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ON THE FRONTLINE OF LITERACY: RISK AND REWARD AS THE BATTLE RAGES ON

by

Rick Stapel

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2008

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

Department of English

in the Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

ON THE FRONTLINE OF LITERACY: RISK AND REWARD AS THE BATTLE RAGES ON

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Rick Stapel

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of English

Approved by:

Dr. Ryan Netzley, PhD, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
November 8, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

RICK STAPEL, for the MASTER OF ARTS degree in ENGLISH, presented on November 8, 2012, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ON THE FRONTLINE OF LITERACY: RISK AND REWARD AS THE BATTLE
RAGES ON

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Ryan Netzley

This paper advocates for assignments that are “high risk” in order to promote a less than predictable classroom environment. This paper attempts to create a space specific to first-year teachers of Freshman Composition and specifically for first-year teachers of Freshman Composition. Sample assignments are couched inside of a personal narrative of failure, as first first-year teachers of Freshman Composition are encouraged to explore the relationship between risk and reward, between pedagogical approach and classroom practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my wife Miranda and my two kids, Gabriel and Adelaide. I love them and they have been so good to me throughout this process. I also want to thank my professors and my co-workers for all their support—there are so many to name and I couldn't have made it through without all of you. Borger especially, and for obvious reasons, gets the nod here. I'd be remiss if I didn't thank God too. You may not believe in one of those, and that's alright. But, I'm about to graduate and that's pretty miraculous. May these subsequent pages bear witness to it.

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PREFACE

To be clear, this is a co-authored paper. I wanted to include this preface to give Laura Borger full credit for all the work she has done here and for all the contributions she has made, not only to the this text, but to my general well-being inside of the classroom. There a few reasons why I wanted to submit this paper and they are as follows: It was the first paper I wrote as a Graduate student (for Dr. Lisa McClure's ENLG 502) and it was the first paper I presented at a conference (MMLA, 2012). Moreover, Borger and I came up with the idea for this paper as I was explaining to her just *how horrible* I felt about my first semester of teaching Freshman Composition. I explained to her that not a lot of first-year instructors liked to talk about their failures, but most people seemed understandably eager to talk about their successes. She asked me about having fun inside of classroom, taking risks inside of the classroom, and to what end certain, "high-risk" assignments worked.

I, because they were so helpful to me, wanted to couch a few of Borger's lesson plans inside of a narrative. The "High Risks" section of this text is decidedly hers, written by her, and grounded in lessons plans obtained by her. They may be found here: http://www.original-ink.net/Professional%20Portfolio/stapel_borg.htm. The "Reflection" section of this text is a patchwork of cooperative ideas, and while my voice is employed predominantly throughout the "Introduction and Conclusion" of this text, Borger provided the inspiration for both.

INTRODUCTION: JOHN WAYNE OR LIL WAYNE, WHO AM I AND WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH ME?

Somewhere along the way to degradation, I realized that taking risks, in the context of one's classroom, begets a brand of faith that diametrically opposes the reason(s) I fear failure. That, reflexively, in wanting to run away from the threat of disappointment until my legs fold underneath me like cheap patio chairs, I could ultimately miss the benefit of sitting in the afterglow of embarrassment. In other words, there may be something redeemable in aftermath of teacher's good intentions, even if they do not manifest as well as first intended. Notwithstanding, It seems as if fellow novice instructors of first year-composition are keenly (and I would submit, dangerously) aware of their proclivity to, in so many words, mess stuff up. As Professor Dawn Skorczewski, writes, "Studies of new instructors invariably find that they express similar fears of showing themselves as powerless and out of control, or unable to maintain their professional authority, fears that they do not really know who they are supposed to be in the classroom" (101). While it may not be beneficial to overstate the correlation between prior experience and future self-assurance, it will be profitable for the development of this paper to forward other kinds of simple truths.

