Creating Community Out of Chaos

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

Once, during 4th-period English, I came dangerously close to becoming the teacher who pushes students out of class into the halls, into the arms of the school dean, and out into the streets. I understand the thin line teachers tread between creating safe classrooms and creating push-out zones.

It started harmlessly enough. I had returned to the school where I taught for decades to co-teach junior English with a fabulous teacher, Dianne Leahy. Forty students were stuffed into our classroom. The school district instituted another new schedule to save money, so we only saw our students every other day for 90 minutes. A few weeks into the school year, I was still confusing Ana and Maria, Deven and Terrell, and Melissa and Erika. It took so long to settle the students down every day that Dianne and I were exasperated by how little real work students completed. We competed with cell phones and side-talking, as well as frequent interruptions due to students strolling in and out of the classroom or plugging in their cell phones while we attempted to demonstrate a writing strategy or initiate a discussion about the play we were studying. In addition to the lack of forward movement on reading and writing during the day, students did not complete their homework. Embarrassed by their behavior and their skimpy work, I hoped that no one would walk in and see us totally at the mercy of these 16- and 17-year-olds.

We tried to build relationships. Dianne found out who played what sport, who danced, who was a cheerleader, who loved skateboarding. I

watched her kneel in front of kids as she passed out folders with a word of praise or a question that demonstrated she cared about them as individuals. Daily we attempted to connect names to faces and faces to aspirations.

While out on a hike after a particularly frustrating day where the struggle over cell phones, side-talk, and unkindness interrupted our work once again, I remembered a former student, Sekou, who returned from Morehouse College with a story about a ritual that he participated in during the early days of his freshman year and how it made him feel part of the scholarly brotherhood. I thought perhaps Dianne and I needed a ritual to help students remember that the classroom is a sacred place of learning. Eager to create community out of the chaos, I prepared a document for students to sign that promised they would complete their work, refrain from using cell phones, and participate fully in class by respectfully listening to others. Now, even as I write this list, it doesn't sound too far-fetched. In fact, it sounds like what school is about.

I brought the document to class and distributed it to students. They accepted the first bullet — do your work — but when we got to cell phones, Sierra said, "I'm not signing. I text during class, and it doesn't interfere with my work."

Her voice brought a flood of others. Melanie said, "I'm not signing. I already do my work." Ursula seconded that. Vince agreed. Then Jasmine said, "I only pledge with God." Kevin gave her a high five, and several others laughed and wadded up the paper. I'm not sure if it was Jason or Victor who said, "Let's all not sign. What can they do? They can't kick all of us out of class."

I had a moment of pure panic. Ten minutes into a 90-minute period, and I had a revolt on my hands. Part of me was horrified as I watched the class coalesce into one angry swarm, and part of me thought, "Hot damn. We have a class of activists."

This is the point at which my 30-plus years in the classroom and my memory of other hard years helped me weather the moment. I could have sent Victor, Sierra, and others to the dean's office with referrals for insubordination, beginning an out-of-control relationship that would teeter between their defiance and my desire to control the classroom. When the class chaos tips teachers to institute measures that tighten the reins by moving defiant students out of class and sending them to the disciplinarian (which moves them one step closer to the streets), they have lost the class.

As classroom teachers, we wield an enormous amount of power to control students' destiny. Dianne and I were determined to keep all of these students in junior English, but it is conceivable that a teacher with

40 students might want to cut a few, especially those who resist. Because we have taught for many years, we knew that we would win most students over, but this experience made me wonder about the new teacher down the hall — one who doesn't have that history of a beautiful June classroom community to recall.

The tide turned when one of the football players said, "I want to play Grant on Friday night, so I'm signing." A number of other students followed suit. They even walked out of the classroom and returned saying, "I am a scholar." They didn't go through the arch of hands I had envisioned, nor did they say it like they believed it, but we did make it through the class, although students looked at me like I was a skunk for the rest of the day.

This incredibly misguided move on my part reminded me that students need to be engaged in meaningful curriculum and to develop relationships with their teachers and each other. They need a learning community where they feel safe to risk and dare and even fail. There is no shortcut to making that happen.

Each September I have this optimistic misconception that I'm going to create a compassionate, warm, safe place for students in the first days of class — often because my recollection is based on the final quarter of the previous year. In the past, that atmosphere did emerge in a shorter time span. But we were living in what seemed like a more secure and less violent time. While students shared the tragedies of divorce and loss of friendships, their class talk was less often disrupted by the pressure cooker of society — and I was more naive and rarely explored those areas. We were polite to each other as we kept uncomfortable truths at bay. Classroom community isn't always synonymous with warmth and harmony.

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Building Community Out of Chaos

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Building Community Out of Chaos

Politeness is often a veneer mistaken for understanding, when in reality it masks uncomfortable territory, the unspeakable pit that we turn from because we know the anger and pain that dwell there. During my years at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon — where the interplay of

race, class, sexual orientation, and gender created a constant background static — it was important to remind myself that real community is forged out of struggle. Students won't always agree on issues; the arguments, tears, laughter, joy, and anger are the crucible from which a real community starts.

Still, I hate discord. When I was growing up, I typically gave up the fight and agreed with my sister or mother so that a reconciliation could be reached. I can remember running to my "safe" spot under my father's overturned rowboat, which hung over two sawhorses in the backyard, whenever anger ran loose in our house. As a teacher, I learned to understand that discord — when paired with a social justice curriculum — can give birth to community.

Too often these days I'm in the middle of that anger, and there's no safe spot. My first impulse is to make everyone sit down, be polite, and listen to each other — a great goal that I've come to realize doesn't happen easily. Topics like gentrification, racism, and homophobia seethe like festering wounds. When there is an opening for discussion, years of anger and pain surface because most students haven't been taught how to talk with each other about these painful matters.

I can't say that I've found definitive answers, but over the years I have come to understand some of the mistakes I have made. I also found a few constants: To become a community, students need more than an upbeat, supportive teacher. They need to understand the parallels of hurt, struggle, and joy across race, class, gender, and cultural lines; they need to uncover the roots of inequality in our society and to work together for change.

Writing and Sharing Personal Stories

Building community begins when students explore their own lives and engage with their classmates. Dianne and I chose the first book, Sherman Alexie's screenplay *Smoke Signals*, to create links to students' lives since the play focuses on relationships between children and their parents. In the beginning, students weren't connecting to the play. That changed when we started discussing the alcoholism and the father/son relationship in the book. Terrell talked about how Arnold, the father, was an alcoholic asshole. His frank assessment broke the ice. Others jumped in. They hated it when Arnold hit Victor, his son, just because he dropped his father's beer. Uriah talked about how Arnold used alcohol to wash away his guilt for burning Thomas' parents in a house fire.

Although the discussion was short and some students still side-talked, the class conversation marked the first movement toward compelling work. But the turning point came when we asked students to write a forgiveness poem (see Resources). In this lesson, students read Lucille Clifton's "forgiving my father" and two student samples — one by a student who forgives her mother for moving so much and creating disruptions in her life, and one by a student who doesn't forgive his father's absence from his life. Our students actually stopped talking and listened to the poems. Then we said, "Write a list of who you want to forgive or not forgive. Then choose one to write about. If you don't want to write about your life, you can write a poem from Victor's point of view in the book."

That's what curriculum that puts students' lives at the center does. It tells students that they matter; that the pain and the joy in their lives can be part of the curriculum.

Students wrote silently, mostly. They wrote in the classroom, on the stairs in the hallway, sprawled against the lockers in front of our class. They wrote furiously. At times, they crept close to a friend and handed their paper over. At the end of the period, students got up on the stage Dianne built for her room and shared their poems. Students cried together as they shared their poetry written to absent fathers, to dead grandparents, to themselves. That was a Thursday. The following Monday, they returned to class and wanted to share more. Trevon caught me in the hall: "Are we going to share our poems in class? I want to hear everyone's."

