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Learning from Inexperience

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After the blizzards subsided long enough for mid-Michigan schools to resume classes in the early weeks of 2008, I was finally able to attend my “mid-tier,” an introductory internship-style field placement in Clare, Michigan, which the English Department at Central Michigan University furnished for me. January twenty-first was a blistery day with whipping winds; this was the day I was to deliver a writing prompt—the first of my budding English teaching career. The students were seniors in a combination Composition and English 12 course. The prompt reflected my affinity towards traveling and asked the students to reflect on their own travels or to reflect on one of the thoughts I expressed on the assignment page (the prompt is included in the Appendix).

On my drive home from Clare that day, reflecting on the lesson I had just taught, I realized for the first time that I was a teacher—at least in the eyes of the twelfth graders I had just left. As I prepared for my more extensive student teaching, this first writing prompt proved a source of great reflection. Below is my experience with some of these many, scattered reflections.

Praying for Acceptance of an Assignment

Walking into the classroom armed with my newly printed writing prompt, I was confident with a slight case of anxiety. This was, after all, my first go at creating a completely original assignment that would be given to real, live, breathing students. This wasn’t just another one of those hypothetical lessons in a university class that, if it flopped, could quickly be forgotten and swept under the rug. My writing prompt would be a first chance at proving to these students that I would be a reliable source and a competent teacher for the next ten visits in their classroom—the classroom my host teacher bravely turned over to me.

Out of necessity, my anxious feelings were pushed to the back of my thoughts and I presented the writing prompt that, as I stood in front of the class, now looked insufficient and completely juvenile. It is funny how something you had so much confidence in just a few hours earlier can lose all merit in your own mind as you present it to a group of twenty-two skeptical seventeen to eighteen-year-olds.

As I read the prompt out loud to the students, I was relieved to see that they followed along and accepted it as a reputable assignment. “Traveling” was chosen as a topic because I hold firm to the belief that teachers must share their interests with students; this sharing of experiences can often lead to reinforcing the bridge between student and teacher. These reinforcements provide a metaphorical bridge that students will be more willing to cross in both the academic aspect of teaching and the aspect of teaching that often leads me feeling more like an ill-prepared psychologist. My diverse travels—to Australia for a six-month study abroad experience; to Europe three times including a seven-week study abroad experience, with stops in eleven different countries; and many journeys through North America and the Caribbean—have given me a fondness for the unfamiliar, for exploring cultures that supply me with new knowledge of the world. This enthusiastic fondness, I felt, would give students a glimpse of one passion I hold, therefore bringing them closer to this assignment and the next assignment—writing creative non-fiction.

Students need to see the teacher is passionate about something and that the teacher has a life outside of the twenty-by-twenty cell that we call a classroom. I finished reading the prompt, even more relieved that I found no typos or obvious grammatical blunders, and gave them the chance to ask any questions before setting the time parameters. The true test of my writing prompt’s aptitude was upon us: a good introductory writing assignment is one that students can engage in enthusiastically with a fair amount of ease and one that students can write on at length without much difficulty. If the senior students were turning in three-sentence responses after four minutes of work, not only would they be showing contempt for my writing

prompt but also for my teaching ability; in my eyes, all the respect I was hoping to gain would be lost—or rather, never even granted. This goes to show some of my “new-teacher” naivety, as a poor response could have just as easily been a student whose day had gone astray prior to her entrance in English class.

To my delight (maybe relief), the students seemed to be putting an honest effort towards the assignment, many of them using the full time allotted. My delight was furthered when one of the students asked for a clarification; she wanted to make sure it was okay to write a poem. To me, this meant that the students (at least that one student) were engaging in the assignment and putting their best work forth. Through this, I deduced that my writing prompt, at least at face value, was successful in establishing my reputation as an actual teacher in the classroom. Only the reading of the responses would give me a useful assessment of the prompt, though.

An Adventure in My Living Room

Falling into the recliner that night, I opened my folder and began reading the words my students had written. Looking over the wrinkled paper with notebook frills still attached, I delighted in what I found. Taken aback at how great the majority of the responses to the prompt were, I read on, waiting for the next welcomed surprise. I expected that there would be a few responses that stood out for the right reasons and a few that stood out for the wrong reasons. With my status as a “stand-in” instructor, I did not expect the average level of writing would be so high. It seemed to me that twelfth graders suffering from the affliction of senioritis would avoid much effort for an inexperienced teacher like me.

A pattern began to develop as I read: most students chose to write on a combination of choices “a” and “b”—which asked students to a) reflect on a previous traveling experience or b) project a future area of traveling interest. The typical free write began with a quick overview of some places the student had been, followed by a list of where he or she aspired to travel. While most students had not traveled outside of the United States, the majority of their aspirations resided in Europe, with a few students expressing interests in Africa, Asia, and South America. Over half the students made some reference to travel outside of the United States,

which I believe shows hope for the future: it is important to understand differing cultures in order to grow and in order to truly understand where we, the United States, fit in the world. A joy in reading these responses was the wide range of variety that the essays provided.

Other students chose to simply tell stories about past travels both inside and outside of the United States. One response that I found most effective was a student who shared an anecdote about her not-so-pleasant trip to France. She used symbolism and imagery, pointing to specific events that created the terrible visit. Still other students spoke of journeys to the Caribbean and areas all around the United States. A few of the students chose to avoid giving specific details about where they wanted to travel and opted for choice c), which asked for a response to the Saint Augustine quote. In doing this, the students’ competence in extending the metaphor of the world as a book surprised me. With only one attempt, the choice selected least was d), which asked students to refute statements I made in the assignment’s opening paragraph.