Initially, one expects novice teachers to cope with their own dividedness, or somehow confront the "conflict between playing a role and feeling authentic" inside of their classrooms (Skorczewski 106-7). But expecting turbulence doesn't make the eventual navigation of ship to rock any less traumatic, painful, or polarizing. The impetus, or push, for this project then is not to merely pronounce an oversimplification of a much larger problem. No, it is easy to observe our own fallibility from afar; it is harder (as educators) to sit in the wounds (the misses and misunderstandings) for which our failures are responsible. With all of this said, we would be remiss in discussing any paradigmatic positions without *first* broadening the scope our intentions—or at least prefacing them.

Novice instructors of any subject may not be anxious or open to taking “risks,” so to speak, with their curriculum, or ready to incorporate what we will call “high-stake assignments” into their methodologies. And it should be noted that we don’t offer any wholesale formulas alongside of these assignments, as—of course—teaching isn’t an exact, formulaic enterprise. However, if what Professor David Bartholomae submits is true; if “there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing,” teachers of first-year composition may hold the keys—whether or not they are conscious of or enthusiastic about having them—to the academic kingdom of discourse (63). Much of what we know about risk and reward is grounded in simple axioms: The further we move out on the proverbial limb in hopes of obtaining the fruit of our labor the more prone the limb is to breaking. As such, we do not necessarily intend to advocate a fatalistic or loose-handed approach to teaching writing as much as we hope to establish some kind of progressive relationship between risk, initiative, and incentive within the classroom.

Personally, I remember my very first day of teaching because it was a revelatory moment for me, an epiphany of sorts. The morning of my first class, I left my house equipped with a deliberate, well-kept five-o-clock shadow, shiny shoes, and three different kinds of product in my hair. As a new writing instructor I was—from the beginning—having trouble reconciling “the conflict between what a teacher should be and what we might call a ‘teaching self’” (Skorczewski 100). My insecurities were just as innocuous—often I would concern myself with minutia—as they were all-encompassing. I would spend thirty minutes of my morning in front of a mirror trying to craft a tie-knot that was thick enough to intimidate, but not thick enough as to impose itself on someone; as if a tie-knot could be avant-garde or something. I saw myself as two parts equal: Academic and Marlboro Man—the marriage of an impossibly convoluted amalgamation of muscle and grace. Somehow, I *knew* that John Wayne rode Banner (a big, strapping Appaloosa horse) and not a Schwinn. I was consciously aware of this, but somehow I thought my five-o-clock shadow beard-thing would burn trails or do something else revolutionary. The first morning I walked into the classroom, I did so with a boyish kind of dynamism, with the recklessness of a stray bullet, really. See, I’m not sure what I expected—on a

practical level—from either my students or myself on the first day of class; the syllabus recitation and reiteration day of class. Nevertheless, right from the outset of things, I was in front of the students with my arms gesticulating about, reading our syllabus with the vigor of fire against the backdrop of a very languid, freshman-faced night.

Me: “And *this* is exactly why it is better to have impaled yourself on a large bed of cactus than to have missed nine days of this class!”

Class: “...”

Me: And *that* is why there is no God in heaven and if there were she would have run out of love for you the moment—the *very moment*—that you decided to turn in homework written in blue Crayola.

Class: “...”

Me: “And *if* you would like to take the *short* way to the top and you would like to do *no* rock n’ rolling...you’ll show up late for this class!”

Class: “...”

Me: “And *here* is *precisely* where I...will...light...my...self...on...fire!”

Class: “...”