Although Dianne and I still struggled, that poem cracked the class. That's what curriculum that puts students' lives at the center does. It tells students that they matter; that the pain and the joy in their lives can be part of the curriculum.

The "Forgiveness Poem" lesson signaled the importance of this work in bringing students' lives into our classroom. Micere Mugo, a Kenyan poet, said, "Writing can be a lifeline, especially when your existence has been denied, especially when you have been left on the margins, especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation."

Students need to learn about each other's lives as well as reflect on their own. When they hear personal stories, classmates become real instead of cardboard stereotypes. Once they've seen how people can hurt,

once they've shared pain and laughter, they can't treat people as objects to be kicked or beaten or called names as easily. When students' lives are taken off the margins and placed in the curriculum, they don't feel the same need to put down someone else.

In order to create an authentic community in my classroom, I develop lessons that help students see the humanity of their classmates. At Jefferson in the age of gentrification, students are both gentrified and gentrifiers — their distrust of each is based on historic and contemporary evictions (see "Rethinking Research: Reading and Writing About the Roots of Gentrification" in Resources). But the class also harbors neighborhood kids who share a past history, including a long-established pecking order from their previous schools.

Students find someone whom they think is weak and attack them. In my fourth-block class, the victim was Jim. He'd been in my class the year before. I'd watched him progress as a writer and thinker. In his end-of-year evaluation, he drew a picture of himself as a chef; his writing was the dough. In an essay, he explained how writing was like making bread. He was proud of his achievements as a writer.

Jim was going blind because of a hereditary disease. It didn't happen overnight, but he struggled with terror at his oncoming blindness. Because he was steadily losing his eyesight, he was clumsy in the classroom. He couldn't see where he was going. He knocked into people and desks. He accidentally overturned piles of books. Students responded with laughter or anger. Some days he cried silently into the fold of his arms. He told me, "I know the darkness is coming." Several male students in the class made fun of him for crying as well. One day, Amber was in a typically bad mood, hunched inside her too-big coat and snarling at anyone who came near. When Jim bumped her desk on the way to the pencil sharpener and her books and papers tumbled on the floor, she blew up at him for bumbling around the room. Jim apologized profusely and retreated into his shell after her attack.

A few days later I gave an assignment for students to write about their ancestors, their people. First, they read Margaret Walker's poems "For My People" and "Lineage," and others. I told them they could imagine their people as their immediate ancestors, their race, their nationality, or gender. Jim wrote:

To My People with Retinitis Pigmentosa
Sometimes I hate you
like the disease
I have been plagued with.
I despise the "sight" of you
seeing myself in your eyes.
I see you as if it were you
who intentionally
damned me to darkness.
I sometimes wish
I was not your brother;
that I could stop
the setting of the sun
and wash my hands of you forever
and never look back
except with pity,
but I cannot.
So I embrace you,
the sun continues to set
as I walk into darkness
holding your hand.

Students were silenced. Tears rolled. Kevin said, "Damn, man. That's hard."

Amber apologized to Jim in front of the class. At the end of the year she told me that her encounter with Jim was one of the events that changed her. She learned to stop and think about why someone else might be doing what they're doing, instead of immediately jumping to the conclusion that they were trying to annoy her.

My experience is that given a chance, students will share amazing stories. Students have told me that my willingness to share stories about my life with them opened the way for them to tell their stories. Students have written hard stories about divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, imprisoned family members, sexual abuse. They've also written stories about finding joy in becoming a camp counselor or spending time with a grandparent. Through their sharing, they make openings to each other. Sometimes it's just a small break. A crack. A passage from one world to another. And these openings allow the class to become a community.

Building Social Imagination

Building community in the classroom also means getting students to enter the lives of characters in literature, history, or real life they might

otherwise dismiss or misunderstand. I don't want their first reaction to difference to be laughter or withdrawal. Empathy is key in community building.

I choose literature that intentionally makes students look beyond their own world. In a class I co-taught with social studies teacher Bill Bigelow, we used an excerpt from Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore* (1990) about Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan. Bulosan wrote, "I am an exile in America." He described the treatment he received, good and bad. He wrote of being cheated out of wages at a fish cannery in Alaska, being refused housing because he was Filipino, being tarred and feathered and driven from town.

We asked students to respond to the reading by keeping a dialogue journal. Dirk wrote, "He's not the only one who feels like an exile in America. Some of us who were born here feel that way, too." As he continued reading, he was surprised that some of the acts of violence Bulosan encountered were similar to those endured by African Americans. In his essay on immigration, Dirk chose to write about the parallels between Bulosan's life and the experiences he's encountered:

> When I was growing up I thought African Americans were the only ones who went through oppression. In the reading 'In the Heart of Filipino America,' I found that Filipinos had to go through a lot when coming to America. I can relate with the stuff they went through because my ancestors went through sort of the same thing.

Dirk went on to describe the parallels in housing discrimination, lynching, name-calling, and being cheated out of wages that both Filipinos and African Americans lived through.

Besides reading and studying about "others," Bill and I wanted students to come face to face with people they usually don't meet as a way of breaking down their preconceived ideas about people from other cultures. During this unit we continued to hear students classify all Asians as "Chinese." In the halls, we heard students mimic the way Vietnamese students spoke. When writing about discrimination, another student confessed that she discriminated against the Mexican students at our school. We paired our members of our class with ELL students who had come from other countries — Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Eritrea, Mexico, Guatemala, Ghana. They each interviewed their partner and wrote a profile of the student to share in class. Students were moved by their partners' stories. One student whose brother had been killed at the beginning of the year was paired with a girl whose sister was killed during the war in Eritrea. He connected to her loss and was amazed at her strength. Others were appalled at how these students had been mistreated at Jefferson. Many students later wrote about the lives of their partners in their essays on immigration.

Besides making immigration a contemporary rather than a historical topic, students heard the sorrow their fellow students felt at leaving home. In our "curriculum of empathy," we wanted our class to see these students as individuals rather than ELL students, "Chinese" students, or an undifferentiated mass of Mexicans.

A curriculum of empathy puts students inside the lives of others.

A curriculum of empathy puts students inside the lives of others. By writing interior monologues, acting out improvisations, taking part in role plays, and creating fictional stories about historical events, students learn to develop understanding about people whose culture, race, gender, or sexual orientation differs from theirs. This is imperfect and potentially dangerous, of course, because sometimes students call forth stereotypes that need to be unpacked.

In his end-of-year evaluation, Tyrelle wrote, "I learned a lot about my own culture as an African American but also about other people's cultures. I never knew Asians suffered. When we wrote from different characters in movies and stories, I learned how it felt to be like them."

Students as Intellectual Activists

Community is also created when students struggle together to achieve a common goal. Sometimes the opportunity spontaneously arises out of the conditions or content of the class, school, or community. During the first year Bill Bigelow and I taught together, we exchanged the large student desks in our room with another teacher's smaller desks without consulting our students. We had 40 students in the class, and not all of the big desks fit in the circle. They staged a "stand in" until we returned the original desks. We had emphasized Frederick Douglass' admonition that power concedes nothing without a demand — and they took it to heart.

One year, our students responded to a negative newspaper article about how parents feared to send their children to our school by organizing a march and rally to "tell the truth about Jefferson to the press." Of course, these "spontaneous uprisings" only work if teachers are willing to

give over class time for the students to organize and if they've highlighted times when people in history resisted injustice, making it clear that solidarity and courage are values to be prized in daily life, not just praised in the abstract and put on the shelf.

