Fundamentals of Literature: 
Teaching High School Students with Special Needs

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Fundamentals of Literature. This was the class that terrified me on the first day of my new assignment: twenty or more students, each with very significant and very different needs. Some of the students would have limited English skills, some would have learning disorders or other diagnosable problems that had qualified them for assistance through the Special Services Department, and the rest could best be described as chronic underachievers, especially in the area of English. Among the latter group, I suspected, would be some with attention and behavior disorders. How in the world was I supposed to address all of their different needs during the same class hour each day?

On the first day of school, I was confronted by a room full of faces that clearly mirrored my own anxiety. It was obvious even before we introduced ourselves that these students were nervous; they were at least as aware as I that each of them had special challenges with respect to English. Some of them were just leaving the sheltered environment of the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom for the first time and were terrified that they would not be able to understand or make themselves understood. Others had a history of failing English classes and were discouraged and afraid of failing again. I determined at once that Job One was to make them feel safe and comfortable. Secondly, I decided that the focus of the class would be to improve basic skills, namely writing and reading. With just fifty-five minutes a day available to us, my intention was to ensure that, as much as possible, the students would use every minute of that time engaged in the practice of writing and reading.

The results of this very simple approach have been far beyond my most optimistic expectations when I started the class. After two years, a second section of the class was opened, and each year it becomes more difficult to hold the class size to the agreed-upon limit of twenty. Evaluations by students completing the class have been consistently and enthusiastically positive. And, to my surprise, I have discovered that, of all my classes, “fundies” is the most fun to teach.

Creating a Safe Environment

Both research and experience have consistently shown that students learn best when they feel safe and comfortable. Mindful of the fact that students entering this remedial class have special challenges in the area of English, my first concern is to ensure that each student feels secure. This is achieved primarily through a plain and simple environment, overt emphasis on mutual respect, and an informal, low-key pedagogical approach.

The prevailing wisdom with respect to teaching language and reading calls for a “print-rich environment.” Most of my colleagues in all disciplines provide such an environment, and I delight in visiting their rooms and reading the cartoons on the doors, the clever posters on the walls, and the ever-changing panoply of student papers on the bulletin boards. My room, by contrast, is plain and rel-
atively unadorned. A few simple posters provide color, and because the same posters remain in their places all year, they soon become effectively invisible to the students. Essential notices are posted on the door, where the students can see them as they exit. A “thought for the day” is posted on the left side of the chalkboard each day, along with the date. As the only consistently changing feature of the classroom, the “thought for the day” is frequently a source of comment and discussion.

Individual students have different needs met in different classes throughout the course of the day. The fact that my fellow teachers have been so successful in providing “print-rich” environments in their classrooms has allowed me the option to try a different approach—that of providing a “clean,” simple environment for the benefit of students who are highly distractible or have difficulty focusing their attention. Although no attempt has been made to formally assess the impact of the plain-and-simple approach to classroom decor on the performance of students with attention problems, several students with diagnosed attention and behavior disorders have remarked that my room seems “peaceful” and that it is easier to concentrate there than in other places. It may well be, too, that the absence of print on the walls is reassuring to those who, because of limited English or reading disorders, fear that they will not be able to properly decode the messages.

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According to Abraham Maslow, “respect” is one of the fundamental human needs that must be met before higher-level learning can occur. In the “fundies” class, the importance of mutual respect is emphasized both through overt instruction and modeling. “Respect others” is presented as the one and only non-negotiable rule in the classroom. All other “rules” are common-sense corollaries to this primary rule: respecting others, one does not interrupt, ignore, criticize, distract, or inconvenience them. Adults in the room consistently model respect for the individuals through attending behaviors; guidance by encouragement rather than criticism; and an egalitarian, democratic approach to classroom management.