In all of the overstatements, buffoonery, and the eventual Schadenfreude I was attempting to play to my students as an audience capable of interpreting some of my exaggerations as merely show and my overstatements as delivered with more calculation than haphazardness. This was decidedly a me kind of problem. And, sure, students are more than capable audiences, but when they aren’t compliant ones, your stratagem starts to fail in a very profound way. With your

lesson plans annihilated, your good intentions wrecked, your jokes tired, and your voice weary, the budding awkwardness in the room grows tangible. Skorzewski writes, “Teachers’ fears can create or increase students’ anxieties and teachers who are in graduate school are especially vulnerable, by virtue of their instructional positions” (101). These fears may be pervasive and far-reaching, are usually compounded by a lack of experience and are hard to appropriate if you don’t ultimately embrace them. With all of this said, I don’t mean to endorse a nihilistic classroom approach in response to any impending doom you might very well help to coordinate. But—and you may shutter as the profundity of this statement washes over you—*mishaps are what they are*. If certain failures really are expected from teachers of first year composition, if failing is their right to some degree, then someone needs to be reminding them of it.

By the time my class was dismissed, I had survived. We all had. Standing in front of my students—I think it may have been halfway in-between my first dated pop-culture reference (the merits of parachute pants) and my second allusion to Ted Nugent—I was realized what was happening. And again, no one *likes* to have their discussions go derailed, or to watch their questions die in a vacuum of silence. It’s not as if we’d ever choose these breakdowns to have as our own because sometimes they may be indicative of a much bigger picture. That things could’ve went better because we could’ve been better—somehow. And so it goes. The first day of class, I wanted to be some kind of a hirsute, charming, curmudgeon Clint Eastwood teacher. I dug in, swung hard and missed; that’s the gospel truth of it, regardless of any mitigating circumstances. Nevermind that Clint Eastwood would probably be more likely to wrestle a moose than mousse his hair or that all of my jokes seemed lost on students who—by the end of fifty minutes—may have been more frightened of what I might say next than entertained. Simply calling a spade a spade helps establish objectivity as a solid scaffold and reality as a fine place to teach from.

While submitting the lessons plans that follow this section of text, we’re turning around and punting a few things away by way of mere confession: the (types of) assignments we are forwarding are combustible. Inviting your students to write on all of the sweeping stereotypes

they've formed about you in less than ten minutes—mandating that they then spend the better part of the class pigeonholing you—does a myriad of different things to the general dynamic of the classroom. In creating assignments that force students to invert traditional classroom relationships, you are in effect, asking them to cope with systemic change. Instead of teaching under a cloak of predictability (because let's be honest, how sideways can a lecture on the intricacies of sentence boundaries *really* go?) placing yourself at the crux of an in-class discussion expands the boundary lines of your classroom.

In my case, putting myself at the center of a free-wheeling, amorphous type of class discussion humanized me. I learned to avoid playing the God of Old Testament Syllabus Law who may have been historically prone to answering insubordination with the wholesale killing tribes and the promulgation of genocide at all costs. Through the perception essay assignment I was able to civilize myself and embody humanistic and legalistic frameworks *after* personifying an objective set of impersonal laws concerned more with provisional classroom conduct than the general context or of the course. This duality cannot be overstated. If somehow we are able to pull a student out of his/her canned set of expectations as they relate to normative teacher/student roles, if we can get them reconfiguring boundaries, we've engaged them. Professor Ann Berthoff writes, "writing is *not* like cooking a particular dish...it is not sequential or linear (293). And I would submit that learning is not a particularly chronological endeavor either. Changes in knowledge seem to happen within the classroom under the most psychologically apocalyptic of circumstances. Where old orders, expectations and if/then contingencies are devastated and they may be supplanted by new trajectories. If we can provide students with assignments that don't necessarily offer mere shock value but do foster some kind of intrinsic value then we—as teachers who have a personal stake in the assignments we are levying—may be able to spend less time wielding our authority, or worrying about ourselves and more time walking alongside of our students instead of ruling over them.

HIGH RISKS AND HIGH REWARDS: ALL IN!