But most often I have to create situations for students to work outside the classroom. I want them to connect our work in class and action in tangible ways. Sometimes I do this by asking students to take what they have learned and create a project to teach at nearby elementary or middle schools. After students critique the media (see "Unlearning the Myths that Bind Us" in Resources), they are usually upset by the negative messages children receive, so I have them write and illustrate books for elementary students. They brainstorm positive values they want children to receive, read traditional and contemporary children's books, critique the stories, and write their own. They develop lesson plans to go with their books. For example, before Bev read her book about John Brown she asked, "Has anyone here ever tried to change something they thought was wrong?" After students shared their experiences, she read her book. Students also created writing assignments to go with their books so they could model the writing process.

Community and activism: These are the goals in every course I teach.

Students were nervous prior to their first teaching engagements. As they practiced lesson plans and received feedback from their peers, there was much laughter and anticipation. They mimicked "bad" students and asked improper questions that had nothing to do with the children's book: Is she your girlfriend? Why does your hair look like that? When they returned from the other schools, there were stories to share: children who hugged their knees and begged them to come back, kids who wouldn't settle down and listen, kids who said they couldn't write. My students proudly read the writings that came out of "their" class. They responded thoughtfully to each student's paper.

The seriousness the students showed was in sharp contrast to the seeming apathy they had displayed at the beginning of the year.

Through the years, I've come to understand that the key to reaching my students and building community is helping students excavate and reflect on their personal experiences, and connecting them to the world of language, literature, and society. We move from ideas to action, perhaps the most elusive objective in any classroom. Community and activism: These are the goals in every course I teach. The steps we take to reach them are not often in a straight path. We stagger, sidestep, stumble, and then rise to stride ahead again. ✱

RESOURCES

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A Message from a Black Mom to Her Son

BY DYAN WATSON

Dear Caleb,

When you were almost 2, we would drop off your cousin, Sydney, at her K–8 elementary school. The ritual went something like this:

"OK, Syd, have a good day."

"OK," she'd groan as she grabbed her backpack. "Bye, Caleb."

"Bye," you'd wave and grin with your entire body.

"Bye," Sydney would say one last time as she shut the door. I'd roll down the car window.

"Byeeeee," you'd sing.

"Bye," Sydney would laugh as she caught up with friends.

I'd roll up the window as you said "bye" a few more times, then start to whimper. "It's OK, sweetie, she'll be back before you know it. And you'll be off joining her before I know it."

And it's true. Before I know it, Caleb, you will be throwing your backpack on and waving goodbye as you run off across the playground. I think about that moment often and wonder about the condition of schools you'll enter. I worry about sending you, my Black son, to schools that over-enroll Black boys into special education, criminalize them at younger and younger ages, and view them as negative statistics on the dark side of the achievement gap.

Son, my hope for you is that your schooling experiences will be better than this, that they'll be better than most of mine.

For three years of my K–8 schooling, from 7:40 a.m. until 3:05 p.m., I was Black and invisible. I was bused across town to integrate a white school in southeast Portland, Oregon. We arrived at school promptly at 7:30 a.m. and had 10 full minutes before the white children arrived. We spent that time roaming the halls — happy, free, normal. Once the white children arrived, we became Black and invisible. We were separated, so that no more than two of us were in a class at a time. I never saw Black people in our textbooks unless they were in shackles or standing with Martin Luther King Jr. Most of us rarely interacted with a Black adult outside of the aide who rode the bus with us. I liked school and I loved learning. But I never quite felt right or good. I felt very Black and obvious because I knew that my experience was different from that of my peers. But I also felt invisible because this was never acknowledged in any meaningful way. I became visible again at 3:05 p.m. when I got back on the bus with the other brown faces to make our journey home.

Caleb, I want your teachers to help you love being in your skin. I want them to make space for you in their curricula, so that you see yourself as integral to this country's history, to your classroom's community, to your peers' learning. I want your teachers to select materials where Blacks are portrayed in ordinary and extraordinary ways that actively challenge stereotypes and biases. Most of all, Caleb, I want your teachers to know you so they can help you grow.

I worry about sending you, my Black son, to schools that over-enroll Black boys into special education, criminalize them at younger and younger ages, and view them as negative statistics on the dark side of the achievement gap.

One day a teacher was trying to figure out why I was so angry since I was generally a calm, fun-loving kid. She said to me: "I know you, Dyan. You come from a good family." But did she know me? She knew that I lived on the other side of town and was bused in as part of the distorted way that Portland school authorities decided to "integrate" the schools. But did she know what that meant? My mom — your grandma — got us up at 6 a.m. in order for me to wash up, boil an egg just right, fix my toast the way I liked it, and watch the pan of milk so that it didn't boil over, so I could have something hot in my stomach before going to school. You know Grandma, she doesn't play. We had to eat a healthy breakfast before going to school,

and we had to fix it ourselves. Maybe that's what that teacher meant by "good family." My teacher didn't know that we had to walk, by ourselves, four blocks to the bus stop and wait for the yellow bus to come pick us up and take us to school. It took us a half hour to get to school. Once there, I had to constantly code-switch, learn how not to be overly Black, and be better than my white counterparts.

Caleb, I want your teachers to know your journey to school — metaphorically and physically. I want them to see you and all of your peers as children from good families. I don't want you to have to earn credit because of whom you're related to or what your parents do for a living. And I don't want your teachers to think that you're special because you're Black and have a family that cares about you and is involved in your life. I want them to know that all children are part of families — traditional or not — that help shape and form who they are.

The summer before beginning 4th grade, I started teaching myself how to play the clarinet. It was the family instrument in that both of my older sisters played it when they were younger. For years I wanted to be a musician. It was in my blood. My grandfather was a musician, all of my uncles can sing very well, and my dad — your grandfather — was a DJ in Jamaica once upon a time. At the end of 5th grade, my band director took each member aside to provide feedback on whether or not she or he should continue music in middle school. My teacher told me that I just didn't have it and should quit. I was devastated. I had dreams of becoming a conductor and I loved playing music. I learned to read music and text at the same time before entering kindergarten, so I couldn't understand what my teacher saw or heard that made him think that I, at the tender age of 11, didn't have what it took to pursue playing in a middle school band. He knew nothing about me and had never asked any questions about me, our family, my aspirations. He didn't seek to make me a better musician.

I want your teachers to make space for you in their curricula, so that you see yourself as integral to this country's history, to your classroom's community, to your peers' learning.

Caleb, I hope that you will have teachers who realize they are gatekeepers. I hope they understand the power they hold and work to discover your talents, seek out your dreams and fan them, rather than smother them. I hope they will see you as part of a family, with gifts and rich histories that have been passed down to you. I hope they will strive to know you even when they think they already know you. I hope your teachers will approach you with humility and stay curious about who you are.

When I was in 4th grade, my elementary school held a back-to-school night that featured student work and allowed families to walk the halls and speak with teachers. In each classroom was a student leader, chosen by teachers. I was not sure what my role was supposed to be. But at one point, a couple came in, desiring to speak with Mrs. S. She was busy, so I thought I'd chat with them while they waited. As I approached them, they recoiled in fear and, with panicked looks, turned away from me and said, "Mrs. S.?" My teacher looked away from the folks she was working with and said, "It's OK, she's not like the rest." I don't remember what happened next. All I remember is that this seemed to be one of the first in a long line of reassurances that I was special and not like other Black boys and girls. For many years afterward, I was told on more than one occasion, "You're not like other Blacks." This was supposed to be a compliment.

Caleb, I pray that your teachers will not look at you through hurtful racial preconceptions. I pray that they will do the work necessary to eliminate racist practices in themselves and in those around them. I pray that they stand up for you in ways that leave you feeling strong and capable. I pray that they will nurture your spirit, and that you, in turn, will desire to be a better you.