In a 1988 statement of policy, William Bennett, then Secretary of Education, clearly enunciated the government’s position in favor of what has been called “values-free” education: “In an educational system with a limited but difficult mission—to teach basic knowledge, basic skills, and the values necessary for democratic citizenship—there is no place for propaganda or political activism of any sort, on any side” (205). There are those who would argue that to create an egalitarian, democratic environment in a classroom is to espouse a certain political agenda, that it is in itself a sort of “activism.” So be it. It is my belief that if any group can be disparaged in the context of the classroom for reasons of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or any other personal qualities, then no one is safe. The policy in my classroom with respect to overt prejudice, bias, or harassment of any kind is unequivocal: zero tolerance.

The pedagogical approach employed in the class is informal and relaxed. For example, I invite but do not require students to respond to oral questions, to read aloud, or to speak in front of the class. Students who choose not to participate in an activity that makes them feel uncomfortable may negotiate alternate means of meeting a particular course objective. I frequently invite students to express their opinions about the course content: “Should we continue the poetry unit a while longer, or shall we start a novel now?” “Do you want to see the first part of the movie now so that you can visualize the characters better, or would you prefer to wait and watch the entire movie after we have finished the book?”

It is my belief that this democratic approach to classroom management may be the reason many students with a history of failure in English classes seem to succeed in this one. In his book Educating
Emphasis on Basic Skills

Regardless of the special challenges each student may bring to the classroom, basic language skills improve through practice. The “fundies” class is structured to ensure that each student is “on-task” to the greatest extent possible, using and practicing the skills of writing and reading, as well as related skills such as listening and speaking.

On Monday through Thursday, class begins with approximately ten minutes of journal writing. This is generally followed by reading from a text, which may be a novel, play, short story, or selection of poems. Initially, the students are required to follow along in the text while the teacher reads aloud; later, students who are among the more confident readers volunteer to share the task of reading aloud. On Fridays, the entire class period is devoted to sustained silent reading from books that the students have selected for themselves. When students are not actually engaged in the process of writing, reading, or discussing what they have read, much of the course content consists of overt instruction by the teacher on related topics, such as improving attention span and test-taking strategies.

Journal Writing

In class evaluations and spontaneous remarks in their journals, many students have expressed both their fears at the notion of having to write in class every day and their relief upon discovering that they could do it. The following comments are typical:

- I was sure I couldn’t think of anything to write about.
- At first I hated having to write every day, but now I miss it if we skip journal writing for one day.
- I know now that I can write, and I am doing a lot more writing in other classes.

Most students approach the task of journal writing with trepidation. They are unsure what it is they are supposed to write about. They are fearful of criticism for not “doing it right.” They may have concerns about whether they can trust the teacher with their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. They worry about how their work will be “graded.” Some balk at the idea of anything done routinely, complaining by the third day, “This is boring!” But in my “fundies” class, it is often journal writing that stu-
dents cite in their final evaluations as having been the most enjoyable and worthwhile activity.

At the beginning of the semester, each student is asked to bring a seventy-page spiral notebook to be used for journal writing. I generally buy a large supply at a discount store and sell them at cost to students who do not bring one from home; I also tear the used pages out of partially filled journals and provide them at no cost to students who say they cannot afford to buy a notebook. The journals are kept in plastic bins in the classroom, so no student can truthfully say, “I don’t have a journal” or “I don’t have it with me.”

In addition to including works by African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian authors, I encourage students to bring works from home that reflect their culture or those of their parents and grandparents.

Students retrieve their journals from the bin on their way into class. I instruct them to write the date (which is always on the board, so that no one need interrupt the class to ask what day it is) and to keep writing from the time the bell rings until I say “Stop!” (usually about ten minutes). Students are encouraged to come to class each day with an idea in mind to write about and to write only about that topic. If they run out of things to say on their topic of choice, however, they may skip a line and begin with a new idea. I provide the students with a list of high-interest topics and ideas to use if they cannot think of something to write about.

I caution the students about writing too much about their own lives and personal experiences. Although it is my policy to scrupulously respect the confidentiality of each student, the bins are accessible to all students, and I cannot absolutely guarantee the safety or security of the journals. I also inform the students that, under the laws of our state, I am legally obliged to report incidents of suspected child abuse, intended suicide or homicide, or any situation likely to affect the health or well-being of a child. (When students do report abuse or dangerous situations, as they occasionally do, I assume, then, that it is with the conscious or unconscious intention of bringing about intervention.)