Developing a cohesive classroom climate is something that has to be actively worked toward – it doesn't happen passively. It can when the students dictate the climate, but their self-generated climate can be counter-productive to the learning process. The teacher can (and should) manipulate the course environment to be as strict or lax, as democratic or dictatorial as s/he wants on the first few days. What I am positing here embodies a combination of theories and practices. Both of these activities displace traditional modes of risk from the student to either the teacher (perception activity) or the assignment (mock essay). Students often do not want to take risks because risk is rarely rewarded and often punished in educational settings. In the perception activity, students take small risks guessing information about their teacher. The risk of failure is negligible if they get the 'answer' wrong. The mock essay is built around how much risk they are willing to take regarding content and form. Though they have to take some risks on the assignment, they can hedge their bets and play it safe. Even if they 'go all in' with it, the assignment has built in safety nets. Ann Berthoff argues that "Our job is to design sequences of assignments that let our students discover what language can do, what they can do with language" (295). They need to take risks to make those discoveries, and these activities let them do that.

Usually around the 3rd class meeting I engage students in the following activity. I don't do it on the very first day because they need *some* information for the deductive / inductive reasoning portion. Waiting is also practical logistically – schedules change, students get lost, etc. Not everyone shows up to that first meeting. For me, this is a watershed activity I reference all semester long – I want everyone there, participating. I do this early enough so that I haven't revealed very much personal information about myself and early enough so that they're still on their 'most polite' behavior. While many students can ultimately become disengaged, apathetic, or antagonistic, they are mostly positive and are willing to do what you ask them on those first few days. This activity is also reciprocal – I don't know anything about them either; we are all

trying to figure out who each other is.

I give students the following handout: *Perceptions and First Impressions*. As I hand out the sheet, I explain what they are to do. As per the instructions, students are to answer the questions about me. They usually look a bit quizzically at the questions as they simultaneously listen to me and read the sheet (and try to make sense of the image which is an optical illusion: when turned the 'face' spells the word 'Liar'). I tell them that they can't possibly know any of these answers because they don't know me. But I want them to infer based on what they know about tall, red-headed Amazonian, white women, or what they know about English teachers. Basically, I give them permission to stereotype me.

This can be a slippery slope and many teachers (especially new teachers) may not want to open the potential Pandora's Box that this activity suggests. A positive frame for this assignment is to tell students that they can answer honestly but not maliciously. This may seem like a subtle difference but it has huge implications not only for this activity, but for the creation of the classroom climate as well. I make a clear distinction between honesty and maliciousness. I want a classroom that is relatively violence-free. In practical terms this means that it is a space where students feel safe from any kind of hate-language, personal attack, and general confrontations.^[1] One way to create that from the very first weeks is by planting seeds like the one I indicate here. It is subtle, but the smallest gestures early become tsunamis later in the semester (and I prefer productive vs. destructive educational tsunamis). I use humor here to frame what I mean. For example, I point students to the last question and tell them not to say "She's not in a relationship because she's ugly and dresses funny." I explain how that is not productive and serves no purpose other than to irritate me early on which is unwise considering I control the grade book. It is a subtle, humorous way to reiterate my position of authority without being dictatorial or malicious toward them. Emphasizing honesty here also fosters an honest writing environment. Students will work to produce honest analyses or syntheses later instead of filling up pages with vacuous statements just to tell the teacher what they think the teacher wants to hear.

I also emphasize that the answer matters less than how they came to their conclusions. Usually, I have dropped a few nuggets of information (a tidbit about football or gaming) on purpose in previous class meetings – usually during the filing in and getting settled period the first few minutes of class. Attentive students may have caught these, but most don't remember. I tell them to use specifics: the way I gesture when I speak, my choice of clothing, how I talk. I also tell them to use previous encounters with college professors / English teachers. The “why” is more important than the “what.” Again, this fosters critical thinking and analytical skills from the first day of class – they create some meaning out of (what seems to them to be) nothing.

