

On Sucking, Being Easy, and Staying Out of the Way

By Melanie Livingston

When my students complain about school, I listen. "What's so bad about science class?" I ask. "If history is so stupid and obvious, why did you get a bad grade?" The answer is invariably the same.

"That teacher sucks."

I know that part of this comment is adolescent blame-shifting, but I also know that an equal part of it is not. I want to find out what makes a teacher "suck" in the eyes of his students. Why do students give up on a class? On a teacher? And more importantly, when do they stick with a class and a teacher?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, I often ask students why they like certain classes or why they got a good grade. Again, the answer varies little.

"That teacher is easy."

Most teachers see an ideal school as a place where students come in ready to learn from teachers. We feed them vital information, and their job is not just to eat it, but to chew 25 times before swallowing if that's what the teacher says to do.

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("You need to write several drafts, the date goes in the upper right corner, and your final draft is always in ink." We know that our rules make sense for keeping students organized and professional, and we expect our rules to be followed.) Most students see an ideal school as a place where teachers "stay out of the way" while they try to get their good, or merely passing,

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grades. They know that nobody better get between a man and his money, and grades are the currency in our schools. "She's nice and all, and she doesn't flunk nobody," was how one student described an "easy" teacher to me. When my students complain about other classes, they are always quick to assure me that I'm one of the easiest teachers they know. At first, I did not appreciate the compliment.

Kids' desire for an "easy" teacher is, in some ways, constructive. I want my classrooms to be student-centered; I want students to believe that they can achieve. I know that my personality is relaxed and that imposing strict My-Way-Or-No-Way rules on my students creates a tense atmosphere and doesn't encourage learning. At times, when off-topic chatter and note-passing have taken over, I have been obliged to impose more rules. Sometimes they quiet down, but the calm always comes at a price. I can feel the energy of the class wane. I can see it in their faces, and I can hear it in their sighs or their under-the-breath mutterings of "this sucks."

I am told that teachers can suck for a variety of reasons. Teachers suck when they are repetitive. They suck when they are boring. They suck when they assume the worst about their students or refuse to listen to students' explanations for their apparent misbehavior. They suck when they have too many rules. They suck when they assign a task that seems impossible. I have been said to suck when I talk too much or when I separate students from a friend or a cellular phone.

I do my best not to suck. I try to make class interesting enough that they would rather do the work than fiddle with their cellular phones. I connect the "boring" topics, like poetry to "cool" topics like rap. I try to help students see that they already know a great deal about seemingly impossible tasks. Learning something new does not mean taking notes on what I say in a blank notebook, but adding their thoughts into an already teeming and tattered portfolio.

At the beginning of the school year, I define for students the plot elements of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Then I have students tell each other stories answering provocative questions I have written on the board. It's sanctioned gossip time, only I ask them to write down what their partner says word for word, as best they can. I take the questions from Mary Louise Pratt's essay "Natural Narrative" in which she prints interviewees' answers to these questions and explains that "all narratives — from a story told in the street to a great literary novel — share the same formal building blocks. Every story is 'literary' to some degree" (Scholes, 1995, p. 13). Students discover that, without trying, they have told their stories using the basic plot elements. After that, the writing tasks I assign don't seem so impossible.

Students see themselves as storytellers more easily, however, than they see themselves as literary analysts. Filling a journal with what they want to say about a text won't be very intellectual, or so they think. The things my students want to talk about most often fall into roughly three categories: looking hot, getting mines, and checking people. "Looking hot" means having clothes, hair, and general style that makes you feel confident. "Getting mines" means getting respect from other

people, usually so that they won't take advantage of you. "Checking people" means checking their aggression against you. It could be a verbal confrontation or a physical one, or even just impeding them in some way from achieving the perceived goal of "messing with you." My students are very interested in this idea; it seems everyone has a story of having to check somebody, almost on a daily basis.

To me, these three categories do relate to their intellectual pursuits, in the English Language Arts classroom especially. Students are utterly concerned with identity and presentation. They strive to understand who they are and how to best express themselves to specific audiences for specific purposes. They are constantly reading their surroundings and rewriting their behaviors in those surroundings. They understand better than most that presentation is not an expression of truth. Presentation is the only absolute truth. My students are acutely aware of their audiences and of the need to change their performances to suit the audience. Even when they resent the need for change and refuse to accommodate an audience such as a police officer or a vice principal, they are aware that they are choosing a performance for an audience in order to elicit a response.