Son, I end this letter by sharing a story that Grandma has told me many times, that I hope will one day resonate with you. On the first day of kindergarten, many of the kids were crying and clinging to their parents. But not me. I was ready! I wanted to be like my three older siblings and go to school. So I gave my mom a hug, let go of her hand, waved goodbye, and found my teacher. And remember how I told you that my oldest sister taught me how to read before I went to school? The teacher found this out and used this skill, along with my desire to be at school, to teach the other kids the alphabet and help them learn how to read. I believe, in part, that is why I became a teacher. She saw something in me and encouraged me to develop my passion — even at this young, sweet age.

That, my son, is my hope for you. I hope your teachers will love you for who you are and the promise of what you'll be.

Love,
Mama

Honor Their Names

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

At a sports bar in British Columbia, a gracious and gregarious young woman seated us. As we slid across the bench in the booth, I asked her name. "Carol," she said.

"Carol," I repeated. "My name is Linda. We have names from a different generation."

She laughed. "Oh, my real name is Chichima. Carol is my white name. My family is from Nigeria, so when we immigrated, I changed my name at school. It's easier for the teachers. We all have white names."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Some of the teachers don't like to say our long names. So on the first day of school, they say, 'What's your white name?' All of my friends have white names."

Of course, this doesn't just happen in British Columbia. It happens in Portland, Oregon, where I live. It happens wherever multiple cultures and languages, one dominant and the others marginalized, bump up against each other. But it's a problem whether it happens in Bozeman, Montana; Reno, Nevada; or Montclair, New Jersey.

Students' names are the first thing teachers know about the young people who enter our classrooms; they can signal country of origin, gender, language. Students' names provide the first moment when a teacher can demonstrate their warmth and humanity, their commitment to seeing and welcoming students' languages and cultures into the classroom. The poet Alejandro Jimenez wrote about this moment in his poem "Mexican Education":

When my mother registered me for the 3rd grade
In January of '96
My ESL teacher
Had trouble with the multiple syllables in my name
She said — "Alejandro is too long, let's call him Alex."

My mother looked at the floor and said, "OK."

To give students nicknames or to refuse to pronounce student names is to reject them from their families, languages, and cultures. To devalue something as intimate and personal as the names their parents bestowed at birth, to whitewash them, to rub out their faces, skins, and vocal cords is akin to saying, "You don't belong" on the first day of school. So we say their names.

In her fiery poem "Name" (see p. 21), Hiwot Adilow talks back to people who attempt to abbreviate her name or give her a nickname:

i'm tired of people asking me to smooth my name out for
them,
they want me to bury it in the english so they can understand.
I will not accommodate the word for mouth,
I will not break my name so your lazy english can sleep its
tongue on top,
fix your lips around it.
no, you can't give me a stupid nickname to replace this gift of
five letters
...

my name is a poem,
my father wrote it over and over again.
it is the lullaby that sends his homesickness to bed

Although I love the study of linguistics, my tongue is a fat slug that tortures every language equally. I took years of French without learning pronunciation; now, in my 60s I struggle through Spanish lessons, still torturing vowels and consonants. So when I take roll on the first day of class, I create a phonemic translation above each student's name to remind myself how to pronounce it. As Adilow wrote:

take two syllables of your time to pronounce this song of mine,

it means life,
you shouldn't treat a breath as carelessly as this.
cradle my name between your lips as delicately as it
deserves —

Every year on the first day of school, I have the opportunity to affirm my students as members of our classroom by cradling their names between lips and trying to sing the songs of their homes. ❋

RESOURCE

Christensen, Linda. 2017. "Name Poem: To Say the Name Is to Begin the Story." *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word (2nd Edition).* Rethinking Schools.

Name

BY HIWOT ADILOW

i'm tired of people asking me to smooth my name out for them,
they want me to bury it in the english so they can understand.
i will not accommodate the word for mouth,
i will not break my name so your lazy english can sleep its tongue
on top,
fix your lips around it.
no, you can't give me a stupid nickname to replace this gift of five
letters.
try to pronounce it before you write me off as
lil one,
afro,
the ethiopian jawn,
or any other poor excuse of a name you've baptized me with in
your weakness.
my name is insulted that you won't speak it.
my name is a jealous god
i kneel my english down every day and offer my begging and broken
amharic
to be accepted by this lord from my parents' country.
this is my religion.
you are tainting it.
every time you call me something else you break it and kick it
you think you're being clever by turning my name into a cackle?
hewhat? hewhy? he when how he what who?
he did whaaaat?
my name is not a joke.
this is more than wind and the clack of a consonant.

my father handed me this heavy burden of five letters decades before
i was born.
with letters, he tried to snatch his ethiopia back from the middle of
a red terror.
he tried to overthrow a fascist.
he was thrown into prison,
ran out of his home
my name is a frantic attempt to save a country.
it is a preserved connection,
the only line i have leading me to a place i've never been.
it is a boat,
a plane,
a vessel carrying me to earth i've never felt.
i speak myself closer and closer to ethiopia by wrapping myself in
this name.
this is my country in ink.
my name is the signature at the end of the last letter before the
army comes,
it is the only music left in the midst of torture and fear,
it is the air that filled my father's lungs when he was released from prison,
the inhale that ushers in beginning.
my name is a poem,
my father wrote it over and over again.
it is the lullaby that sends his homesickness to bed
i refuse to break myself into dust for people too weak to carry my name
in their mouths.
take two syllables of your time to pronounce this song of mine,
it means life,
you shouldn't treat a breath as carelessly as this.
cradle my name between your lips as delicately as it deserves
it's Hiwot,
say it right.

Hiwot Adilow is an Ethiopian American poet from Philadelphia. She received her BA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she was a First Wave Urban Arts Scholar. Hiwot is one of the 2018 recipients of the Brunel International African Poetry Prize and author of the chapbook In the House of My Father *(Two Sylvias Press, 2018). Her writing appears or is forthcoming in* Winter Tangerine, Callaloo, The Offing, *and elsewhere and has been anthologized in* The BreakBeat Poets Vol 2.0: Black Girl Magic *(Haymarket Books, 2018). This poem was first published in* Apiary Magazine, *Issue 6.*

12 Suggestions for New Teachers

BY LARRY MILLER

I was 38 when I started my teaching career. I thought I knew everything I needed to know. I'd been a community and union activist for years and I'd been political all my life. I figured all I had to do was bring my experience and politics to the classroom and I'd be a great teacher. I was wrong. I taught and led schools for 17 years. I've been on the Milwaukee school board for nine years and teach an introductory college education class. I continue to be humbled. When I work with new teachers, I give them the following suggestions:

1. Make respect central to your classroom culture. My students and their parents often say, "You have to give respect to get respect." They're right. Address students as you would want someone to talk to your family members — no yelling, no humiliating. Look for what's good and right in their work or actions and find ways to say something positive. The only way to hold students to your high expectations is to gain their respect and their acknowledgment that your class will lead to real learning that will benefit them.

2. Base your curriculum on social justice. Frame it with a critical edge. I have three questions for assessing my curriculum:

- Does the curriculum encourage a critical examination of the world?
- Is the curriculum challenging and engaging?
- Are students learning the skills they need to be critical thinkers, advance their education, expand their life options, and become active citizens?

3. Keep rules to a minimum and enforce them. Have clear consequences. Don't threaten to take a particular action if you are not willing to carry it out. Talk to young students with respect and high school students as mature young adults.

4. Whenever possible, connect your classroom discussions and curriculum to students' lives, communities, and cultures. Learn as much as you can about your students. For example, I used song lyrics, current events articles, and community speakers to initiate thoughtful and engaging discussions. No matter what subject, including math and science, one can connect social issues and community problems to the curriculum.

5. Learn from other teachers and staff. Talk to teachers who have been in your school for a long time and who appear connected to the students and families and the community. I've always made a point of consulting daily with my colleagues. Learn from the diversity and experience of your colleagues, including the support staff. Their insights can be invaluable.

