meaning for them. Oh yeah, and they actually did it.

Carroll and Wilson may have an explanation for this turn around in their Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing. They say, "Students who get their meaning down first and then work it into an appropriate form use critical thinking skills (34). Brandon had

already formed his ideas into a meaningful genre that would have been lost had I forced him into mine.

The next lesson my students taught me was if you want them to truly learn something, make it memorable. My seventh grade students were struggling one year with their process papers. Paper after paper covered “how to make a hamburger,” “how to perform an Ollie” on their skateboard, and various other topics that only a kid would write about. Unfortunately, the students almost universally left out very important steps, steps necessary for old teachers unfamiliar with “Ollies.” Begging and pleading for more information had no effect. I had to show them the problem.

One day during journal writing I had the kids explain how to make a grilled cheese. After ten minutes or so my former student, Christina, whom I had enlisted as my confidante in this ruse, would enter and be introduced as a foreign exchange student visiting from Russia. She would listen patiently as volunteers read their pieces. Then, in her heavily accented voice, Christina would ask, “What dees gril cheez you speak of?” As a student tried to explain, Christina would shake her head with a look of incomprehension. That’s when the fun would begin as I invited the student to the front of the class while I pulled out all the necessary ingredients for the sandwich: spatula, butter knife, butter, bread, cheese, and skillet. Christina would then follow the exact directions of the child, buttering bread with her hands because the student hadn’t told her to use a knife, leaving the wrapper on the cheese as she placed it on the bread (hey, my French mother followed the directions on a can of spaghetti that said ‘Place in pot. Heat over medium heat until boiling.’ Yes, the can exploded).

The students loved it. They had left their seats to crowd around the action and offer advice. One student even told me he had lived next to Christina for three years and never knew she was Russian (she is Hispanic). But through all the fun, they got the message. Years later former students would tell me every time they had to explain a process, they remembered my “Russian.”

This is what Carol and Wilson mean when they point out, “Emotion energizes those memories,” and “Novelty and curiosity enhance memory.” The lesson worked not because of how great I explained it, but due to the sight of a girl with a handful of butter.

My students also taught me that humor goes a long way in reaching them. I can’t count how many times I put the comment “needs more emotion” on my students’ narratives. I even contemplated buying a stamp. Instead, I tried humor.

The class started with the normal ten minutes of journal writing, except this time I wrote with an exaggerated sad look on my face. Kids are great at reading the emotion of their teacher, and when I asked the class for volunteers to share, one of them would inevitably ask me what was wrong and if I wanted to share. I always obliged.

I have had my dog Dolly for ten years now, and she has been my best friend during all those years. No matter how bad my day is, she is there to comfort me. No matter how bad I’ve messed up, she has never judged me. No matter how many times I’ve yelled at her, she has always forgiven me. She has read my emotions and kept her distance when I wanted to be alone, and stayed close when I needed her. She has been my security blanket for most of my adult life.

Last night, like many other nights, I took Dolly “bye-bye,” her favorite activity. She loves to sit in the car, head hanging out the window, tongue lolling about, nose searching the air for interesting smells. But last night was different.

Just as the evening drive was coming to an end, I pulled into the gas station to fill my tank. While waiting in line to pay, I happened to glance out the window and noticed Dolly was not in her seat. How she did it, I don’t know, but I saw her next to the car drinking a puddle of gas. I ran out of the station as fast as I could, screaming her name in horror, but it was too late. She ran around the car three times and then collapsed.

It is here that I pause in my story and face my class. Some students would be visibly crying; others would have tears forming in their eyes; the rest would remain respectfully quiet as they absorbed my tragedy. But, I could always count on one student to ask what happened to her. After a few seconds of students shouting, “She died, you idiot,” or “What a moron,” I would interject and finish my story.

Oh no, she didn’t die; she just ran out of gas.

Those crying minutes ago are now in a state of disbelief: “You’re kidding me?” “You made that up?” “I can’t believe you just did that to us,” and my favorite, “What just happened? The dog didn’t die?” But invariably, they all forgive me and end up laughing. They also see first hand how the writer can control the emotion of the audience.

After this lesson, the impact becomes evident. “Needs more emotion” has been replaced with “Is this true?” The students pay me back by taking me on their own emotional rollercoaster journey – without the punch line.

In reflection, Brandon and the others taught me as much as I taught them. Just as Brandon could not become a true researcher until he provided his own meaning, I could not become a true teacher until I put my own meaning into the lessons. And as I reflect on my own experiences as a student, those teachers I remember most fondly lived by that very same credo.

Approx. 1535 wds
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