It becomes my job as their English teacher to help my students relate the post-modern understanding that they already have of the world around them to the texts I ask them to read. They already know how to read and write, and I should just get out of the way. But if I'm going to stay out of the way, they must actually be on their way to something. I check in on their progress through quizzes, journals, and conferences at least every other day. I ask students to share their writing and thinking, so I listen more than I speak, modeling the act of learning for my classmates.

Still, assigning a discussion leader of the day and having students conference in groups do not guarantee that the students will learn. They have to see a purpose to their work. When they suspect that I'm just passing time for 48 minutes, group work turns into gossip session and discussion leader becomes stand-up comedian. They like to test whether an activity is really worthwhile by asking the dreaded question: "Is this for a grade?"

This is when their desire for an easy teacher becomes destructive. My students don't seem to see their teachers as inhibiting or enhancing their learning as much as they see them inhibiting or enhancing their transcripts. In competitive schools, the goal is an A. In most other public schools, the goal is passing, graduating, "getting the heck out of here." Grades are no longer an indication of learning goals met; they are the learning goals. The teacher may feel she is getting out of the way of the creative process, but her role as grade-giver remains a fixed roadblock between the student and his learning. In a world where promotion to the next grade depends on standardized test scores, where schools ask that even conduct and effort be assigned letter grades, I can hardly blame the students for equating importance of task to percentage of final grade.

I too am concerned about their grades. I worry about how to give grades on final drafts when I believe that no draft of writing is ever "final." I worry that an A will

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suggest that they “got it” and that they have nothing further to learn or that a D or F will suggest that they “can’t get it” and may as well give up. I want to eliminate the equation of Grade = Academic Capability. I work hard to create grading rubrics for student assignments, so they can see what the grade represents. I also give “Gimmee” grades for easy weekly quizzes or remembering their books. If they want to pass, or if they want an A, the opportunity is right there. There are no tricks, and A’s are not reserved for only the most advanced students. They know exactly what to do to get the grade they want. I aim to remove worry about grades from the learning equation. When the mystery of grading is removed, what remains is the mystery of language arts.

Art is mysterious. Language is mysterious. I can’t say what is art or where language gets its power. I have questions too. Together, we study art and language by asking What does it say and then asking How does it say it and Why does it say it that way and Why say it at all. In my class, we answer these questions by reading and listening to texts and speaking and writing about them. Then we read and listen to each other’s words and speak and write about our ideas. I may ask the first questions, but their answers produce questions of their own. We explore their ideas, because it is the exploration, not the answer, that matters.

This isn’t my idea. Post-modern theories of reading and writing support the idea that students must get inside their own process. Reading and writing must be meta-cognitive acts. Charles Schuster writes in *Teaching Literature Through Performance* that “if there is one primary mission to writing instruction, then it is to teach students to see through the manipulations of all sorts of texts in all sorts of media, and to express their own views in some appropriate manner” (Schuster, 1995, p. 137). Post-modern definitions of reading instruction insist that the primary mission thereof is to teach students that reading is itself the act of writing, or rewriting a text. David Bartholomae explains that text is inherently defined by reader. “...An essay or story is not the sum of its parts but something you as a reader create by putting together those parts that seem to matter personally” (Bartholomae, 1990, p. 8). E.L. Doctorow puts it another way:

Whenever I read anything, I seemed to identify as much with the act of composition as with the story... I didn’t actually have to write a thing, because the act of reading was my writing... As a child, I somehow drifted into this region where you are both reader and writer: I declared to myself that I was a writer. I wrote a lot of good books. I wrote *Captain Blood* by Rafael Sabatini. That was one of my better efforts. (Harvey, 2000, p. 14)

If reading is writing, and writing is the ability to see through manipulations and to express one’s own views, then my job is to teach that ability. I don’t teach the ability as something new to the students, however, because these students already know a great deal about manipulation and self-expression. They explore these concepts in daily interactions; to teach them this ability is to teach them how to

interact. My goal is to help my students interact with texts as they do with people, not to make the acts of reading and writing shallow or pedestrian, but to elevate and complicate both acts.

