1997

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Recommended Citation

Shafer, Greg (1997) "Conferences, Compassion, and Composition: A Modest Proposal for Inspiring the Alienated Student," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1461>

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Conferences, Compassion, and Composition: A Modest Proposal for Inspiring the Alienated Student

Greg Shafer

This isn't an essay about a troubled student's miraculous transformation from alienation to empowerment. Nor is it about the magic of a particular strategy, the enchantment of a specific book, or the liberating impact of a certain writing assignment. While such stories make for great fiction and movies, the real-life drama of inspiring disillusioned students is much messier, more complex, and infinitely less certain. Like writing and learning itself, it is an ongoing, ever-evolving process that involves parents, conferencing, curriculum adjustment, and patience. That's what this essay is about—my semester of gradual, unpredictable, ever-fluctuating success at persuading Chris to participate in my English class.

I should begin by introducing you to my class, the students, and the demographics in which I teach. Lakeview High School is a very inviting school in an affluent, predominately white area of Battle Creek. Here, proposals are enthusiastically debated by educated and engaged members of the community. The Open House, which occurs in the autumn of each year, fills the school with parents who know the faculty and refer to the principal by his first name. In a word, Lakeview is, in many ways, an idyllic setting for people to learn. Jonathan Kozol would have trouble finding

the glaring inequalities that are so poignantly illustrated in other districts.

However, within all of this affluence and prosperity sat Chris. Unlike the typical profile of a troubled, rebellious, at-risk student, Chris was blue-eyed with blond hair, popular, and clearly intelligent. When I approached him in the library and first recognized his reluctance, he was staring vacantly into space, a look of defiance clearly visible when I crouched down and began to talk to him.

Refusing to Write

"Aren't you going to do the research paper, Chris?" I asked.

"No," he responded without ever looking at me. "In fact, I don't know if I'm gonna do any more writing this year."

"Why? Did I do or say something?"

Chris blushed, but the resolve and the stare remained. "It's not what you say but how you say it. I just can't explain it," he added.

I rose and told him I was available to talk if he wanted to sometime. "I hope you change your mind about the research paper," I added.

It was my first encounter with this side of Chris. As a bright and garrulous 3.0 student, I knew he was an underachiever, but I had never

seen this unexpected kind of intransigence. It seemed to have come out of nowhere and left me lost as to what to do.

Approximately a week later, our school had its parent-teacher conferences, and I was able to meet Chris's mother for the first time. As she introduced herself and sat down, it took only a few moments for her to tell me that Chris's refusal to work had been an annual affair since he had started high school. "He seems to get angry at the entire institution," she said. "It's not you or the class or the school—it's everything."

This, of course, was the reason why Chris was a 3.0 student when he clearly had the acumen to be much more. Each year, he seemed to turn-off, to disengage, and his grades plummeted as a result. We finished the conference moments later, promising to continue communicating if and when we noticed changes. The smiles on our faces as we exchanged a handshake were tinged with exasperation and uncertainty. How does one deal with stubborn, simmering reticence? What is the remedy for quiet anger?

Creating a Plan

That weekend I sat at my desk and began to craft a plan for Chris. For years I have been familiar with the work of theorists who write specifically about alienation and politics in an educational context. The words of Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Denny Taylor, and Shirley Brice Heath had helped shape my own philosophy about literacy and the language arts, but I had never been confronted with such a personally compelling dilemma. As the quiet rhythms of the radio floated across the room and snow blew outside, I paged through their works for an answer which specifically dealt with Chris.

As hopeless as the scenario seemed, I emerged from my weekend with what I thought was a plan that represented what was best in the theory of empowering and inclusive education. For me, it seemed clear that the traditional curriculum simply wasn't working for Chris. To say that he was disillusioned, alone, and angry was to restate the obvious. My first step—and I believe that this would elevate the morale of any disillusioned learner—was to design a set of weekly conference

sessions, so that I could begin to talk to him and transcend the usual chasm that separates teacher from student. In essence, I wanted to replace class-wide discussions with personal reflections, to replace generic writing assignments with negotiated topics for exploration. While I knew I couldn't do this with all of my students, I also knew I didn't need to—that most students prosper in the conventional learning context.

