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Identifying and Analyzing the Challenges of Teaching Writing in the Secondary Classroom

Teaching is not an easy profession regardless of what subject is being taught. Therefore, teaching English on the secondary level is especially challenging due to unique issues that can make themselves apparent, in and out of the classroom. To successfully teach English at the secondary level, the instructor must be well-versed themselves, highly educated on foreign and American literature, as well as being able to sharpen and develop the reading comprehension and writing skills of their students. If a teacher feels comfortable with those skills, they have only won half the battle as the major challenges can often be found outside of the classroom. These outside issues are usually with regards to the student's parents, home life and level of interest in the subject of writing. If a student is withdrawn while in school because of family issues, overbearing parents or lack of relevance in their personal lives, it can be very difficult for the teacher to convey the importance of what the student will learn in their high school level English courses.

When teachers feel under prepared or are unsure of their own writing, it can also have a negative effect on their enthusiasm for their students' writing. Other challenges that can negatively impact secondary English teachers are lack of time for instruction, pressure by the administration to effectively complete the curriculum, as well as lack of experience when it is a teacher's first year of professional teaching. Overall, there are many challenges in and out of the English classroom. So in order to be a successful teacher with well-rounded students, all of the challenges need to be addressed in order for the teachers and the students to succeed.

Teachers who have a lack of confidence in their own writing can be deterred from assigning writing assignments as well as being able to complete the writing assignments with their own students. The lack of confidence can be due to low self-efficacy in their abilities to provide quality writing, or due to lack of experience with writing instruction resulting from their education being focused more on literature or reading comprehension. In the article, “Model for Teaching In-Service Secondary Teachers to Write,” Chris Street and Kristin Stang address the idea of teacher self-efficacy: “In the area of writing instruction, the attitudes of in-service teachers are significant because writing is not often an activity that encourages confidence in one’s own abilities” (Street “Improving”, 39). When teachers express doubt about their writing, it can color the students’ attitudes and negatively impact their writing skills and processes. This is a major problem that, if not examined carefully, could create additional problems for the teacher and the students in their immediate future.

While teachers should be confident in how well they teach, it is simple to state for someone who is not a teacher. The pressure of being a positive role model for the students combined with the pressure to succeed and effectively teach the students can be very daunting to a first-year or even an experienced teacher. When education professionals become more confident about their effectiveness as teachers, it can reflect positively on how they view their own professional identities (Street “Improving”40). Writing teachers should view themselves as just that, educational professionals; but some find it difficult to attain the right level of self-efficacy to believe that what they are accomplishing is meaningful. When the students do not seem to want to write can have a negative effect on the teacher; they may feel like they are not motivating their kids to like writing. A common problem in classrooms is that students are

intimidated by writing assignments that require critical thinking and original ideas, and therefore do not want to show the initiative towards their writing assignments.

In an article from *The Teacher Education Quarterly*, authors Street and Stang promote the teaching of writing as well as the individual teacher's comfort level:

As the emphasis on writing across the curriculum continues in our secondary schools, all teachers will be charged with the task of instructing secondary students to write... it is hoped that as secondary teachers become more comfortable and confident with their own writing they will become more effective teachers of writing ("In What Ways" 89).

The idea of writing across the curriculum is dominant in Street's article, which shows just how important the ability to write is to students, not just in the English classroom but also in the world beyond high school. This poses a problem as students who are not college-bound sometimes do not appreciate the skills they are learning and do not comprehend the bigger picture, including just how vital writing skills will be in their professional careers.

The lack of student motivation because of family pressure, disinterest or other factors can be very difficult for a teacher to break through in order to reignite the student's abilities to write in the English classroom. Students who face poverty, homelessness, or teenage pregnancy can often be disengaged from the classroom because they have larger issues to confront at home than writing an essay on Beowulf. In his 2007 article, "High-Flying Schools, Student Disadvantage, and the Logic of NCLB," Douglas Harris speaks about conditions for low SES students at home, "Within the home, low-income parents have relationships with their children that are, emotionally and physically, less healthy due in part to economic pressures that induce parent-child conflicts" (369). Conflicts including verbal and physical abuse as well as parent's not completing their own high school education often offer students less motivation to attain their high school diplomas. Trying to reach these students is a major challenge on many levels

including a personal level, due to the fact that the teacher may not have experienced any of these life altering misfortunes and may find it hard to relate to their students' problems. Teachers should not, however, cease all efforts to connect with their students, especially since there are effective ways to meet the students' needs both academically and emotionally.

Second-year teacher Steve Moore teaches English and reading in Kansas City, Missouri; some of his students are underprivileged, homeless and pregnant and his advice is to get on the student's level and attempt to do what is best for their personal situation. Moore's advice on reaching the poverty stricken children:

It's not easy, but setting the grounds for meeting all kid's needs is the best thing you can do as a teacher. When kids come in to me days late after not being in school because of child care, homelessness, or whatever, I don't focus on "what's due" or "what they need to do" but rather, on what they can show they've learned and will learn (Moore).

