

Thursday, February 4, 2010

Meadow Brook Musings

The Science of Teaching

by John Callaghan

I got four wrong (out of 60) on the English 10 Semester Common Assessment (all 10th graders in the district must take the test, the results of which have to count at least 80% of the semester exam grade). I felt dumb. I actually did better than any of my 150 tenth graders (the highest score had 8 wrong answers- most had 12 or more). But I read an article the other day that Arne Duncan thinks that my paycheck should be docked and/or I should be fired because my performance as a teacher should be tied to student performance. The amazing thing, though, is that it took all these years for me to find out that I'm a crappy teacher.

The test consisted of multiple-choice questions about Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," about an informational article describing camouflage in nature, and about how the article compares to and contrasts with the story. In addition, there were multiple-choice questions about grammatical and rhetorical elements in an article, also about camouflage. Then the students had 25 minutes to write a comparison/contrast essay

on how "The Minister's Black Veil" compares/contrasts with either Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask" or Johnny Cash's song, "Man In Black." Based on the 40 point rubric, I couldn't give myself the full 40 because, although I had a fairly clear thesis statement, I spent more time on the comparison part than I did on the contrast part, and I only had one or two compare/contrast transitional words in the whole thing; not only that but I forgot to end one of the quotes I used from "Black Veil" with quotation marks. I ran out of time and, once again, felt really dumb although I am somewhat consoled by the fact that I was able to generate 5 paragraphs.



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We English 10 teachers now have to analyze the data from the test results: which questions had the most wrong answers so that we can re-teach those concepts that obviously we failed to teach properly. So I not only felt dumb, I also felt incompetent. But there is a tiny glint of light at the end of the dark tunnel of my ignorance! I shouldn't feel so bad: I don't teach any of the Honors or Advanced Placement classes; my kids are *supposed* to fail- they're the ones that consistently come under the standards set by the Gods of Testing. You have to have losers if you're going to have winners. How else are the winners going to feel good about themselves, get scholarships, graduate from college, get high-paying bank and stock market jobs, and live happily ever after? Competition is the very essence of what America is all about, is it not? Oh, oh! Am I un-American as well?

It's also taken me all these years to come to the realization that teaching is a science, not an art. If I follow the scripts and prompts the testing and publishing people design for me, my students will do just fine on the tests. A plus B= C, right? If I analyze and disaggregate my data, I'll know just what to teach because I know that the questions students got right on the test represent knowledge and skills they have internalized and will be able to apply in the college and work worlds for the rest of their lives. Let me give you an example of how I've realized that teaching is a science. The other day, Bobby came up to me and said, "Hey, Mr. C, I finished that book, *Mississippi Trial*, about the Emmett Till kid; it was the first book I've ever finished. I couldn't put it down last night. Hell of a lot better than that stupid story on the test about the guy with the black cloth on his face!" I blew him off. Who is he kidding? He got a 55 on the common assessment. What would he know about reading? He didn't even know that the story was an allegory, for God's sake.

I could go on with a lot more examples and about how I have to adjust my teaching style now that I've found out about the science thing. It's going to take a little while for me to get used to a new approach, but I don't want Arne or the testing guys to get mad at me. I promise; I'll get it right one of these days. Besides this is my fifth paragraph and I have to come up with a conclusion. I know it doesn't have anything to do with my opening thesis paragraph, but here's my conclusion: the following articles about the Side by Side Symposium on May 8, the scholarship for young authors, the youth writing camp and half-day workshops, the MBWP Summer Institute plans, the National Writing Project of Michigan notes, and the technology concept of VoiceThread (sounds like something from Physics to me) are all worth reading. Maybe some of them aren't exactly "scientific," but Arne doesn't read the *MBWP Newsletter*, does he?

SUMMARY

Created by Lori Ostergaard (ostergaa@oakland.edu) on Thursday, February 4, 2010
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