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The Newest Member of the Family

Jennifer Ochoa

More Than Idealism: A Teacher's First Year

I was jumping-up-and-down excited. I could not wait. For the two years I spent taking education classes, I was filled with a teaching electricity which propelled me through my final college days. My conversations crackled and sparked with phrases like Whole Language, Peer Response, and Reading and Writing Workshops. I tornadoed through my textbooks, leaving a clutter of scribbled notes in my wake, as I whirled away carrying with me every word. Nancie Atwell and Lucy Calkins were the storm goddesses, throwing down lightening bolts of new best practices for teaching English. I could not wait.

I could not wait to be a teacher. I daydreamed about my own classroom, with my own students zipping along through assignments and projects I had created for their English enjoyment and fulfillment. I envisioned myself an English mentor to all of my students who had never been in an English class such as mine would be. I could not wait to help 150 students discover themselves as readers and writers. I had 729,000 posters waiting to be laminated and taped to my very own classroom walls. I even began buying "teacher clothes" to replace my college wardrobe of sweats and more sweats. I could not wait to be a teacher.

Even now, after two years of actually being a real teacher with a real paycheck, I firmly believe that beginning teaching notions should have strong roots in a thick foundation of the kind of idealism I had. It is this early idealism that helps me survive the 95th fourteen-year-old who has asked for a pass in the five minutes directly after the bell has rung, signaling the end of lunch. Or the hour I have carefully orchestrated for a truly effective peer response session which lasts only 10 minutes because "don't I know" a final copy is really just the rough draft written in ink. But mostly in these two years, my idealism, though slightly dimmed now, has helped me survive the slap-in-the-face fact that not all of my colleagues

share my belief in student-centered learning or workshop-style class sessions. Nor do many of them believe that students are really people with tender adolescent emotions and beliefs that may not be trampled upon at will.

I firmly believe that beginning teaching notions should have strong roots in a thick foundation of the kind of idealism I had.

My first days as a teacher actually began two weeks before school started. When presented with my new classroom in the high school, my mouth fell open. The English teacher who had been teaching in Room 232 for thirty years had retired in June, walking out the door of his classroom without a glance over his shoulder, leaving thirty years of his teaching mess for me to clean up. In the two weeks it took me to clean up the room, I filled eighteen huge recycling bins with yellowing dittos, seven class sets of novels that had been lost for years, a whole class set of tests on Edgar Allen Poe from 1975 which every student had failed, and three sets of *Scholastic Scope* that were older than I was!

On the opening day of the school year, I was ready. I had neatly typed and run off hundreds of copies of my "Class Guidelines for Surviving Pleasantly with Ms. Ochoa," and dutifully researched the appropriate curriculum guidelines so that I could pass out my Course Objectives and Outlines. I stood nervously in the hall in my brand-new, first-day-of-school outfit, and greeted my new students with a gigantic grin while trying to stifle my excitement. I asked the students that first day to write me a letter, telling me their expectations for me, the class, and for themselves as readers and writers. These wonderful letters were almost carbon copies of one another. They expected me to teach well and be fair. They hated unfair teachers. They expected to do well if they came to class and did their work. And they hated reading and writing. Fine, I could work with all of these expectations and assessments. As the bell sounded to end my first day of teaching, I proceeded to my very first English Department meeting.

I can't remember having any expectations about department meetings; but in all of my thinking-about-teaching time, I had never experienced the kind of talk that flew wildly about the room. I was not at all prepared for what happened at that meeting or at any that followed.

That day, the talk centered around scheduling dates for the department "Theme Days" and an article from the *New York Times* that relayed the wonders of the "Classics Canon," detailing how horrible it is that teachers don't teach more classic works. A lengthy discussion of the evils of young adult literature resulted in a unanimous vote that Y.A. literature was certainly partially responsible for the downfall of the current teenage generation.

These topics certainly offended my naive beliefs. I was also horribly confused about Theme Days, but when I asked about their definition, I was promptly told, "You don't know about theme days. You're new." What shocked me the most about that day was the fact that I was sitting in a room filled with people, most of whom seemed to detest working with teenagers, especially their students.

I know now how easy it is to be negative about working with students, many of whom make working with them difficult and unpleasant. The feelings I witnessed that day, and throughout the rest of the school year, seemed to go beyond the frustration of working with belligerent fifteen-year-olds. Many colleagues seemed to feel that students, especially those in "general classes," were really not smart enough to be able to understand any of the great knowledge we were to impart. The obvious conclusion was, why bother with general students? Who cared? They were only worthy of mediocre teaching, if that. This philosophy was incomprehensible to me. And so, I forged on, trying to organize my classes for a successful beginning, both of the school year and of my career. I promised myself I would not succumb to the deadly negativity of many people in my department.

What shocked me the most about that day was the fact that I was sitting in a room filled with people, most of whom seemed to detest working with teenagers, especially their students.