I regularly read and respond to what the students write. I do not “correct” their entries but rather respond to them in a casual, natural dialogue. In one journal I may be inspired to make only a few remarks, with a note of encouragement and appreciation at the end. Another might become the format for an intensely lively and interesting discussion with a student with whom I rarely have an opportunity to speak. In every case, the journal becomes for me a method of getting to know a student in ways I would not otherwise be able to.

I suspect that for the students the journals become an opportunity to discuss in school a topic of their own choosing, something in which they have an inherent or vested interest, and to have the worth of their ideas and experiences acknowledged and validated by a teacher. This allows the students to ensure that at least some of the content of the class has relevance for them personally. Unfortunately, such opportunities seem to be as rare for many students today as they were in the 1960s, when Paolo Freire wrote the following words in Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable, or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity. (57)

Reading Aloud

The course is structured as a survey of literature, encompassing the following genres: short story, novel, poetry, drama, film, nonfiction essays, and expository articles. The content, selected from multiple sources, is also explicitly multicultural. In addition to including works by African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian authors, I encourage students to bring works from home that reflect their culture or those of their parents and grandparents.
In addition, I usually receive permission from some of the students to use their original poems, stories, or articles as works to be shared with the class.

Virtually all of the required reading in the class is done aloud (except on Fridays, the day designated for sustained silent reading). This ensures that all students, regardless of their reading abilities, study habits, or responsibilities to jobs and families, have access to the texts and can contribute in a meaningful way to discussions and other activities. It affords students who are learning English as a new language invaluable opportunities to hear the pronunciation of words and the cadence of the language. Perhaps most importantly, students enjoy being read to. Whereas many of the students in this class characterize silent reading as “work” (work that some of them have concluded is extremely difficult), they often express the feeling that reading aloud is easy and fun.

The students are required to follow along in the text during reading time, rather than to merely listen. When the students see as well as hear the text, they have the opportunity to observe, albeit subconsciously, many aspects of the written word that are not apparent to the listener: spelling of words and use of punctuation, sentence structure, relationship of sound to syntax, etc. Thus, by reading along, students are likely to be subliminally gaining experience that will help to improve writing as well as reading skills. Once the students understand the benefits of reading along, the vast majority do so willingly.

**Sustained Silent Reading**

A surprising number of students who enter this class report never having read a book. It is understandable, then, that many feel some anxiety upon being told that one of the requirements of the class is to read at least one book a month, and to read a book (not a magazine or newspaper) in class on Fridays. I spend considerable time in class preparing the students to meet this particular requirement by assisting them, individually and as a group, to identify subjects that interest them. Many are not aware that books are available about their favorite hobbies, sports, or movie stars. A trip to the library during the first week of class enables the students to learn where they can find materials to suit their particular interests.

Bilingual students are encouraged to select books in their first language, as well as in English, and books in either language are acceptable for reading on Friday or for monthly book reports (which may be written or oral).

**Results**

There is no doubt that school is a much friendlier place for some students than for others. Those whose talents, interests, and personal backgrounds happen to place them within the “norms” expected by the educational system may fare well. Others reach the latter years of high school only by force of sheer will and determination, despite many disappointments and a profound belief in their own inadequacy.

The American school system is an enormous bureaucracy characterized, as are all bureaucracies, by inertia and resistance to change. It is clear that this system has failed to keep pace with demographics and changes in the needs of its constituents. Edward B. Fiske, educational consultant and author of *Smart Schools, Smart Kids*, makes the following observation: “We have been asking a nineteenth-century institution to educate people for life in the twenty-first century. Public schools as currently organized are as archaic as a turn-of-the-century Model T Ford rattling down a thruway” (25).

Few would argue that our current system of education fails to meet the emotional, intellectual, and academic needs of many students, particularly those whose personal needs, interests, or backgrounds place them outside what is regarded as the “mainstream.” In the context of this class, with the support of an administration willing to limit class sizes and allot resources to meet the needs of special students, I have been privileged to offer a few students a slightly different context in which to develop their language skills.

**Works Cited**


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