

How “Difficult Students” Shaped a Teacher’s Practice

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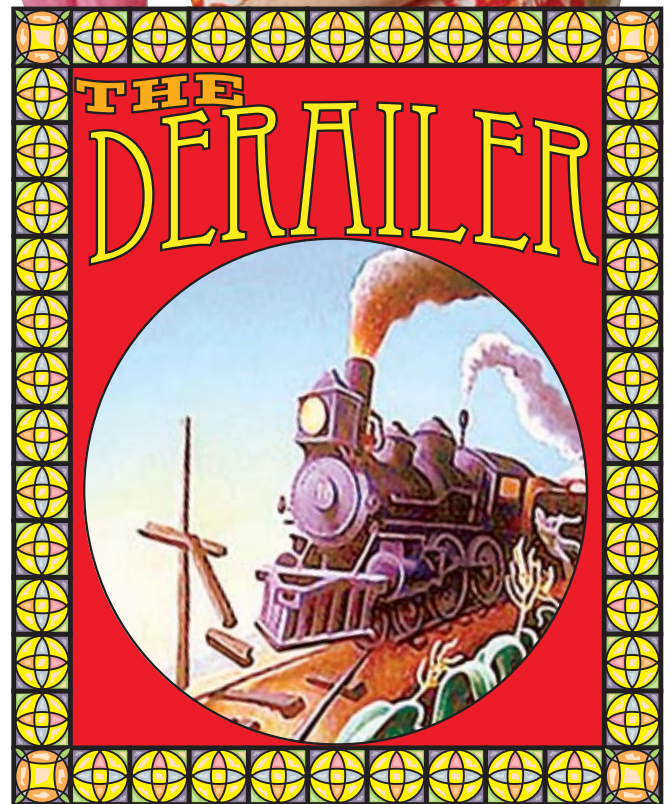
AS teachers, every one of us has had a student (at least one!) who has given us pause to wonder why we became teachers. These students challenge the way we teach, question the content of our instruction, and stretch our abilities to maintain self-control in front of classes. In the face of these challenges, we continue to hone our skills in classroom management until we have reached a degree of success, or at least an accord. These students make us better teachers. They make us realize why we became teachers in the first place: to make a difference in the lives of children. The secret for me was finding the right connection.

All students bring much to the classroom in terms of rich cultural background and personal experiences that have formed their views of the world. At times, a student’s family background and personal experiences can be used to enhance a classroom activity or discussion. But some students, at the beginning of the year, appear to want to detract from the learning environment by their sullen disapproval; I call these students, *the grumps*. Others actively try to derail the instructional program altogether; I call these students, *the derailers*. These more difficult students are the focus of this article, for they have made a difference in the author’s career, a *positive* difference. Surprising? Not really.

We all learn from the people we come in contact with throughout our lives. What we take from these encounters can make us stronger, or at least more aware of our social learning. If a relationship is to survive, we adapt our responses to the other person. Sometimes, this means looking beyond our initial impression of the other person, and even discarding old beliefs we hold or behaviors that no longer apply.

Derailers

The derailers, as mentioned above, were students who taught me much, despite their efforts to derail my lessons. When a



derailer arrived in class, usually late, he or she would begin a series of challenges that lasted until I invited the student to leave the room, usually before noon. Such students were angry, hostile, hated school, and had little academic success in previous years. Teaching any subject became intense with derailers in the room because of their determined efforts to draw attention to themselves, thereby thwarting the learning process. Interrupting me during instruction, creating drama where there was none before, taunting other students throughout the day, and employing subtle distractions to disrupt the concentration of peers were some tactics derailers used to keep attention

focused on themselves. They were primarily successful at one thing: arranging events so that they would be asked to leave the classroom.

What I learned from the derailers was not that they didn't want to learn. Nor was it that they liked to do things that would draw attention to themselves and get expelled from the room. It also was not that they didn't like school or me. I learned that they were crying out for help. Their family life was so troubled that they didn't know what to do or how to deal with it.

Initially, I had these students' parents come to school and sit with the student in the classroom. It didn't help, and in fact, made things worse. Parent and child would argue, taunt, and antagonize one another, which was not the helpful adult participation I had been looking for.

Getting to Know You

I learned from the derailers that I needed to get to know all of my students better. If I reached out to these students—got to know them as individuals and got to know their family circumstances—then there was a better chance that they would participate in a group setting in a more positive way. For example, students would stay after school as they “had no place to go.” They would help clean up the room, or just hang out, playing computer games. This would give me a chance to talk with them (one on one or in small groups) about their interests and dreams about the future. Another way I learned about students' lives was through our guidance counselor who gave me a heads up regarding family issues that may have been influencing a student's behavior in class.

Clear Procedures

I experienced derailers early in my teaching career, including my student teaching. I realized there was a pattern to their behavior, and I eventually became strong enough with classroom management skills that derailers no longer posed a problem for me. Part of my strategy echoed what I later read in a “creed of procedures for effective teachers.”¹ The effective teacher:

1. Works on having a well-managed classroom.
2. Trains students to know what they are to do.
3. Has students working “on task.”
4. Has a classroom with little confusion or wasted time