This activity occurs in three parts: individual work, followed by group work, followed by class work. Students work for 10 minutes individually trying to figure out who I am in the world. They are tentative about their responses and think they can't answer the questions because they don't have enough information. After about 10 minutes I have them self-select groups and compare responses. I usually keep my ears open and my mouth shut and pretend to be attending to some kind of paperwork business at the front of the class. This fosters a student-centered environment versus teacher-centered.^[2] Group discussion starts slow and quiet but gets loud and fast. The same students who moments ago did not know how to answer the questions are vehemently defending their responses. Students working in groups on something that is fun and low risk for them (the teacher is the object of the activity, *not* the student, this is not ‘graded’ work, etc.) allows them to develop a genuine rapport among themselves. The foundations built during these first days makes high-risk ventures (like peer review) feel less risky later on. I give students the remainder of the hour to hash this out and come up with a consensus list of responses – majority rules for this and they have to ‘mostly’ agree on responses that will go on the group sheet.

I collect responses and review them before the next class period.^[3] The next class they get back into groups and I give them five minutes to finish up and prepare for class work. While they do this, I write the categories of the questions on the board. I then go from group to group

soliciting responses. Inevitably they say I am from a small town and a large urban center. They say I am an only child and come from a large family with brothers. They say I was an honor roll student and I was a partier / slacker. They say my mom was a homemaker and a lawyer and my father was a coalminer and military sergeant. We generate a comprehensive list on the board of all the possible ‘me’s’ they see.

This is where it gets good.

The list is laughable in its enormity. I give them the correct answers but explain why all these possible interpretations are completely viable. We talk about interpreting ‘facts’ and ‘data.’ My large personality, big hand gesturing, loud voice could mean that I had to fight to be heard in a large family of siblings. It could also mean that I am used to being heard as an only child. When it comes to analysis and making arguments, they will engage in this same mental exercise all semester long – take a set of data and take a position and/or make meaning out of it.

Another discussion we engage in is about perceptions. Many of them superimpose their own experiences onto me. If they are Republican, they say that I am a Republican. If they are from a big family, they say I am from a big family. We talk about how that can be beneficial as well as negative. If I remind them of someone they like, they will like me even though I have given them no cause to do so. Likewise, if I look like someone they hate, they will transfer those feelings to me and our interactions will be affected negatively by no fault of my own. I usually point to the final question (which I have not answered) and tell them that I have a partner named Chris. This usually makes them pause for a second. I push the boundary further and ask them “Is my partner named Christopher or Christina?” Tension fills the room palpably. Often students gasp, laugh, or have other kinds of shocked reactions at the possibility I may be homosexual. We talk about perceptions hard core at this stage of the activity. *There is no other time as an educator I get to mentally shift their perceptions this tangibly.* If they view me as gay, suddenly I look completely different to them, positively or negatively. When I tell them

Chris is a Christopher, many will sigh and we will talk about the implications of their relief. While they may want to superimpose their lived experiences onto every teacher or every student they have class with, they cannot assume all people have their same perspectives.

This is a risk-filled venture; however, it has never backfired negatively for me. It is another opportunity to establish the classroom as a hate-free / violence-free zone. It also frames for them, albeit temporarily, the importance of rhetoric on a diplomatic, daily level. We can't possibly know where our classmates have come from, what their families look like, what their sexual orientations are. Students need to learn the necessity of framing what they say – this goes back to honesty in the classroom as well as how to make effective rhetorical choices. They can be honest but tactful at the same time. There is a right way and a wrong way to engage in controversial conversations. Odds are we will discuss controversial topics in our courses. Putting myself in the highest position of risk on the first days emphasizes the significance of rhetoric in ways a textbook cannot. It also sends a clear signal from week one that hate-language, especially homophobic hate-language, is not tolerated or acceptable in this classroom climate.^[4]

I then point discussion toward them. If I have an African-American female in class, I ask her if she wants to be stereotyped as the 'angry black woman' of the group. If there is a blonde, I ask her about being the 'dumb blonde' of the group, and so on. Students move through their discomfort of racism / sexism to see the absurdity of what I am proposing.^[5] Mild humor allows us to engage in a conversation about stereotypes that might not otherwise occur. I explain to them that regardless of where they came from or what they were like as students a semester ago, they start in here *tabula rasa*. I know nothing about them. My expectations of them, my perceptions of who they are get shaped based on their interactions in this class climate. This notion is liberatory for many students. They think I can hear the ghosts of their educational past, but I am not the creepy kid from *The Sixth Sense*; I can't see their dead people.

