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# A READING CLASSROOM ISN'T GRIMSVILLE

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Elementary perhaps, but during a 1967-69 compensatory program designed to increase communication skills for post-secondary but not fully qualified college students on a southern black university campus, we figured that to learn was to attend—in both a mental and a physical sense. So we frequently based our sessions on two light-minded assumptions:

- 1) Learning doesn't have to be grim.
- 2) Limited experiences can be widened both in and out of the college classroom by "off-duty" means.

Early in the first semester, to shake the students out of authoritarian expectations, we celebrated the advent of Friday by solving riddles and playing a word game. The professional objectives were obvious: In a pleasant atmosphere, to drive the students to think, to increase their background knowledge and vocabulary, and to help them practice quickness—a pace these habit-laden students often lack.

One time, for instance, we started with, "What has a head, a tail, four legs, eats hay, and sees equally well at both ends?"

"A cow!"

"A—what's that thing in the zoo—a giraffe?"

"A mule!" (Snickers, because that's how our name is often mispronounced.)

"Nope, nope, nope." I tossed chalk in hand and waited with the maddening calm of One Who Knows the Answer.

"A horse?"

"Nah, that's too easy." Mr. Wellingham, whose ambition is to be a lawyer but who seldom said a word, dismissed that with finality.

The students studied the brief puzzling text written in full on the board. No one slouched heavy-eyed now.

"An elephant?"

"You could all be right," I assured them, "on the first four clues. But what about the last? How can any animal you've suggested 'see equally well at both ends'?"

"He got a eye under his tail!"

Whoops of laughter. I really walked into that one. I shook my

head, laughing too, but that unrelenting teacher focus and stance pressed them to think. “It’s a perfectly logical answer. No gimmick. Just solve that last part.”

“A saw-horse?” Miss Bertram offered.

More whoops. “How’s that eat hay?” Mr. Alvarez asked with excellent discriminating logic, but crushing scorn.

“Miss Bertram is partly right. It is a horse. But what kind?”

“Give us a hint, will you?”

“O.K. A riddle is just a capsule problem in reasoning. Sometimes, the way you do on RFU cards, you have to expand or rephrase the problem. Try thinking negatively on this one.”

“You mean it don’t have all them things—the head and tail and all that?”

“Oh yes, it has those things. The facts are right. But you have to figure out the implication. Remember—think negatively.”

They pored over it again.

“Sees equally well at both ends,” Mr. Alvarez muttered out loud. “What if it—hey—it’s a blind horse!”

“You got it!”

Mr. Wellingham and Mr. Alvarez smacked palms in triumph.

“What?” Other class members challenged his answer.

“Sure,” Mr. Alvarez explained coolly. “It ‘sees equally well,’ sec? That means it don’t see at all. It’s blind.”

Groans.

“Hey, that’s neat. I’m gonna try it on my roommate.”

We tried another. “On what side of a church does an oak tree grow?”

“This one depends on space relationship and a joke,” I hinted, after they guessed “north,” “sunny,” and “cemetery.” They solved it then, partly because we’d been working on this type of visualization in texts.

“The out side!”

Mr. Wellingham was half out of his seat. “Here’s one for you!”

I offered him chalk and board.

“Nah. This one takes telling.” And he proceeded to baffle us with an involved riddle we couldn’t guess because the answer depended on a tricky arrangement of words. (How would you get out of a room with no doors, no windows, but a chair and a mirror?) Finally he had to give us the elaborate solution. (Sit in the chair, look in the mirror, see what you saw, take the saw, saw the chair in two. Two halves make a W-hole. Crawl through!) Which was just great.

Mr. Wellingham was a student who had never spoken voluntarily in class discussions before and had not said one word in our once-a-week meetings which massed all four reading sections. Yet the informal play of a riddle brought him to his feet giving a speech, whether he realized it or not.

The class asked for more riddles. I agreed we'd share more on other Fridays, especially if they would remember to bring them in.

At the moment it was time for something else—a word game. Anything would do, but that day it was a fill-in-the-blanks set of 25 words and definitions where part of the letters of each word were supplied. A sample section looked like this:

Ex:	A D O R E	To revere; worship; love
	- - - R E	To frighten
	- - - R E	Whither; to a place which
	- - - R E	A heavy single-edged sword
	- - - R E	Opposed to here; thither
	- - - R E	A portion; to divide with others
Ex:	Ā A I S E	To elevate; lift up
	R - - - E	A chain of mountains; stove
	R - - - E	A firearm; to pillage, plunder
	R - - - E	Russian monetary unit
	R - - - E	Red cosmetic for the cheeks
	R - - - E	Verse, with corresponding terminal sounds

So simple it's hardly worth doing, especially for college-enrolled students? For many who have endured academic difficulties, I think instruction has often not been simple enough. A task so hard we can't do it discourages any of us from starting. Or if we start, we don't persist, especially by ourselves.

This type of exercise has all the appeals of a solvable group game. Yet, for these students, it also contained basics they hadn't all mastered. They had to produce accurately the "there" needed to fill the fourth item, rather than the "their" they so often substitute in confusion. They may have learned at least two new words ("sabre" and "ruble") as we discussed the solutions. They could possibly have picked up five more in the definitions—"revere," "thither," "pillage," "monetary," and "terminal."

What! They didn't know words like that?

Some did. Some didn't. Some knew the words but not the pronunciation. But all students in that classroom stood a better chance of increasing their vocabulary knowledge, and therefore their reading.

speaking, and writing ease in an atmosphere where the onus of learning was lightened by the tone of fun.

Something else good happened that day. The majority got the word “rhyme” quickly. Correctly solved, it reenforced its customary spelling order, and at the same time confirmed for those practically-oriented students that they did, after all, acquire some usable knowledge in high school poetry sessions.

Did any of the pleasure and satisfaction they obviously felt that day transfer to more prosaic sessions? I can’t be certain. But at least they came to class and responded alertly on Friday mornings, a day when the campus weekend often traditionally began the night before.