My next task was to arm myself with lesson plans so that I could occupy the 150 students I taught daily. I asked our department chairman which books I needed. He was evasive for a few days, but I was persistent. Looking back, I suppose my greatest trouble at that time was that I didn't understand the political structure of my school, and specifically, my department. The chairman was not a man who did things like "get books" for first-year teachers. He gave me thirty-five copies of *Warriner's Grammar*, copyright 1964, for my Advanced Composition class. That was fine. I could plan my own grammar program since I had already decided on a rigorous writing program for that class. I was given "average" anthologies for my Ninth Grade Enriched class. The chairman had another teacher deliver those to me on a cart, and he told me he was not sure which texts were used with my Tenth Grade General

classes. Because of the focus on whole language in my education classes, I was unprepared to deal with grammar books and basic anthologies. The new generation of English Education students are taught only of the evils of these entities. Unfortunately, nobody tells new teachers that many English departments follow a strict diet of anthologies and grammar, and evil or not, everyone is expected to teach from them.

I, however, refused to sell my soul to the devil. On the most basic level, I didn't really know how to teach from these books, and I knew I probably could not do a good job. And on a more intellectual level, I knew deep in my teacher's heart that students don't learn how to punctuate by fixing 1500 incorrect sentences in a grammar text. And that people don't become life-long readers and lovers of books by reading story after story from an anthology and answering the ten content questions that follow. I knew that writing for real audiences and purposes fostered growth in correct grammatical usage. I knew that reading meaningful texts and using prior knowledge to gain understanding was the way to nurture readers. Knowing what I knew about good teaching practices, I developed programs for all of my classes based on my training and my best instincts.

However, I have always been a person consumed with "doing the right thing" and pleasing my superiors. Because I was not using the textbooks I had been given, I was concerned I might not be following the curriculum. I asked several people over and over again if my curriculum was educationally sound, or if there was something different I should be teaching. I constantly received praise for my work from other teachers, the librarians, the parents, and the principal. I made sure that I listened carefully at department meetings so that I knew which parts of the department curriculum were considered essential, and I always found a way to weave these pieces into my own plans. I thought things were going smoothly, and I was succeeding at being a good teacher. I thought I had achieved a pleasant balance between using my own best practices, and using, as best I could, the practices already in place at the school. I was very wrong.

Part of complying with the department's wishes was asking students to purchase novels they were to read in class. The theory behind this practice was basically sound: students should know how to "mark up texts" and make the books their own. However, when put into action, the practice fell to pieces. I understood the policy was to ask students to buy the books but those who could or would not buy the books would be given one. I was opposed to asking them to buy books because Michigan law says schools need to provide the books for students. But, I wanted to do what I was supposed to, so I asked my seniors to buy the scheduled read. Most of my students bought the books, but some of the students opted not to, and since I taught in a large, urban high school where students often come from low-income families, I didn't press the issue. When I asked for the books from the department chair, he told me they didn't actually keep any copies of required novels because they really wanted students to buy the books. This seemed illegal to me, but I bit my lip and purchased the needed copies myself.

The department chair ordered the books from a local distribution company. In return for their \$3.75, I handed the students a brand-new book just waiting to be written in. The first day we read, all but three of the students' new purchases fell apart. As angry consumers, the students demanded either their money back or new books. I didn't blame them, so after school, I marched upstairs and told the department chairman about my class's defective books. I was told, in no uncertain terms, that refunding money or receiving new books was impossible, and they would have to muddle through reading broken books. My angry mob of seniors took this news poorly, and I vowed we would never purchase books again.

I asked at the beginning of the second semester what requirements existed for Advanced Composition class. I was told only "the term paper." However, when I discovered the other Advanced Composition classes were reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, I decided we would read a book, too. I picked Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* because I thought the content and the characters would be

meaningful to my seniors and because I thought it was an excellent coming-of-age story. I also chose the book because our school owned a class set, and the students would not have to purchase a copy.

Early in May, the department chairman asked how many copies of *The Catcher in the Rye* I would be needing. I wrote a note back saying my seniors did not want to purchase any books because of the defective books we had received in the fall. I stated my alternate plans and gave sound reasons for straying from the fold. The department chairman had never cared what I did in my classes before, and I didn't think he would care now.

Soon after I wrote the note, however, I was called into the principal's office and reprimanded as though I were a belligerent child by being told I would make my students pay for the books because the copies of *Catcher* had already been purchased. At this time, my tenure evaluation had not been completed, so I felt very threatened by the principal and completely torn between my beliefs and what I was expected to do.

I delivered the news to my seniors. They had loved Myers' book. Many non-readers ripped through it and pronounced it their favorite book ever. We had had wonderful discussions and they wrote passionate papers in response to the book. Understandably, they were unhappy when told

that they had to buy and read another book in the last two weeks of their senior year. They were also angry that I had been made to cry.

The next day, several colleagues came to me to express their anger at the way I had been treated and to give me their support. Several other teachers agreed with me that we should not ask students to buy books; they had tried to avoid the practice themselves for years.

Then my students did an amazing thing. They organized themselves and went to a bookstore and bought the books for full price instead of for the reduced price the school charged. The year ended with my class dutifully reading their own purchased copies of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I began my first year of teaching with a tremendous amount of idealism. I still hold onto some of my new teacher beliefs. However, I now know that there is a difference between being idealistic and being naive. While I would never compromise my belief that all students are people who deserve to be treated fairly, I understand the survival of a new teacher relies on learning how to live within the already established political structure of a school.

Changing schools after that first traumatic year helped. I am still jumping-up-and-down excited. My idealism holds strong, and whenever someone asks about my occupation, pride surges through me when I reply, "I'm an English teacher."