Energized and relatively excited, I give them their first writing prompt: Perception Essay. This essay can either be a traditional expository essay or can be treated like a

narrative. Both are effective for different reasons. This essay is another exercise in reasoning and analysis but requires no research. Students start with what they know and are familiar with. Ironically, the students who have the most problems with this essay are middle-class, white students who have never thought about white privilege and don't think about / know what it is like to be stereotyped. This essay can be a diagnostic tool to assess individual student skills and adjust whole group instruction based on their skills set.

The first essay of the semester is usually the Mock Essay^[6]. I start by giving students a copy of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Most students haven't read it and begin discussing it surprised that satire is not exclusive to the 21st century. Students discuss Swift's argumentation style and I lead them through a discussion of form. Then I introduce the Mock Essay assignment and give them the following prompt: *Mock Essay*. This assignment focuses students on form over content. This allows them to really get their heads around citation format of quotes, incorporation of quotes, the purpose of a works cited, the connection between the in-text citations and the works cited page, etc. It also gets them to think about support and argumentation formats. They also get to be creative and make up all sources and citations – they create all of their content from scratch. They can use book titles like “My Life Under the Bleachers” by Seymour Butts for example. This is another activity in which they seemingly make meaning from nothing. Some students have difficulty conceptualizing the breadth of the essay at first; however once they give themselves permission to play and take some risks (which I have already encouraged them to do), they tend to lose themselves in the assignment. It is usually the most fun they have writing all semester. Two of the most memorable essays I've ever received were: *Why Everyone Should Be 4' Tall or Shorter* and *Why Students Should Drink Beer With Professors Before Class*. Though absurd, both authors made ‘valid’ arguments within the context of their essays and, most importantly, (il)logically supported each argument with data they created.

I often get asked if I am not teaching students to cheat with this assignment. My response is that students can adapt any instruction we give them toward cheating if that is their educational

bent. I have found that the risk of 'teaching them to cheat' outweighs the benefits genuinely engaging students. They have fun with this writing assignment. Because they have fun, they *take ownership* of their work. I read the following axiom recently: are you here to be assessed or here to be educated? Students get educated through the mock essay. Assessment becomes secondary to creation – a welcome inversion of priorities in most writing classes. Additionally, teachers should know their students well enough to identify when the work they produce is and is not their own.

REFLECTION: IT IS ILLEGAL FOR ASSIGNMENTS TO BE FUN.

James Slevin argues that:

Academic culture is all about looking and looking for. It is about the hunt for a conclusion, not about conclusions; it is about the making of meaning, not the meaning....The values of academic culture are not the conclusions we draw but the drawing of conclusions from the evidence before us. (62)

Both of these activities set a precedent for this kind of meaning-making. As students struggle on analysis, synthesis, and argumentation, you can refer them back to the perception activity. They are forced to make meaning with strangers in a strange setting and rely on (and are surprised by) skills they already possess. The perception activity is tied to emotional content as well (they laugh, they are shocked, etc.) which makes transference of critical thinking skills from that activity to higher order activities possible. Emotions are irrevocably tied to learning. Adding risk-taking, humor, and play to instruction gives students permission to tap into their education on an emotional level and:

When the classroom becomes a place where students can feel their fear, and any other feeling that they experience...they no longer need to separate the process of learning from the process of being human. And when teachers do the same...we join students in the effort to achieve deeper understanding. (Skorczewski 115)

The mock essay lets them play through their meaning-making. By reducing their stress about whether their sources are 'good enough' or if they fit into their larger thesis, they can mold their ideas like Play-Doh and play with words and meaning in their own text.

