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The Newest Member of the Family

Jennifer Ochoa

Defining English

Shemikah is a young woman with whom I spend every morning between 7:45 and 8:55. She's a student in my first hour 9th grade English class. Shemikah is funny, bright, extremely talkative, and not afraid to speak her mind. Currently, her daily morning goal is to annoy me to the very center of my being. Shemikah and I have a daily litany that goes something like this:

ME: Shemikah, please sit down and stop talking.

SHEMIKAH: I will, I just want to know how come all we do in here is read and write? Isn't this supposed to be English class?

ME: Well, Shemikah, what do you think we should be doing in here?

SHEMIKAH: I don't know, you should know, you're the teacher. I just think we should be doing something other than all this reading and writing stuff!

I'm sure Shemikah's sentiments are echoed by English students everywhere. Even many English teachers are often unsure what English class should be. Should it be loosey-goosey, centered on emotions ("Write whatever you want, it has to feel right, don't worry about punctuation or spelling)? Some think it should. Or should English classes survive on a strict diet of grammar and vocabulary drills with little room for discussion of thoughts ("Open your books to page 74, and do Exercise A, B and C, and yes, you do have to write the sentences out!)? Others think this is the way to go.

I try to strive for a happy medium between the two extremes. I do think that writers need to focus on ideas before they worry about mechanics, and

writing is best taught from this perspective. But I also think the knowledge of mechanics must come from somewhere, and short lessons of grammar need to be the focus sometimes.

As a new English teacher, I continually ask myself what is my idea of what the consistency of an English class should be. I know my class would be based on district curriculum guidelines, what my department and principal expect, and of course, what books I use. All of these factors have a place in my definition of English class, but they are not enough to complete the definition. The part of my definition that was incomplete was the "do" part. What was actually going to happen when thirty 14-year-old-people sauntered into my classroom and expected an English class from me. I wanted an English teacher guru to come to me and give me daily lesson plans I could teach from that would excite students and help them learn. This never actually happened.

When I was an English education student, I was prepared for life as a high-ranking officer in the war to educate students. I learned not only the theories of English education, but also practical strategies to use in the front lines of my classroom. We were drilled in preparing unit plans, how to teach novels, how to design a lesson plan to capture the attention of the enemy: The Bored

Student. Then, we moved on to the basic training world of student teaching. I had a rigorous student teaching experience. My supervising teacher helped me understand where students were coming from, and where they could be reached. I felt I was really prepared to be a real teacher when I left her classroom. I couldn't wait to march into a school and win the battle.

The dilemma occurred the night before the first big battle. I armed myself with my big guns, a course outline, a list of class rules (cleverly camouflaged as "guidelines"), and adrenaline pumping through my veins worthy of D-Day. However, I was still not sure I was really prepared. I still didn't know what to do! I really didn't feel ready to live life on the front lines of my own classroom ALL BY MYSELF!

The idea of student teaching forever really began to appeal to me. During student teaching, all of my plans had to go through a higher ranking officer, and if it looked like they would fail, someone would bail me out with an idea that would work. As a "real teacher," if an idea failed, I would surely be captured by the enemy and thrown in a camp forever. I was worried that if I lost the first skirmish on the first day of school, I would never get my classes back. Then I might have to resort to dirty tactics like grammar every day. I didn't know what to do, and fifty-five minutes was a long time.

During my first year as a teacher, my saving grace was my definition of an English class. When I first decided on a definition, I knew that lots of work on writing and the enjoyment of reading had to be included. When I thought about teaching writing, I thought back to what I learned as a student preparing to be an English teacher, and also what I learned as a student in writing classes myself. I knew I wanted to include lots of "writing talk" in my definition. I wanted to add lots of peer responding to writing. It always helps me when someone reads what I write before I turn it in to wherever it needs to go. I wanted lots of conversing between individual students and myself about writing to take place. I knew that I needed to talk about mechanics so that students could use the information to write, and also so that I wouldn't have to do quite so much copy editing. But I didn't

think I wanted to focus on grammar lessons from a book. When I was a student, I never did understand the grammar book activities, except for diagramming sentences, which I loved. I didn't think we needed to diagram sentences, though. I didn't really know a good way to teach vocabulary, so I left that out of the definition at first. I have since added it to the definition, though, mostly because I do remember as vocabulary words, most of the vocabulary words I learned in high school. I still don't know a good way to teach vocab, however.

When I came to the reading part of the definition, I had many ideas about what needed to be included in the definition, mostly because I love reading myself, and I think everybody should love reading. I wanted to include structured reading, but I didn't just want to read story after story in our literature book and then have students answer the questions at the end. Those questions always seemed pointless to me, and I remember reading the questions first and then looking for the answers, instead of actually reading the story. I wanted to make connections between what we were reading and what my students were thinking. I also wanted to include novels in the definition. I really wasn't that sure about what to do when teaching a novel, but I thought I could try to figure out some plans, and it seemed important and Englishy, and I loved reading novels as a class when I was in school, it was a predictable thing from day to day, so I threw novels into the definition, too. Most important when I thought about reading was teaching students that reading really can be a pleasurable activity. When I was in junior high, every day, my whole school had silent sustained reading for 25 minutes. I loved that time during the day, and I wanted to include the idea in my definition.

My definition grew in size and began to get unwieldy. But I took control and honed it down so that it was a manageable working tool. Once I had my definition of an English class, I used the definition to figure out what to do every day. I planned units and lessons and daily activities all based around what I thought should be happening in an English classroom. When I first developed a definition, I was sure it would be written in

stone for the entirety of my English career. That lasted about a month, until I realized some things didn't work the way I had planned. There were days when I came to school completely unprepared, and inevitably the school copy machine would be broken or unendingly in use. I was ashamed at first, but sometimes on those days, I resorted to our literature books, even using the questions at the end of the story. And some days, I assigned dittos with good old-fashioned grammar activities on them.

I am not ashamed of those days any more, though, mostly because I have checked with teachers I really admire who always seem to be engaging students in the most stimulating activities, and they have admitted they fall back on these plans some days, too.

I don't know what Shemikah's definition of English class would be if you asked her. I'm not sure she would agree with mine at all. I do know that having my own personal definition has helped my teaching because it is the map that I use to guide everything I plan. Now, even when I don't know what to do, I can figure something out with the help of my trusty old definition.