For Chris, the conferences would be before school Monday and after school on Friday. As I suggested the idea to his mother, we both knew it would mean a great deal of time with few assurances that Chris would respond. It meant starting the weekend late and ending it early. It meant missing the bus for special trips by car in the dark hours of a blustery February morning. However, it seemed worth a try if we could penetrate the stoic facade he had placed between himself and us.

Beginning the Conferences

Part of the impetus for conferencing also came from Muriel Harris's *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*, where she suggests that evaluating students without individual conferences is analogous to "judging a golfer's talents and weaknesses by looking at his scorecard back at the clubhouse" (79). The tendency to rely on product as a way to assist people precludes any chance for the teacher to probe, to explore, to become aware of the process and the complexities of the individual behind the act. In short, we as teachers need to understand the social dynamics in which all of our students are immersed. We need to appreciate the process of education.

Initial conferences were, as expected, slow, awkward, and hindered by formality as we each tried to become comfortable. Later, as the meeting became more routine, we both began to open up and speak more freely. It was in the third week that I learned about Chris's romantic relationship with Kim, a young lady in my class. It was also during this conference that I discovered the intense trepidation that Chris felt toward his father and the financial empire he was expected to operate some day. Chris resented the expecta-

tions his parents had that he would walk in his father's path, emulating his love for business.

In the same conference, he further lamented his father's demand that he attend the Math/Science Center in the afternoon, when he could remain at the high school and take classes there. Such a move, Chris argued, violated his desire to take more writing and art classes and usurped any autonomy he had over his schooling. "My classes have been chosen," he once said to me with a smile. "Maybe I'll get a say in what university I attend."

As the days turned into weeks, the conferences became a rather satisfying part of my weekly schedule. Since his original revelation, it seemed obvious that Chris also enjoyed and benefited from our meetings. Sometimes, of course, he would miss them completely, while others often lasted only minutes. However, the sessions often precipitated some very constructive writing discussions about education, philosophy, and values. Because he had no peer pressure and felt none of the reservations about speaking in front of his girlfriend, he became more engaged, more active, and enthusiastic.

Writing Freely

One of the more successful exercises I tried during this time was to engage Chris in the writing of personal journals. Usually I would introduce a variety of topics that addressed questions we were discussing in class and invited Chris to explore these topics through virtually any form of expression. Also available for journals were a variety of contemporary social issues. Some Mondays would find us writing journal responses to an editorial in the Sunday newspaper. Another Monday—ones that I'll never forget—involved poetic responses to a variety of celebrated writers which we were reading in class. Because we met at the beginning and end of the week, it was easy to introduce an exercise on Monday and complete it before the weekend on Friday. Being able to write with Chris and eschew the formality that is inherent in a normal class session, seemed to create a liberating, stimulating context. In many ways, it was a productive way to keep Chris involved, to prevent him from

drifting from the work of the class, to illustrate the essence of written communication.

Peter Elbow has suggested that free writing is a generative, productive way to eventually craft quality prose (24). In *Writing Without Teachers*, he argues that one must free write, or "cook," before any true growth can occur. During our months of conferencing I found the free writing to be an incredibly effective catalyst for both discussion and personal engagement. It helped us to appreciate the universal need we have to make our voices heard.

Connecting with an Author

In approximately the sixth week, I had what might be considered a watershed moment in my attempt to cultivate an interest in writing for Chris. It was during this conference that our discussion of Thoreau and business led to a passionate diatribe on his parents' desire that he follow their prescribed path for "success." It was also during this time that he most emotionally repudiated the avarice he saw in the world of business and voiced his desire for a more artistic career. During this rather cathartic time, I found an unexpected ally in the canonical literature I taught and the authors who had written it. Until that point, Chris had written only sporadically but with his declaration, I felt I had found a focal point upon which Chris could find empowerment. How was "greatness" and "success" defined by American historical standards? Was our pantheon filled with the voices of rich tycoons whose business savvy had earned them fortunes or were we a nation that elevated art, vision, and philosophy over materialism? Had Thoreau, Jefferson, Mark Twain, Poe, Washington, or Whitman been rich men? What about Elizabeth Cady Stanton? What about Susan B. Anthony or Martin Luther King?