Play, innovation, allowing students to take risks without failing them, and students

actually *having fun* feel “illegal” in all academic settings beyond kindergarten. It is viewed as unprofessional somehow when students are invested and when the learning process is fun for both the students and the teacher. This is hypocritical and ironic considering all research points to the success of engaged, personally invested students. Fun and high standards do not have to be mutually exclusive. High standards and a dictatorial teacher do not always make successful students. Just as teachers need to give students permission to play and take risks, teachers need permission to take risks and play as well.^[8] Teachers shouldn't feel like Guy Allen who began playing in his classroom after the dominant paradigm was failing his students. He says: “I parked these innovations – they felt naughty at the time – into one corner of my course....The students loved the innovative assignments, and I liked reading the vibrant personal essays that I was beginning to see.” Even though it was proving successful and his more conservative colleagues were encouraging students to take his courses so their writing could improve, “The orthodox paradigm remained predominant....I felt like I was breaking rules and doing something that I shouldn't tell anybody about” (69). Why do we want to couch success as failure when it doesn't look like ‘normal’ instruction – ‘normal’ instruction which traditionally hasn't worked?

CONCLUSION: SWINGING AND MISSING

On the heels of this discussion, I think it might be appropriate to reiterate some of our more global aims. Moreover, It would benefit me to again restate, or in this case narrate, the very first impetus for my half of this essay: That first and foremost, if you can learn to move through lanes of self-awareness and historical evidence, you may arrive at the crux of our issue which is (so respectfully submitted) that at sixteen weeks into your teaching career, you shouldn't think of yourself as exceptional if you're not the exception.

At the age of thirteen, I remember starting to understand the objective truth of things. I started playing the game of baseball at the age of six because my father thought I needed something to do in between football (fall) and basketball (winter) season and it was something that I did every summer of my childhood without much question or objection. From a young age, I *thought* I had been sort of quick and agile in relation to most kids, so as such (I thought) playing a position in the outfield made the most sense for me. I was thinking positive, but history would attest that I could run under balls hit to Center field that some kids couldn't. But as I got older I started to lose some of my speed, which is to say I started to gain weight. My devotedness for Little Debbie snack cakes and an extraordinary lethargy made for a fun-loving, albeit self-destructive baseball career in which I worried more about whose old man was going to buy our team sodas after the game rather than who was actually on first base. So, as I did not exactly hit the genetic jackpot and as I had an aversion to sustained effort, my coach moved me to the pitcher's mound. And by the pitcher's mound I don't mean he actually wanted me to *throw the baseball*. In fact, per our Mustang league regulations (ages 9-10), the "pitcher" stood by the pitching machine for no apparent reason because—as it might be easy to deduce—the pitching *machine* didn't need really need any help throwing the baseball. In fact, an assistant coach would operate the machine and feed baseballs into the mouth of the machine, and I would

field the occasional ground ball or else throw myself in front of the coach if some kid from the opposing team accidentally hit a line-shot up the middle. So it went for about five summers: me playing the secret service to my pitching coach's president. My coach then moved me to Right Field.

I'm not *exactly* sure what prompted me to ask my dad whether or not I was a good baseball player. It may have been that for the better part of my playing career I batted eighth in a line-up of nine hitters; it may have been the fact that once our team graduated from the pitching machine and started facing live pitching, I was exiled to the outfield again, this time to Right field. The only other place that saw less game action than right field was the dugout. But, I'll always admire my dad's answer to such a difficult question. I remember telling him in the form of a question: *Dad, you think I'm a good baseball player?* And I remember him looking me right between the eyes and saying, *Son, I think you're a good baseball player. But just because I do, my believing doesn't necessarily make it so.*