In looking back at all the responses, three of the students composed responses that left me with dropped jaw and tingles in my spine. Two of these “jaw-droppers” were poems adorned with vocabulary that would leave many college students fumbling for a dictionary. Originality points also went to the student who took the Saint Augustine quote and used it as a reference to her travels through life, rather than the physical travel to a different land. She used Augustine’s metaphor to talk about each day as another page and each big decision as a new chapter.

The students fulfilled and in some cases exceeded my expectations. All I wanted to see was some engagement in the question, and I was using it as more of an introductory tool than as a true measuring stick for ability. For that reason, when I saw some great writing, poetry, and connections being created, I was very satisfied and excited to work with these students who were obviously ready and eager to learn rather than my expectation of inheriting apathetic students trying to finish the final months of their high school career with as little effort as possible.

Ha, I’m a Teacher—How’d that Happen?

As expressed above, my overwhelming reaction to this

experience was one of surprise. I began the process of assigning this writing prompt, simply trying to best emulate the teachers of my past I most respected and felt I learned the most from; leaving this experience, I gained confidence and a sense of what my own style will be. Even though I have continually taken strides towards believing that I am a teacher and believing that I will be a good teacher, the internship-style mid-tier was an experience that solidified this idea into certainty. The transformation into teaching began taking place as I watched students mull over my insignificant assignment as if it were their final exam and ended when I began reading the students' responses. As my jaw continued to drop at the vast number of great responses, I began to believe that maybe, just maybe, some of the great responses could be attributed to the fact that these teenagers actually looked at me as a reputable source—a real teacher.

I have learned two things from presenting this writing prompt. First, the presentation of an assignment can be as important to the success of that assignment as the actual questions or prompts being posed in the assignment. I firmly believe that if I had entered the classroom with a dilapidated piece of paper with a poorly thought-out prompt that I presented half-heartedly to the students, it assuredly would have failed. However, since I presented the prompt in a respectable manner and with some conviction, the students saw some value in the assignment, therefore taking it seriously and producing what I would consider quality work.

Second, I learned how valuable *choice* can be to an assignment. I already held a belief that choice could be helpful in encouraging creativity and better writing; never did I imagine that providing choices within an assignment would be conducive to so great a number of astonishingly good pieces. In this case, choices (a) and (b) seemed to be favorites among students, which is fine. The choice allows those students who might otherwise tune out to the assignment to find some other means of responding effectively. Never has this been more evident to me than in my allowing students to write in differing genres. This was an afterthought added at the last minute, but it led to two of the thirty-five students responding with a poem.

These students were clearly engaged and shocked me with their competence in writing poetry. Had I not included this option, these students might not have been able to

express themselves fully. The choices provided likely created a writing assignment students felt comfortable to explore different genres and ideas with. Without this choice, I don't think I would have received as much variety or creativity in the responses. Though I am not an advocate for free-genre choice all the time, I learned that in an introductory prompt such as this, free-genre choice can be a true asset.

Student Teaching...Just Down the Road

I believe a major battle in the high school classroom is trying to snap students out of cookie-cutter, formulaic responses; the battle exists in trying to encourage and elicit student originality. I agree that there are times to conform, and I agree that there are times to write in one given form or another. Isn't it true, though, that our students will have been barraged with the idea that conformity is the path to success? With standardized tests pressuring students to learn what is on the exam and the constant reminder of what colleges "want," it is easy for students to give up on originality and conform to what they are continually told will lead to success. Because of this barraging, I would suggest that in the English department of our high schools, it would be refreshing and beneficial for students to be inundated with assignments that encourage originality.

Until I find a better way to help students write innovatively, most, if not all of my assignments in student teaching and henceforth will involve a heavy dose of choice. By giving students specific, restricting assignments, the teacher has done nothing but set a ceiling that the students cannot breach. However, if the guidelines can be expanded on and adapted to each student's specific abilities, the possibility of originality and novel writing is virtually boundless. The type of surprise that students like mine can provide is the true joy of teaching—the true reason I have chosen to enter this field that is abundant with non-monetary rewards.

Appendix

Free Write

"The World is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page." -Saint Augustine

Sometimes it is difficult to look outside of the realm you might be living in at a given time. In reality, living in mid-

Michigan only gives you one view of a vast world. I feel it is imperative to at least reflect on what the rest of the world might be like; at best, you will have already traveled to some other part of the world or will be planning on doing so. I, having done a fair amount of traveling, feel that visiting a different culture can be one of the most rewarding and eye-opening events in a person's life. Until you travel outside of your comfort zone, it is difficult to make educated comparisons.

Respond to one of the choices, or a variation of one of the choices, in at least one to two paragraphs. If you choose, you may respond creatively in the form of a short story, poem/song lyrics, etc.

Your Choices

- a) Where have you traveled in the world? What effect did it have on you? Did it change any of your worldviews? What else do you want to tell me about it?
- b) Where would you like to travel in the world? Explain

some of the reasons behind this. What do you think that part of the world will be like?

c) Respond to the quote by Saint Augustine. Feel free to agree with it, disagree with it, or anything in between. Give concrete reasons for your position.

d) Refute any of the statements I have made in the above paragraph. This must be done with intelligent, well thought out ideas.

About the Author
Michael Willett (mwillett7@gmail.com) is a budding teacher of English who has recently completed his pre-service requirements as a student teacher in Clare, Michigan. Outside of the academic world, his interests include trail biking, coaching hockey, and trekking the world. His international destination this summer is Siberia, Russia where he will teach ESL.

Editors' Note – Correction
In the Fall 2008 issue of *LAJM*, Amelia Walker wrote an article, "Successful Guided Reading for Third Graders in a Diverse and Academically Challenged Classroom," and the title of Figure 3 (page 60) should read: "From Unconscious to Conscious Acts in Reading." We apologize for the error.