For the first time since that day in the library, Chris seemed intrigued. We immediately began brainstorming for possible journal and research topics, and suggested a survey of venerated American literary and political icons which he could review. What was the truth behind the people we in America revered? Was financial status the criterion upon which our pantheon was con-

structed? What exactly did the answers to these questions tell us about our definition of "success?" Chris added the question, "Can one be an artist or a philosopher and still be considered great in a materialistic nation?" It was an exciting session, a conference that raised pertinent questions for society and Chris's own personal empowerment. This was to be the catalyst for the research paper I had been long trying to get Chris to do.

Seeing Some Success

By the midterm, it was clear that the conferences, the individualized writing, and the inquiry-based research had ignited at least a spark in Chris. In contrast to my earlier dialogue with him in the library, Chris didn't seem nearly as angry and was actively participating in the research of his paper and the writing of shorter works for our school's literary magazine.

Of course, as I indicated earlier, this progress and optimism were intermingled with days of sullen despondency and erratic swings of enthusiasm. The conferences didn't replace or expunge the social dynamics which often bothered Chris and caused him to be a volatile student. Conferences were often a time to restart the engine, to reignite even a flicker of excitement. As we grappled with the various impediments as well as the writing he generated, I often reminded him of the very personal aspects of composing and creating—how all learning is a socially driven activity (Vygotsky 30). In class, for example, we had discussed the very dramatic change in Mark Twain's work after the death of his daughter, Suzy, and the failure of his business. While many still see literature as an objective, scientific process, it is hard to wrest it away from the social context in which it is written. To me, it seemed important to remind Chris of this.

Drawing Conclusions

With May came warmer weather, longer days, and the satisfying realization that Chris would complete the paper and pass the class. The conferences, the individualized program, and the frequent discussions with his mother created a

context in which Chris seemed to find both success and satisfaction. In the process of experiencing this rigorous, time-consuming experiment, I can make a variety of conclusions that may be of interest to both readers and to myself as we continue to confront the myriad of Chrises that populate our classrooms and need our guidance. First, it is essential to remember Freire's words that "education is an ongoing activity" (72). Rather than approaching it as fixed or uniform, we must be prepared for all of the mercurial, evolutionary changes that are part of any learning context.

Our students, whether or not they are part of the honor roll, are vulnerable to the currents of their particular social context, whether it involves parental strife, romantic conflict, or more serious dilemmas such as violence and poverty. To appreciate the setting in which students learn is to make one's classroom more individualized, more responsive to each pupil. Of course, all of this becomes irrelevant if we don't create a conference setting that cultivates risk taking and honesty. Muriel Harris argues that "we need to become adept at learning how to involve the student, how to create a personal, nonthreatening, informal atmosphere for conversation that permits the student to participate actively" (57).

Involvement is increased and participation enhanced when assignments fit congruently with the world of the learner. Early in our conferencing experience, Chris found the literature of Thoreau to be directly germane to his questions about success and money. Later, when I directed him to read Thoreau's "Life Without Principle"—an essay touching the aesthetic life of an artist in a society filled with business—he discovered a personal voice for his writing.

"Literacy," writes Henry Giroux, "represents a set of practices that can provide the conditions through which people can be empowered or disempowered. It is pedagogical because literacy always involves the social relations in which learning takes place" (236). Clearly, the learning context improved for Chris when the language he constructed in school coalesced with the questions he had about his life. As language teachers, we need to resist the tendency to be "boss teachers" in the words of William Glasser (40). Rather,

I found it helpful to penetrate the world of my student, to design assignments to meet his often tempestuous social life. Of course, I know there will be more students with equally challenging dramas.

The life of the high school student is a flurry of sports, dances, grades, and adult expectations. As we explore the world of composition, literature, and speech, so too must we understand and legitimize the interests and passions of our adolescent pupils. While such practices never "saved" Chris from the ebb and flow of adolescent emotions, it did help him to find a voice that spoke to his questions about success. As language teachers, we need to make these connections or risk leaving some students alienated and apathetic.

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Gregory Shafer teaches English at Lakeview High School in Battle Creek. He is a frequent conference presenter and recently wrote an article for the Detroit Free Press on the weaknesses of the High School Proficiency Test.