Now, there are a few ways of interpreting this statement, really. Or there are a few ways of contemplating its implications. A lot of people may say that with pseudo-defeatist statements like these my dad and his hard truth may be the source of any larger psychiatric problem I might now possess. But a lot of people are sanctimonious and moreover, never saw me play baseball. That is, as I continued to swing and miss, a liberating suddenness seized me around the middle of my eighth grade summer: baseball just wasn't my thing. I had other things, but baseball was not one of them. Right field is a cold and lonely place for a fat kid to stand. Hope is hard to find out there. But with every at bat—and with my dad's declaration in tow—I didn't move closer to defeat, I moved toward the truth of the matter and as I moved in this direction I started to warm up. I was bad at baseball and didn't owe anyone an apology for being better at tackling a runner than hitting a curveball. And with that, after grabbing hold of objectivity, the old bat I swung—and missed with yet still—didn't seem too heavy for me to shoulder.

In keeping with the simplicity of my position, all of this is to say that as teachers we need to understand our limitations. The fear of failure is an old friend of mine. Even though I'm able

to rationalize merely confessing certain facts about my teaching career, sometimes I do irrational things. It is true that I haven't been teaching very long and as such I'm not very good at it (I'm completely okay with this assessment, so don't be offended for me). In trying to separate objectivity from subjectivity, I understand the risk I run in sounding defeatist—or worse yet—misanthropic. This is the impossibility of our position. To show weakness or admit weakness will infuriate the lot of us who “believe in ourselves” or surely have, the “right” amount of “self-esteem.” But don't get angry. Anger, in this context is more offensive than defensive, and we're not trying to offend anyone, especially those instructors who understand the relative value of failure and success. As an intellectual proposition, it makes sense that there is incentive in risk, reward, and the aftermath of the process, and yet I can't outrun the pervasive reach of fear which accompanies the thoughts of past discussions which have died, past lectures which have bombed, and past assignments which did not fulfill the expectations I had for them. And maybe this antagonizing will always persist, but it shouldn't oppress. In navigating the line between risk and danger while wagering personal embarrassment, classroom comfort, authoritarian control, sometimes we lose. But if you're playing to always “win” the game so to speak, you've prematurely lost it.

ENDNOTES

^[1] I also want a violence-free space for teaching and instruction. I don't want to be personally attacked or feel confrontations on a daily basis in my job environment. This is a self-serving as well as a pedagogically sound practice.

^[2] In what Paulo Freire terms a problem-posing classroom... 'the teacher is no longer the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach' (67). In this kind of classroom, students and teachers together create what we call a 'class.' Student challenges might be heard as comments on what is happening in the classroom already, between the people in that room, rather than as simple affronts to the authority of the instructor. (Skorczewski 105).

^[3] This avoids problems of students being unable to complete group work because someone is absent. It keeps them accountable as well when they know I will be collecting it.

^[4] Based on comfort level, teachers can drop this or modify it and talk in terms of hypotheticals. Taking risks is beneficial in the classroom, but should not cause undue stress to the teacher. Push the comfort zone without moving into the danger zone.

^[5] This serves to pop the taboo bubble of racism in our culture. Though prevalent, we have no culturally comfortable rhetoric for discussing issues of race, class, and gender in heterogeneous groups.

^[6] Created by Christopher Milazzo when he was in the SIU English MA program. He created the assignment after reading an article about a similar writing activity used during the Renaissance as practice for students' argumentative skills. He modernized it and created this adaptation.

^[7] I offer student sample essays online and usually print one in class to discuss. Titles are: "Vegetarians Can Have Their Chickens and Eat Them Too" and "Why *South Park* Should Be Canonized in High Schools."

^[8] That permission may not be overt from the heads of departments; however, if teachers do not receive it externally, new teachers *especially* need to give themselves permission to play and take risks. They may fail and be miserable otherwise.

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