As reading and writing are such personal experiences, I recognize that there are few “answers” in the study of English Language Arts. When a teacher asks, “What did you think of the animal imagery in *Of Mice and Men*?” students worry about giving the wrong answer. But when the same teacher asks “What did you think of last night’s episode of ‘American Idol?’” students know there is no right answer. Or rather, there are many answers, each true to the student who creates his interpretation. My job as an English teacher is to validate the students as thinkers, to challenge those thoughts, to ask them to support their ideas, question each other and think some more. “Don’t look at me,” I have often chided students. “I don’t know the answer. If I did, I’d tell you, and we’d move on. Only you know what you think.”

Of course, in the city of Boston, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in the United States of America, some answers are either right or wrong. “People don’t never learn” is not an acceptable answer on a standardized test or a job application, even if it is part of the sentence, “The Capulets and the Montagues let their problems destroy their children, just like gang rivalries destroy their members, proving that people don’t never learn.” I teach grammar and I teach critical thinking, and I don’t subordinate one to the other, even if I sometimes want to. Instead, I focus on teaching students to use language that is “situationally appropriate.” Grammar lessons, just like literature lessons, are not about Right and Wrong answers. We use the same questions of What does it say, How does it say it and Why does it say it that way.

City and State curriculum frameworks tell me I must teach adverbs, and I do. But my students understand that adverbs, just like metaphors, are tools to help us convey meaning to people and that we choose the tools depending on our audience. I don’t worry too much about Massachusetts’s curriculum frameworks or the requirements of our yearly standardized test, the MCAS, because we learn grammar, literary terms, organizational skills all in the context of inquiry. Inquiries can be made into any required or supplemental content. I believe that my students are more engaged in learning because it is an inquiry into the unknown rather than a quest for the mystical answer that the teacher knows but won’t tell.

Unfortunately, my students may be well-prepared to make an inquiry into a reading that doesn’t fit the MCAS test mold. I struggled a bit at first with how to prepare students for the MCAS without diminishing their learning by “teaching to the test.” If I teach them well, I argued to myself, if they understand what I expect them to understand, their skills will take them well beyond MCAS requirements. I would remove worry about MCAS from the learning equation.

I worked with my students on asking deeper questions about reading, making connections to their world around them, allowing the words to create images in their minds. And then the MCAS asked them to answer a multiple choice question about it. I found that my students understood the MCAS-like passages I gave them, but

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they fumbled with the cleverly worded questions, and the distracting wrong answers.

I was furious. This test wasn't testing reading comprehension skills — it was testing multiple choice test-taking skills! And the composition section wasn't much better. The MCAS asked an inane essay question, one I would never pose to my students, and more importantly, one they wouldn't pose to themselves. In my class, students choose their own writing topics, and they write essays on why giving free studio time to aspiring young rap artists could send the right message to urban youth, or on how the entertainment industry tends to warp adolescents' body image. The MCAS asked my students to write about "a favorite hobby." Furthermore, I knew the MCAS wanted a formulaic five-paragraph essay.

I didn't know how to prepare my students to tackle such exercises without changing the entire tone of my own teaching and learning expectations for them. I knew that taking the high road meant leaving my students likely to fail and my school open to attacks on its funding, or worse, its accreditation. The MCAS definitely sucked.

I decided that honesty was the best policy with my students. Starting in January, we had "MCAS Monday" every week. We suspended our other work to prepare for the test. It wasn't a part of the other learning — I didn't want it to be. Our rallying cry was "Beat the MCAS!" I taught them how to play the game of "what do they want me to say?" and "what was the person writing this question probably thinking?" and even as I did I reminded them that I would never want them to play such a game with me. "I want to hear what you have to say," I said. "I want you to write for yourselves and then let me read it. For MCAS, you aren't writing for yourselves. You're writing for them. So do what they want, pass, so we can get back to the good stuff."