6. Build students' confidence in their intelligence and creativity. I've often heard my students call kids from the suburbs or those in AP classes "the smart kids." Don't let that go unchallenged. I start the year talking about how "being smart" can take many forms. Students learn in different ways. I find daily examples of students' work and views to talk about as smart and intelligent. Give constant examples of the brilliance of students' communities, past and present.

7. Distinguish between students' home languages and their need to know "standard" English. Work with both. Celebrate home languages in a variety of ways: dialogue, poetry, presentations, etc. Encourage students to code-switch. And ensure that they learn "standard" English. (For a more thorough discussion of home language, see Linda Christensen's book *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, which is described on p. 132.)

8. Keep lecturing short. Have students create projects, give presentations, and engage in discussions, debates, role plays, and simulations.

9. Have engaging activities prepared for students when they walk into the classroom. Play a piece of music, put a quote or an editorial cartoon on a document projector to interpret, or put students in "critical thinking groups" with a puzzle, provocative question, or math problem.

10. Connect with students outside of the classroom. Ask family members of students their preferred method of contact — phone, email, texts, or written notes. Call parents during the opening weeks of school to ask about what you need to know to best teach their child. Connect to students and their families in non-school settings. For example, during Black History Month many churches in the Black community have special programs that students perform in. Attend their sporting, music, poetry, and other after-school activities. Be seen in their lives beyond the classroom.

11. Create lessons and assignments that take students beyond the classroom. Organize fieldwork with interviews in communities. Use maps to explore cities and other areas. Use "scavenger hunts" to add fun while encouraging students to be aware of their physical and natural surroundings. Have students use photography and videography whenever possible to document their work. Organize field trips outside of the students' neighborhood or city to visit farms, college lectures, museums, and historic sites that connect to your curriculum.

12. Keep calm. Calmness allows you to make rational decisions. If a student is confrontational or out of control, it never works to react with anger. Let the situation cool down and then try to have a mature conversation with those involved. ✱

How I Survived My First Year

BY BILL BIGELOW

It was a Friday afternoon and the end of my 6th-period freshman social studies class. As two of my students walked out the door, I overheard one say to the other: "Do you know what this class reminds me of? A local TV commercial."

It was a crushing comment. I knew exactly what she meant. It was my first year as a teacher. And as hard as I was working, the class still felt ragged, amateurish — well intended, but sloppy. Her metaphor, invoking the image of a salesman trying too hard, was perfect.

Many years later, there are still days when my class feels a bit like a local TV ad. But I continue to experiment, continue to study my own classroom practice. And looking back, I think I learned some things that first year that might be useful to pass on.

The first couple of years in the classroom establish what could be called a teacher's "professional trajectory." Most of us come out of college full of theory and hope. But then our lofty aims often bump up against the conservative cultures of our new schools and students who often have been hardened by life and schooling.

How we respond to this clash of idealism vs. cynicism begins to create patterns that help define the teachers we'll become.

Which is not to say that the mistakes we make early on are repeated over and over throughout our careers. I probably did more things wrong than right my first year, and I'd like to think that I've grown since then.

Perhaps the best we can do is to ensure that early in our teaching

lives we create mechanisms of self-reflection that allow us to grow and allow us to continually rethink our curricula and classroom approaches. Nurturing these critical mechanisms is vital if we're to maintain our hope in increasingly trying times.

My First Job

Typical of the circumstances of most first-year teachers, principals did not line up to compete for my services. I began on the substitute list, and was lucky to land that spot. I know there are people who enjoy subbing: no papers to correct, no lesson plans to fret over, frequent changes of scenery, and so forth. But I hated it. I didn't know the kids' names; they often began in let's-terrorize-the-sub mode; teachers invariably left awful lesson plans ("Review Chapter 20 and have them study for the test") but resented it if I didn't follow them to the letter; and I rarely had the opportunity to develop a lesson plan of my own, and teach it start to finish.

How we respond to this clash of idealism vs. cynicism begins to create patterns that help define the teachers we'll become.

Finally, in late October I did get a job — at Grant High School in Portland, Oregon, where I had completed my student teaching. It was a school with a diverse student body, about 30 percent African American, with its white students drawn from both working-class and "up on the ridge" neighborhoods. I had two preps: U.S. history and something called "freshman social studies" (and baseball coaching in the spring).

As I was to learn, I'd been hired to teach "overflow" classes, classes that had been formed because Grant's enrollment was higher than expected. Teachers chose the "surplus" students they would donate to these new classes. Then the administration hired a sub to babysit while they sought permission from higher-ups to offer a contract to a regular teacher. In the meantime, the kids had driven two subs to quit. I was hired during the tenure of sub No. 3. My position was officially designated "temporary." In other words, I would automatically lose my job at the end of the year — unless another teacher fell ill, retired, died, quit, or had a baby.

My first meeting with the administrative team of principal, vice principal, and curriculum specialist was perfunctory. I was told that

"freshman social studies" meant one semester of career education, one semester of world geography, and no, they weren't sure which came first. Nor did they know which, or even if, textbooks were used. But I could pick up my two-ream allotment of ditto paper from the department chair.

They gave me a key to Room 10 and sent me to review my "work station," as the principal, an ex-Navy man, called it. Room 10 was a runt: a tiny basement classroom crammed with 1950s-style student desks and a loud, hulking heating unit in the rear. But it was mine. It turned out students had been issued textbooks — for U.S. history, something like *God Bless America: We're Number One*, and for world geography, the cleverly titled *World Geography*.

Don't Be a Loner

Before the students came the questions: Should I use these textbooks? How do I grade? What kind of "discipline" policy should I have? How should I arrange the classroom? What do I teach on the first day?

My answers to these and other typical new-teacher questions are less important than the process of answering them. And this is perhaps the most valuable lesson I drew from that first year: Build a community of educators. In September I had organized a study/support group with several teachers, some brand new, others with a few years of experience. We were united by a broad vision of creating lively and thoughtful classrooms where we provoked students to question the roots of social problems and encouraged them to believe that they could make a difference in the world. This group became my haven, offering comfort in times of stress — which was most of the time — and concrete advice to vexing questions.

Of course, I don't mean to suggest that these support groups are only for the inexperienced. I've been in a study/action group, Portland Area Rethinking Schools, for many years, and this group and a subgroup aimed at sharing curriculum on global justice issues continue to offer essential support. They remind me that I'm not alone and they offer practical advice.

We met weekly and usually divided our time between discussion of issues in education — tracking, discipline, teacher union politics, school funding, etc. — and specific classroom problems we encountered. Sometimes we brainstormed ideas for particular units people were developing: for example, Native American history or the U.S. Constitution. It was also to this group that I brought complaints of rowdy classes and re-

calcitrant students, practical concerns about leading discussions or structuring a major project, and questions of how curricularly adventurous I could be without incurring the wrath of an administrator.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I was glad that the group was composed mostly of teachers from other schools. Because of the huge gulf between my classroom ideals and my capacity to live those ideals in my day-to-day practice, I sometimes felt ashamed and was reluctant to share my stumbles and doubts with more experienced colleagues in the building.

There were only eight of us in the group but we taught in four different districts; two were Title I teachers and three worked in alternative programs. The diversity of work situations yanked me out of the isolation of my classroom cubicle and forced me to see a bigger educational picture. Sheryl Hirshon's frequent despair with her reading classes in a rural Oregon community may have been of a different sort from my frequent despair at urban Grant High School. But each of us could learn from how the other analyzed and confronted our difficult situations.

Each of us could learn from how the other analyzed and confronted our difficult situations.

Occasionally our meetings turned into aimless whining sessions. But other times, a simple comment could remind us of our ideals and keep us on the path. I remember in a weak moment confessing that I was going to start relying on the textbook: I was just too tired, scrambling to create my own curriculum from scratch, retyping excerpts from assorted books in the days before we teachers were allowed access to a copy machine, and when personal computers were still a thing of the future.