This can be one of the most frustrating challenges for a teacher because the students could very well have an interest in learning and writing, but there is too much going on at home, or because of a lack of home, that keeps them from reaching their full potential. The task of writing an essay or any lengthy writing assignment can really disinterest students who barely have the time for class, let alone long homework assignments. Mr. Moore specifically emphasized giving the students plenty of time to write as well as showing the students that the teachers genuinely care about what they are doing; he remarked, "...they [the students] will surprise you with their writing and effort" (Moore). The challenges a writing teacher faces with poverty-stricken students can seem discouraging, but, as Mr. Moore stated, there are clear ways of working with the students, including connecting with them on their level, making the relationship work, and allowing for achievement to occur in the writing classroom.

Students who are disadvantaged economically are not necessarily the greatest challenge to a writing teacher. While the parents of the low SES students are usually absent from the academic life of their children, the other side to that problem are parents who are overly involved in their children's education. These parents, often identified as "helicopter parents," make it their business to e-mail the teacher constantly, show up to class when they feel like it and put extreme pressure on their student and the teacher to do better or stay at a high standard. This is an emerging problem in the twenty-first century with all of the new technology available with which parents can contact the teacher and administration. Students who have overbearing "helicopter parents" can suffer in their work because of the extra pressure placed on them to succeed or as a rebellion to their parents' actions.

Steve Moore, who also taught in a more affluent Missouri school district talks about his experiences with "helicopter parents." He notes,

Parents can be just as immature as their children--often certain problems you see in the classroom are explained when you meet the parents. There's a lot of psychological baggage that comes with getting to know someone's child and I actually think there's a bit of the strongest trust that is given when a parent expects you to work miracles... (Moore).

The task of "working miracles" with someone else's child who may not have the ability or the motivation to complete the writing at the expected level is one that many teachers are faced with, including Mr. Moore.

The key to maintaining the relationships on a healthy level with the parents, while also encouraging the child to reach their potential, is to get to know the students and set boundaries with the parents. The administration should always back the teacher when a parent becomes too pushy or overly involved, and keeping the lines of communication open with the principal or other administration about the situation will help as well. The idea of "helicopter parents" who

overly involve themselves in their children's education is a major problem and can sometimes spill over outside of the classroom. Working through issues inside and outside of the classroom can make a teacher stronger in their problem solving techniques as well as their communication abilities with the students, parents and administration.

To a first-year teacher right out of college, these techniques and scenarios could seem almost impossible to maneuver through and accomplish. The main challenge a new teacher usually faces is the fear of failing their students because of their inexperience. Veteran teachers may remark that the notion of fear is trivial, but for a first-year teacher who has never taught without a supervising teacher, the classroom may seem more intimidating than exciting. Jennifer Cook addresses the idea of becoming an adult role model and authority figure in her 2009 *The New Educator* article, "It becomes clear... that assuming authority as a teacher is not as simple as merely standing in front of a class of students and delivering a lesson. It is a complex negotiation between students and teacher and between teacher and self" (284). Becoming a positive authority figure and role model does not come easy to every new teacher. The importance of a new teacher establishing him/herself as an authority figure is vital to gaining the students' respect and can prevent behavioral problems in the future.

A great strategy to gain the students' respect in the writing classroom is to always write with the students. Completing the assignment with the students helps the teacher understand how challenging the assignment is as well as potential flaws with the prompt or length. Students will really respond when the teacher is writing alongside them and it will help them focus more closely on the task knowing that the teacher cares enough to write as well. Pulitzer-prize winning teacher Donald Murray writes, "If you can't do them or finish them [the writing assignments] in the time allowed, you've just taken a big step toward becoming a good writing

teacher” (Murray 179). Murray points out the main challenge writing teachers have to face is the idea that failure can make a better writing teacher.

Assignment revision can also sculpt the teacher into who they will eventually become as a professional. New teachers will naturally fear this exact failure, but it undoubtedly positively reinforces making the lessons better for the next time around. The goal is always to become a better teacher and by experiencing the assignments firsthand; the teacher will thus have insight into what they are really expecting of their students and whether or not they feel the assignment is appropriate lengthwise and in terms of content. When setting goals as a writing teacher there must be room for variation as issues will come up that could change the path to the selected goals.

The process of identifying and analyzing challenges that will come up in the teaching field can be crucial to the success of the teaching professional’s career. It is clear that there are many challenges, coming from all areas, in and out of the classroom, that will need to be addressed and worked through in order to prevail as a more experienced and educated teacher. These challenges stem from parental issues, attitudes of the students regarding school and writing, as well as uncontrollable issues such as poverty or homelessness. The problem solving abilities of the individual teacher, as well as the outside guidance available to the teacher, such as administration and other teachers, can be the best resources for a new teacher working through issues that arise. With growing awareness of these particular problems, the new teachers coming into the schools of America can hopefully feel more prepared to teach writing, as well as excited and fulfilled by the important task of teaching students the art of written expression.

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