

## **Alternative Service Learning Assignment: Part Two**

I had fully planned on completing the five lesson plans for the original differentiated instruction assignment by digging out some of my former lesson plans and brushing them up to include greater differentiated learning opportunities. But, as I prepare this summer for my upcoming new position as 7-12 Principal this coming fall, I felt a reflection on my most recent service as Dean of Students, through the lens of ED 632, might be more conducive to the goals outlined in the "Service Learning Option" and more practical for my future application.

I left the Social Studies classroom just after Thanksgiving and worked through the end of the year as the k-12 Dean of Students for our small, rural, overwhelmingly Caucasian, lower to working class, Minnesota school. As Dean, I was charged with handling the day-to-day discipline issues school-wide. As a Teacher on Special Assignment, I had to walk a fine line when dealing with individual student behavior because I didn't feel I was in a position to truly address some of the behavior issues. That is to say, that many behavior issues I dealt with in the office could have, in my opinion been handled in the classroom. Classroom management, clear expectations, and positive teacher-student relationships could have kept many of my frequent flyers in the classroom and engaged.

So, not wanting to be seen as evaluating my peers, I did my best to help students identify solutions to their academic obstacles. Often times after talking to a student I would suggest that he/she meet one-on-one with the teachers and try to come up with a solution they both could love with. Many times that meant modifying an assignment or an assessment so

that the student could demonstrate acquisition of a particular learning objective in perhaps a non-conventional way.

I kept a daily, chicken-scratch, journal of events and discussions throughout my six months as Dean. For the purpose of this alternative service learning assignment, I will reference a few of the journal entries that were made during the first few weeks of this course and apply some of what I have learned since to those entries. I offer the following applied reflections:

### **The “Art of Teaching”**

“I can’t do it, Mr. Campbell. I can’t take one more day of that class. She doesn’t listen. I was sitting by myself, not screwing around like all the other immature boys in my class, and I was trying but she wouldn’t let me ask a question.” Now this is how a particular conversation with a particular student goes on at least a twice a week basis. Maybe not word for word but very close. The student in this case is no angel and has very likely spent all of this “benefit of the doubt” capital this late in the school year. But it is clear that there is a very real disconnect between the teacher and the student in this case. An unstoppable force has met an immovable object. And I am stuck in the middle.

So, I sit with the student and mostly listen. Listen to him ramble about all of the outside influences keeping him from succeeding. Eventually he gets around to admitting that he has stopped trying because he doesn’t like the way the teacher teaches. I remind him that I am not in a position to tell a teacher how to run his/her classroom but help him come up with other ways he can demonstrate to the teacher that he “gets it”. At first the student is skeptical and doesn’t even want to approach the teacher about alternatives to in-class labs. He’s figured out,

on his own, a way to prove the same hypothesis with his own experiment but is afraid to talk to the teacher about it. That, and he already made a huge scene leaving the classroom and doesn't want to lose face by going back in there. But he does. And the lab work is excused in lieu of his alternate plan of attack.

Oh, it's not like we solved the world's problems in one sitting. That same student was sent out of that class on a fairly regular basis the rest of the quarter. He's failing Science but he loves the outdoors, and knows animal and plant life, he's a bodily-kinesthetic, naturalist-minded kid who doesn't fit the teacher-centered, essentialist mold that particular teacher is trying to place him in. Sure the labs are hands on but he gets lost in the sauce well before the class gets to the hands-on labs. The daily lectures and piles of notes and quizzes kill any interest he has in the actual biology.

### **The Classroom Management Curse**

First year teacher, knows is content forward and backward, can speak confidently and competently about classroom management theory but writes more referrals than all other high school teachers combined. So I "observe" his classroom. Not observing or evaluating him, because that would be outside the purview of my new role. But I observe his class at the request of the superintendent because student achievement is down and detentions are up. It is apparent, from the minute I walk into the classroom, that he has lost control of this particular group of seventh graders. And upon further investigation, I question whether he ever had it.

So I jotted down a few ideas that my years of teaching experience have proven to work for me and I made the following three suggestions to him solely as a mentor:

- 1) Clear expectations- Focus on just a few key classroom goals and post them in full view. Refer to them often, both in times of praise and when reminding students what we're all working toward.
- 2) Preparation- It seemed that he had planned about 30-40 minutes of work for an almost hour-long class. This is a faux pas in any class but in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade classroom it is a recipe for disaster. I suggested that he plan additional enrichment activities for the end of class, or chances for students to back-brief the daily lesson to the class as a daily review, or simply allow for more practice sets, or set up workstations in the largely unused back half of the classroom where students could rotate the last 15 minutes of class through a series of subject related activities. But saying, "If you get done early help your neighbor or sit quietly" cannot be the daily routine.
- 3) Transitions- The transitions from lesson, to practice set, to individual work, etc, were so abrupt that he lost a few students at each turn. There was nothing to tell the students that they were moving from one objective to the next. And, aside from the initial daily lesson, there was not another time during the class when he had the attention of all students. I suggested he establish an "anchor"; a place in the room that, when he stands at that spot, all eyes are on him. I told him he'd have to work on it overtly with the class. But he spent most of the class putting out small discipline fires and missed some really great opportunities and questions. And he never really regained control of the class after that first 10 minutes or so.

## **The “Art of Relationship Building”**

So much emphasis is placed on content competence and technological aptitude but if we’re not making those day-to-day connections with our students then we are failing as educators. How can we cater to the individual learning styles of our students if we don’t take the time to get to know them?

Me: How is it that you can find success in five of our classes but are failing miserably the sixth?

Student: Because I can’t stand that teacher. She talks down to us. She cuts us off when we ask questions. She’s stuck up.

My school may not be the type of ethnically diverse urban learning institution upon which I cut my teeth as a fledgling teacher but there is a very real divide between the upper-middle class teaching staff that does not live “in the community” and mostly our blue collar to no collar, socioeconomically depressed student body. That culture gap presents a real obstacle to building the kinds of positive relationships that students need to begin to build a strong foundation of learning.

So, to the student referenced above I asked, “Why do you think she’s stuck up? Is it the way she talks? The words she uses? Her tone?” Turns out it was all of those things and the way she dressed, what she drove, and the store references she made when talking about shopping. The teacher in question is not much different, in my eyes, than other teachers with whom this student has found success. But the other teachers, she says, are “real”. They “understand” and take time to “get to know” the students. Sometimes, she says, one of her favorite teachers just

has days where he listens to the class. He asks questions about how things are going and then just listens. She wishes every teacher would listen and care.

I spent a little bit of time talking to the student about how all teachers have different teaching styles, different communication styles. But I assured her that all of the teachers that I know in the school genuinely care about their students and want them to succeed. I asked if she had ever approached this teacher with whom she had problems and tried to help her better reach the class. She had not. But said she might go to the upcoming parent-teacher conferences (by herself because her mom can never make it) and just talk with her. I asked if she'd like me to talk with her and she thought that would be fine as well.

Relationship building is such a huge part of what we do and it's so important to getting students past the bottom tiers of Maslow's pyramid and into a place where they can begin to climb Bloom's ladder toward putting it all together.

### **Ten hours of Service**

I figure three full weeks of school after this ED 632 class started, at 8 hours (a very conservative number) a day puts me at over 120 hours of service learning that will serve me well as I continue to transition from a classroom teacher to an administrator. Notice I didn't say from the classroom to the office? Because this class and others along my path toward a principal license have taught me that in order to be a truly effective leader in my learning community I need to be in the classrooms still. I cannot lead from the office. But there will be more to follow on that in my Service Learning Reflection.