My friend Peter Thacker, sympathetic yet disapproving, simply asked: "Bill, do you really want to do that?"

OK, it bordered on a guilt trip. But that's all it took for me to remember that in fact I really didn't want to do that. The group was simultaneously collective conscience and inspiration.

The most useful piece of advice in the infancy of my career came from Tom McKenna, my cooperating teacher during my student teaching at Grant High School. It wasn't spoken advice, but he demonstrated it countless times in his classroom demeanor: Show the students that you love and respect them; play with them; joke with them; let them see your humanity. Good lesson plans are essential, yes, but ultimately students respond to the teacher as a human being.

Easier said than done, to be sure. Some days I would start out full of love and humor, but the students' surliness would defeat me by period's end. However, on better days, days when I had designed lessons that channeled rather than suppressed their fitful energy, or when I found some way to coax them to share their real stories — and thus I could share mine — I glimpsed the classroom life that was meant to be. We stopped being boss and workers, guard and inmates.

Moving Beyond the Textbooks

Not all textbooks are wretched, although as I recall mine were pretty awful. But as a beginning teacher I needed to see myself as a producer, not merely a consumer, of curriculum. It's hard work to translate the world into engaging lesson plans, but unless we're content to subordinate our classrooms to the priorities of the corporations that produce textbooks and other canned curricula, that's exactly what we have to do every day.

It's not that textbooks are a vast wasteland of corporate propaganda with no value whatsoever. I've borrowed some good ideas from textbook study guides. But they can easily narrow, distort, and misdirect our efforts.

To offer just one example: In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen's valuable critique of contemporary U.S. history textbooks, he demonstrates that all major texts downplay or totally ignore the history of the struggle against racism in the United States. Especially as a beginning teacher, if I had relied on textbooks to shape the outlines of my U.S. history curriculum, I would have neglected crucial areas of inquiry — and may never have realized it.

In addition to the support group, my planning book was another confidant of sorts. In it I would describe the activities I intended to do each week. Then I would record in some detail what actually happened. This was especially useful the following summer, when I could sit on the porch and leisurely flip through the book looking for patterns in students' responses to various lessons and teaching methods.

When I read back through that planning book today, I'm reminded of how helpless I often felt. From Nov. 28, for example: "Things seem to be getting much rowdier in both my freshman classes. And I'm not sure exactly what to do." I wrote frequently about their "groans." But having the journal to look back on after that first year also allowed me to search out the causes of the rowdiness and groans. I saw that my failure to engage them was more pronounced when I tried to pound them with

information. My observations after a lecture on the roots of the Civil War were blunt, and a trifle pathetic: "People were very bored. I guess I should find another way to present it — even though it's interesting to me."

What's obvious to me now was not so obvious at the time: When students experience social dynamics from the inside — with role plays, stories, improvisations — they aren't so rowdy and they aren't so bored. There's a direct relationship between curriculum and "classroom management" that isn't always explicitly acknowledged in teaching methods courses that prospective teachers take.

The following year, I designed a simulation to get at the prewar sectional conflicts, and wrote a role play that showed students firsthand why Lincoln's election led to Southern secession. The role play also prompted students to think critically about the "Lincoln freed the slaves" myth. It was vital that I had some mechanisms to be self-reflective that first year.

Feeling Like a Jilted Lover

The principal made his one and only appearance in my classroom on March 15. Actually, he didn't come in, but knocked on the door and waited in the hallway. When I answered he handed me my official termination notice.

It was expected. I'd known I wouldn't be back because I was a temporary. But still there had been that slight hope. I guess by contract or law, March 15 was the final date to notify teachers if they wouldn't be returning. I had about three months to let my unemployment sink in.

When that June date finally came, I packed my little white Toyota with the files, books, posters, and other knick-knacks I'd accumulated throughout the year. I stood looking at the bare walls, my tiny oak desk, and Hulk the heater. And I left.

My tears didn't start until I was in the safety of my living room.

Tom McKenna had said that at the end of the year he always felt like a jilted lover. "Wait, there was more I wanted to say to you," he would think as the students filed out for the last time. And: "I always cared more about this than you did."

Sitting there on my couch, I knew exactly what he meant. When that first year ended, I was left with the should-have-dones, the sense of missed opportunities, and the finality of it all. The end-of-the-year cry has become one of my work-life rituals: "There was more we had to say to each other."

The school district had made it clear that I was not guaranteed a job the following September. Thanks to this official non-guarantee I was able to collect unemployment that summer — in spite of the state functionary who told me with a sneer: "Unemployment benefits are not vacation pay for teachers, ya know."

But job or no job, benefits or no benefits, I'd made it. I'd finished my hardest year.

I would like to be able to say that the kids pulled me through. I always found that image of "young, idealistic superteacher and students vs. hostile world" appealing. And some years the kids did pull me through. But that first year, the more significant survival strategy was my reliance on a network of colleagues who shared a vision of the kind of classroom life, and the kind of world, we wanted to build.

That first year, we pulled each other through. ✱

RESOURCE

Loewen, James. 2007. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Touchstone.

Creating Classrooms for Equity and Social Justice

This essay was published in its original form as the introduction to Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Volume I, *and was written by the editors of that book. It was revised by the editors of* The New Teacher Book.

As teachers, we begin from the premise that schools and classrooms should be laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in. Unfortunately, too many schools are training grounds for boredom, alienation, and pessimism. Too many schools fail to confront the racial, class, and gender inequities woven into our social fabric. Teachers are often simultaneously perpetrators and victims, with little control over planning time, class size, or broader school policies — and much less over the unemployment, hopelessness, and other "savage inequalities" that help shape our children's lives.

But *The New Teacher Book* is not about what we cannot do; it's about what we can do. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote that teachers should attempt to "live part of their dreams within their educational space." Classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it a reality.

No matter what the grade level or content area, we believe that several interlocking components comprise what we call a social justice classroom. Curriculum and classroom practice must be:

Grounded in the lives of our students. All good teaching begins with respect for children, their innate curiosity, passions, and their capacity to learn. Curriculum should be rooted in children's needs and experiences. Whether we're teaching science, mathematics, English, or social studies, ultimately the class has to be about our students' lives as well as about a particular subject. Students should probe the ways their lives connect to the broader society, and are often limited by that society.

Critical. The curriculum should equip students to "talk back" to the world. Students must learn to pose essential critical questions: Who makes decisions and who is left out? Who benefits and who suffers? Why is a given practice fair or unfair? What are its origins? What alternatives can we imagine? What is required to create change? Through critiques of advertising, cartoons, literature, legislative decisions, military interventions, job structures, newspapers, movies, agricultural practices, or school life, students should have opportunities to question social reality. Finally, student work must move outside the classroom walls, so that scholastic learning is linked to real-world problems.

Multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice. In the publication *Rethinking Columbus*, Rethinking Schools used the discovery myth to demonstrate how children's literature and textbooks tend to value the lives of Great White Men over all others. Traditional materials invite children into Columbus' thoughts and dreams; he gets to speak, claim land, and rename the homelands of Native Americans, who appear to have no rights. Implicit in many traditional accounts of history is the notion that children should disregard the lives of women, working people, and especially people of color — they're led to view history and current events from the standpoint of the dominant groups. By contrast, a social justice curriculum must strive to include the lives of all those in our society, especially the marginalized and dominated. As anti-racist educator Enid Lee points out in an interview in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, a rigorous multiculturalism should engage children in a critique of the roots of inequality in curriculum, school structure, and the larger society, always asking: How are we involved? What can we do?

Participatory, experiential. Traditional classrooms often leave little room for student involvement and initiative. In a "rethought" classroom, concepts need to be experienced firsthand, not just read about or heard about. Whether through projects, role plays, simulations, mock trials, or experiments, students need to be mentally, and often physically, active. Our classrooms also must provoke students to develop their democratic capacities: to question, to challenge, to make real decisions, to collectively solve problems.

Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary. The ways we organize classroom life should seek to make children feel significant and cared about — by the teacher and by each other. Unless students feel emotionally and physically safe, they won't share real thoughts and feelings. Discussions will be tinny and dishonest. We need to design activities where students learn to trust and care for each other. Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to building that society. Together students and teachers can create a "community of conscience," as educators Asa Hilliard and Gerald Pine call it.

Activist. We want students to come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers. If we ask children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories for cynicism. Although it's not a teacher's role to direct students to particular organizations, it is a teacher's role to suggest that ideas should be acted upon and to offer students opportunities to do just that. Children can also draw inspiration from historical and contemporary efforts of people who struggled for justice. A critical curriculum should be a rainbow of resistance, reflecting the diversity of people who acted to make a difference, many of whom did so at great sacrifice. Students should be allowed to learn about and feel connected to this legacy of defiance.

Academically rigorous. A social justice classroom equips children not only to change the world, but also to maneuver in the one that exists. Far from devaluing the vital academic skills young people need, a critical and activist curriculum speaks directly to the deeply rooted alienation that currently discourages millions of students from acquiring those skills. A social justice classroom offers more to students than do traditional classrooms and expects more from students. Critical teaching aims to inspire levels of academic performance far greater than those motivated or measured by grades and test scores. When children write for real audiences, read books and articles about issues that really matter, and discuss big ideas with compassion and intensity, "academics" starts to breathe. Yes, we must help students "pass the tests" (even as we help them analyze and

critique those tests and the harmful impact of test-driven education). But only by systematically reconstructing classroom life do we have any hope of cracking the cynicism that lies so close to the heart of massive school failure, and of raising academic expectations and performance for all our children.

Culturally and linguistically inclusive and empowering. Critical teaching requires that we admit we don't know it all. Each class presents new challenges to learn from our students and demands that we be good researchers, and good listeners. This is especially true when our racial or social class identity, or our nationality or linguistic heritage is different from those of our students. As African American educator Lisa Delpit writes in her review of the book *White Teacher* in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, "When teachers are teaching children who are different from themselves, they must call upon parents in a collaborative fashion if they are to learn who their students really are." Teachers need to challenge all forms of privilege, especially white supremacy, in ways that respect and empower the communities and students they serve. And we must embrace students' home languages, helping them preserve their linguistic heritages while also helping them navigate in English-dominant settings.

We're skeptical of the "inspirational speakers" who administrators bring to faculty meetings, who exhort us to become superteachers and classroom magicians. Critical teaching requires vision, support, and resources, not magic. We hope the stories, critiques, and lesson ideas here will offer useful examples that can be adapted in classrooms of all levels and disciplines and in diverse social milieus. Our goal is to provide a clear framework to guide classroom transformation. ✱

RESOURCES

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Howling at the Ocean

Surviving my first year teaching

BY JAYDRA JOHNSON

In 2016, less than a quarter into my first year of teaching, one of my students was suspended for heiling Hitler at the fall pep assembly. Meanwhile, across the country, Trump's campaign of hate was accelerating while administrators told student athletes they couldn't kneel during the national anthem, and like many other teachers, I regularly found swastikas in smeared pencil on my classroom desks.

This is how I began a careening and collision-filled year of exploring what it meant to be a white, anti-racist educator. In my 20s. In a predominantly white, wealthy school. In the time of Trump.

Through tremendous struggle, I discovered some of what worked and what didn't in the classroom. I discovered that challenging white supremacy guarantees resistance from white people. I also discovered that resistance can be softened. Perhaps most crucially, I discovered my own power to trip and fall and get up and get up and get up.

One incident I think about often occurred in October while I was teaching a unit about Black writers that highlighted resistance and included some study of the Jim Crow South. This unit included poems and literature by Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, slam poetry and hip-hop by modern artists, and primary source documents from the Jim Crow era. During the debrief of the Jim Crow-era jigsaw activity, a student's comment about "reverse racism" led to a heated class discussion. I gave students a definition for racism that included the notion that racism requires one group to have power over another. I told them, "Black

people can't be racist toward white folks because of our nation's legacy of denying full rights to people with darker skin." My class exploded with voices from both my white students and my students of color. We volleyed ideas until the bell rang.

I left class that day energized — it was the most engaged that class had been all year. I felt I had fulfilled my duty as a teacher for social justice and a white ally, encouraging students to question the stories they had been told, to reimagine their own worldview, to get uncomfortable. I had made them think.

But during tutorial period the following day, Sam came in with a couple friends to follow up about our class discussion. White, male, and mad, notebook tucked in the crook of his arm, Sam read to me the definition of racism from the dictionary that he had transcribed from the Internet, then offered, "So you're wrong. Black people can think their race is superior, so they can be racist."

I discovered my own power to trip and fall and get up and get up and get up.

I understood Sam's anger and confusion. These 10th graders hadn't had much opportunity to explore or debate a systems-level definition of racism, and, despite my best efforts, I had ultimately failed to provide that for them. Sam was a white male from a working-class family who felt oppressed and alienated in this school of mostly affluent students. His special education designation pushed him even further to the margins. He couldn't believe that he had any privilege at all. All he knew was that his single father struggled to make ends meet, that he lived in a dog-eat-dog world and was on the wrong end of the fight. I didn't move Sam's mind that day, but as he walked out of my classroom after about 20 minutes of back-and-forth, I did feel like we had a solid conversation, that I had asked some good questions about who has the power to define words, and kept an open mind and heart throughout our dialogue.

The next afternoon, my email pinged me with a message from the principal's secretary. My presence was requested at a meeting the following day about my lesson on racism. I reached down to recover my stomach from its plummet to the floor.

Six weeks into school and I was already in trouble? Would I be put on the naughty teacher list? I was already a first-year probationary teacher, was there such thing as probation probation? Would I be handed a textbook and told to fall in line? How could I defend my own teaching choices when I admittedly felt I had no clue what I was doing?

I immediately ran across the hall to my colleague's classroom. Sarabeth's approach to teaching was similar to mine, and I was full of questions about how to proceed. She advised me wisely and gently, cooling my hot panic and sharing her experience of meetings such as this. Of course, students pushed and wrestled with the content, she said. Our curriculum was challenging the paradigm of white superiority and including some new perspectives. Later that afternoon I reached out to a social studies colleague who was always in trouble for his radical curriculum. He explained that when you're teaching against the grain, this is normal. "Bring a union rep," he said.

I prepared the lesson plan, materials, and rationale that my administrator requested and showed up for the meeting with what poise I could muster, the recommended rep in tow.

"Oh! You didn't have to bring him," my principal remarked in surprise as my rep and I entered his office.

Strike two, I thought. Hoping this wasn't some grave offense on my part, I offered back, "Oh, well, this is my first meeting of this type and I thought it would be best to bring someone, just in case." The principal kindly accepted my plea of ignorance, and moved on to explain why I was there. He had received a message from Sam's dad stating that the definition of racism from my lesson was harmful to their family. He just wanted to get more information to speak in my defense before he called the parent back. I made my case, handed over the materials I collected, and left the meeting feeling grateful for my administrator's support, but still shaken and unsure.

Was I doing the right thing? How could I have messed this up so badly? What was I going to do? Should I pull back on the political in my classroom? It is an English class after all, not social studies. Maybe it would be better for everyone to just read *The Great Gatsby* and answer questions, saving the social justice for when I could do it "right." The hypercritical first-year inner monologue chattered on, but my principal's support and colleagues' empathy galvanized me to keep going.

Students' resistance to that unit and others continued. Late October's lesson featuring rap artists' video and lyrical protests against police brutality fell flat. The choice writing assignment at the end of the Black writers unit was "confusing" or "stupid" and only a handful ultimately made it to my inbox. Our January gender studies unit received a chorus of "Nothing like this happens anymore," and much student writing seemed produced only to placate me.