Still, I knew that trying to beat the MCAS "because you have to" or "because the teacher said so" wouldn't be motivation enough for many of my students. Once again, they wanted to know if the MCAS would affect their grades or if it would keep them from being promoted. Although this is the case for tenth graders, my seventh graders were off the hook. I knew that a teacher whom I respected greatly had told her students that a standardized reading test in Spanish was going to determine whether they had to go to summer school. When they got to summer school and realized this wasn't the case, they told me she was a liar, even as one of them admitted, "She probably just wanted us to take it seriously."

I'm a bad liar, and I didn't like feeding into the kids' tendency to try only when passing was at stake. When the kids asked me if MCAS would "count," I told them it wouldn't. They groaned, and a chorus of "why bother" started up. Then I told them why I thought the MCAS did matter. I told them that historically, mostly white, mostly middle and upper class, mostly suburban schools did much better on MCAS than city schools like ours. They also had more money. "You complain that our school is ghetto?" I incited them. "You say we don't get enough money and we don't get enough respect? Well, people out there look at our MCAS scores, and that's how

they judge us. They see that the school failed, and they think we can't learn. This is a city school. This school is 85% people of color. You beat the MCAS, because you can prove to them that city kids can learn. That kids of color can read and write circles around any test they give you!" I swear to you, they cheered. The morning of MCAS testing, I stopped by their homeroom for a brief pep rally. They looked like boxers going into the ring. They were focused, mean, and very excited. I hadn't just told them how to take the test. I had showed them why they should want to pass, and they had demanded I show them how.

When those students returned to me as eighth graders the next year, I began our first English class of the year by first writing the MCAS results for seventh graders in the state of Massachusetts. Then I wrote the results for seventh graders in the city. Finally I wrote the results for seventh graders at our school. 100% of them had passed. We applauded ourselves, and I announced that this year, for the first time, the eighth grade English class would study Shakespeare. Not one student groaned.

In my classroom, I aim to get my students to want to learn. Classrooms are not isolated places, however, and even if I could always engage my students without engaging their parents, my colleagues, and the rest of the school community, it would be an unnecessarily uphill battle. I believe that the study of English is the examination of ideas, ones presented by authors in texts and ones presented by students in class. Students cannot truly examine ideas if they only think about them for the duration of their English class period.

As a teacher, I make it a priority to meet with teachers of other disciplines who have the same students to find connections between the units we are teaching. The school can help by clustering teachers who share students or, better, by creating interdisciplinary curricula, but even when that doesn't happen, I consider every collegial interaction, from department meetings to copy room chats, an opportunity to find out more about what goes on in other classrooms. Teachers usually appear flattered that I am asking, and most ask me about my classroom, if only out of politeness. Students are often intrigued when I say that a novel takes place during a time period that they all know a lot about because they studied it last year with Mr. Smith. These connections keep class interesting for both the teacher and learner, and they encourage students to draw their own connections.

Learning connections need to take place outside the school as well. I listen to the pop radio stations on my way to work every morning so I can stay in touch with the relevant happenings that are likely to be on my students' minds. If Jennifer Lopez signs on to promote a new fashion label, I can use the buzz to get students thinking about use of symbols (J-Lo) to manipulate a specific audience (urban consumers). I listen to the radio and read magazines, but I also ask questions to my students directly. I take an interest in the goings-on in their community outside school, whether it's their home or their church or their basketball team. The students see me modeling inquisitive behavior and they see that I incorporate that learning into our curricular learning. My hope is that they will do the same. I do not want to

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feed them information and tell them how to chew it. I try to make them hungry and then show them how to forage and cook.

At the beginning of each unit of study, I give out a sheet listing all the activities we will do and what questions we will be attempting to answer. I always tell my students that I don't ask questions if I already know the answer. Complicated learning requires complicated answers, usually in the form of different questions. Asking and attempting to answer questions is an intellectual struggle at any level. I expect only that my students struggle. Look for the answers, not just in the book and in the class, but in other books and other classes, in other people, and in themselves. They don't have to find the answers; I would worry about their complacency if they thought they had. My students smile secretively when I sit cross-legged on the desk, laugh at their outbursts, pose the unit questions, and remind them that I don't expect perfect answers. They think I'm easy. I think I'm just staying out of the way.

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