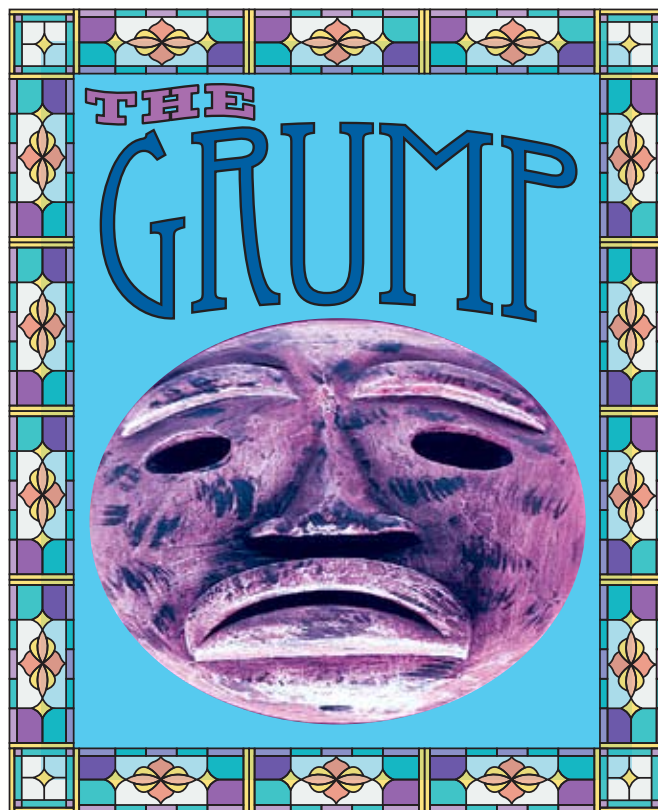
My classroom procedures applied everywhere and to everyone. Once procedures had been established and rehearsed, students knew what was expected and were better able to understand consequences that followed when my expectations were not met. I should be clear that I did still occasionally ask a derailer to leave the classroom if he or she became too disruptive. I followed a rule taken from baseball – three strikes and you're out! This approach continued to work for me throughout my teaching career.

Safe Environment for Grumps

What I learned from the other set of students, the grumps, was equal in importance to what I learned from the derailers. Grumps came to class every day, but participated minimally. They didn't disrupt the learning environment, but did enjoy the derailers' attempts to disrupt instruction. Grumps usually got good grades, but did not volunteer to speak in class or show enthusiasm for any topic.

In getting to know grumps, I discovered that they lived day to day. They were survivors. Their parents worked two or three jobs and so were often absent from the home, but were nonetheless striving to be good parents. Grumps enjoyed learning, but the environment in which they lived prohibited them from showing any signs of enjoyment.

I can think back to Will, Rose, and Sasha, three gifted students who did well on all tests and participated in class discussions. But once outside the classroom door, they were with peers who did not value education. These students had to act according to



the rules of the neighborhood—keeping their faces emotionless and being guarded at all times in interactions with any adult. By creating a safe environment in the classroom, however, I could coax the grumps out of their hard shells.

A Living Museum

I used the social studies curriculum itself to hook students' interest, and this worked well—with both derailers and grumps—especially in sixth grade. The lives we read about in our text, and the history we uncovered, actually made a great connection

with difficult students. They could identify with the struggles of the Ancient Egyptians and the difficulties faced by early settlers of Asia and Africa. Social studies proved to be my tool for classroom management success and for participatory learning experiences.

One activity in particular made the derailers and the grumps connect with the social studies curriculum, and in turn, with school. The sixth grade team (three other teachers and myself) placed great emphasis on the Egyptian period, mainly because of the varied and diverse projects we provided for the students. A “Living Museum” gave student both choice and creative expression. Each student became an expert on one topic discussed during the unit of study on Ancient Egypt. Students had to research their topic and then create a way to “show” what they had learned, to exhibit their learning to other classes. On the day of the Living Museum, students dressed in period clothing they had constructed using their own resources (such as cardboard, aluminum foil, and duct tape) after studying pictures on the Internet and in books. Students from other classes then flowed through the room, providing a learning experience for the visitors and a chance for my students to display their artwork and expertise. It was a huge success.

A Classic Story

Another “connecting moment” was the opera. Yes, you read it right. Our sixth grade reader included the tragic love story of Aida, the Ethiopian princess who is captured and brought into slavery in ancient Egypt. The reading went well enough, because this was a story students could certainly relate to. (The story involves romantic love and tragic death, but also slavery, social status, family conflict, and adults punishing members of the younger generation.) I then found a recording of highlights from the opera, which the students asked for repeatedly. We also watched a video of the opera from a series our library had on classic literature.

I was surprised by the attention my students gave to this opera. The derailers and grumps were involved in the lesson and enthusiastic about the story and the music. I believe they were drawing comparisons to their own lives, seeing the struggles the young couple went through and the angst felt by the families as the tragedy unfolded.

The student project was to design and illustrate a tri-fold program telling the story of Aida. It had a cover picture, depicting

the part of the story most memorable to the student, with a synopsis in the middle section, followed by a review on the back. The students’ artwork and writing was so well done I saved these works for years. Derailers became immersed in the story. Grumps were proud of their work, but didn’t want to take it home.

Connections

Connecting with learners is the key for success, and that is what I focused on with difficult students. I knew that half the battle was won when a grump began attending school every day. What

I needed was a hook to bring them into the learning process. Then they could see the value of what we were doing each day with reading, language, and math.

My hook was social studies. For example, grumps and derailers identified with the hardships faced by the underclasses of India and ancient Egypt. Issues of economics, social relations, wealth and poverty were all uncovered as we read our text and learned about societies in various times and places. In classroom discussions and projects, students were sharing their angst with the world in which they lived, but in a safe environment within the classroom walls. They could talk about problems of race, class,

and culture—in the context of a history lesson—because the problems were not too personal or too immediate. The connections they made to their own situations, however, let me know they understood the material and were using what they learned to connect their lives with the wider world.

What I witnessed over the semester was a transformation of learning and learners. Students were connecting to the material and class activities, leaving behind their evading and grumpy behaviors. I continued to rely on social studies to make the day run smoothly and create pathways to learning for derailers and grumps—students who, in fact, really did want to learn. 🎭

Notes

1. Harry Wong, *First Days of School* (Mountain View, CA: Wong Publications, 2004), 90.

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