By the end of first semester, I felt completely inept at teaching for social justice, especially in a school where students report feeling both invisible and hyper-visible, underrepresented and misrepresented at once. I wanted to build a classroom that made my students feel respected, loved, and celebrated while also facilitating a critical analysis of our world. It was hard to see though the daily turmoil how all this was landing with them. My relationships with my students of color felt tepid at best, and I worried constantly that I was doing more harm than good. This felt like a double fail.

Weeks of that year are wiped from my memory due to my anxiety and exhaustion, but I do remember the foggy confusion: How could everything I bring go so wrong and lead to so little student engagement and work?

Perhaps I didn't open my students enough to learning; perhaps they felt I had just been trying to put them in their place or push my own agenda. Throughout the year, my students made themselves heard, one way or another. And it was not just my white students and not just in one class; it felt like every student was in on it. They pushed back by rolling their eyes, refusing to work, and generally spinning the classroom into chaos. I was told to write referrals, manage more, manage less, scaffold more, change topics, change seating charts, call home, ask for help. Nothing seemed to work.

Steadily, my classroom's climate worsened and my efforts to control it seemed to do the opposite. Each class meeting, restorative justice circle, hall pass restriction, phone call home, and visit to the dean was like a burst of wind on a bonfire, the flames of my classroom perhaps visible from space. Parent emails flowed in with questions about my lessons and my competence. Parents asked for meetings. Students complained to administrators. I was labeled as a social justice warrior, an incompetent teacher, and a failure when it comes to engaging students.

And the worst part was that I agreed.

But I kept going to work. I kept trying to make lesson plans that honored the voices of the unheard, asking students to empathize with people's stories, and to share their own. My copies of *Rhythm and Resistance* and *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* became tattered and tagged. I begged for help from all my teacher allies to help save my sinking ship. SOS.

In January, I actually wished to be hit by a car, injured just seriously enough to take a medical leave. In February, I sobbed on the floor during my prep periods. As the year dragged on, I drowned: in advice, in piles of papers, in emails, and in the certainty that I was the worst teacher who had ever lived. Students dropped my class. I flailed. For a while, I stopped teaching about anything that really mattered to me. For spring break, I drove alone through the firs and fog to the Oregon coast. I hoped to be cleansed by astringent air and whipping grass, to feel right-sized next to waves and horizon and miles of rain-pocked sands. On a cloudy afternoon, I walked to the beach where I howled at the ocean in anger, in grief.

By the time April rolled around, I was empty. I sputtered and stalled out and lurched forward again, fueled purely by the kindness of my small community of teacher friends and heroes. All year I had relied on them for help, and they had given it, joyfully. Reyanna gave me lesson plans, Sarabeth gave me hugs, Linda whole units, and Matt unending enthusiasm. Julia listened with her whole heart, and Emily journaled with me daily. I also leaned on a local group of like-minded teachers, the Critical Educators Collective, and found some sense of solace and efficacy through our activist work and mutual support. Every time I approached my community anew with some failed lesson or bruising critique, I worried I was draining their reserves. Not so. These teachers were gravediggers in reverse, shoveling the dirt off and hoisting me out of the pit. I stood up and breathed. Heave-ho.

I relaxed into my classroom's chaos, spending less time controlling and more time trying to connect with students, bringing their lives into the curriculum.

By May, I was getting better at knowing how to teach a critical course without steering the ship too forcefully toward my own dream destination. As if by magic, some of the foggy confusion also cleared, and I found myself making fewer "mistakes," perhaps because I started to take a gentler attitude toward myself. I relaxed into my classroom's chaos, spending less time controlling and more time trying to connect with students, bringing their lives into the curriculum. When I did this, authentic learning bubbled up in student poems, narratives, and essays.

One unit that really showed me a new path forward was a praise poetry mini-unit that spring. Our model texts included examples of poetry-as-activism. Hiwot Adilow's "Name" talks back to a society that consistently abuses her name, one loaded with cultural and familial significance, with lines like:

I am tired of people asking me to smooth my name out for
them.
They want me to bury it in the English
so they can understand
....
My name is insulted that you won't speak it.
My name is a jealous god.

Another model I used, Denice Frohman's "Accents," sings the praises of a mother's English, inspiring students with metaphorical language and a deep reverence for home. Frohman writes:

My mom holds her accent like a shotgun
with two good hands.
Her tongue, all brass knuckle
slipping in between her lips
her hips, all laughter and wind clap . . .
Her accent is a stubborn compass
always pointing her toward home.

These women know how to praise what society diminishes, despises, and ignores. I hoped my students would take on similar topics, perhaps using their own poems to address body image, educational inequities, or poverty. We discussed the content and style of models like these to get inspired, and I shared my own poem drafts. Then I stepped back.

Instead of dictating the topics I hoped for, I allowed students to praise what mattered to them, whether it was their favorite video game, their dog, or, my personal favorite, Cheez-Its. Alex wrote an ode to villains like "the Joker [who] went from nobody to nightmare in record time." I could have lamented their reluctance to talk back about "real issues," but instead I felt a joyous community swelling up as students performed their poems, gave shout-outs, and laughed their butts off. I also saw how without my nervous dictation, students still got at the issues I hoped they would, using their pencils to praise their homes, their names, their role models, and their various cultural identities. Jack sang the praises of Kendrick Lamar, a critical and political artist-as-activist, in an:

Ode to K Dot
Who is humble
Who teaches the world to love themselves
Who has the funk within him
Who is vibin'
Who is a thunderstorm of words
Who blesses us.

Students also wrote about their Puerto Rican heritage, transgender identities, and broken-yet-lovable alcoholic parents. Most importantly, though, my students found joy, a key ingredient of solid social justice pedagogy. As the school year wound down, I realized that despite the days and weeks of struggle and failure, I had done something real: I had survived the most difficult year of my life. And I was going to come back.

Things didn't improve that year because I quit teaching with a social justice lens. They improved when I realized that being a teacher for social justice didn't mean a forceful fist-in-the-face version of education, demanding that they share my analysis of the world, or a particular definition of racism. They improved when I began, slowly, to figure out what good social justice teaching really looks like: students' stories told and honored, new perspectives taken and validated, poems penned and performed. A little more grace for myself didn't hurt either.

It's impossible to tell how much of the chaos in my classroom was due to my limited skill set, how much to my exhaustion, how much to my social justice curriculum, and how much to a standard rite of passage for new teachers.

But through this long year, I did discover that when I shut students down, or portray one group only as perpetrators, some students will resist. What I needed to do in that moment months earlier was pivot into a place of exploring their notions about racism through compelling content, helping them develop their own ideas and connect their lives to our curriculum. I didn't realize that I had all year to help students uncover the deeply unequal state of our society through poetry, primary source documents, novels, and films, all the while highlighting the contributions of allies who could become role models for my students.

At the time, it felt urgent to squash any hint of oppressive language or ideology in my classroom and in my life, and it was. The 2016 election seemed to embolden those who hurl hate speech, craft xenophobic legislation, and otherwise act out violent and hateful ideologies. But what I didn't yet know was that in the classroom, a full-stop approach was insufficient. I needed a full-start approach instead, a nosedive into the voices of the unheard both past and present.

What I should have also known, of course, is that when I challenge

white supremacy, some students and colleagues and parents will push back, and I needed to get used to that. My colleagues of color engage resistance every day, in addition to maintaining resilience in the face of micro and macroaggressions, and it's my responsibility as a white educator to stand against the pushback I receive when I teach for social justice. That said, I also needed to let those at the margins tell their stories and let students question, relate, and conclude on their own. My moralizing wasn't going to do it. Helping them explore questions about racism and hear stories from survivors might.

I am increasingly staying focused on treating myself and my students with a little more love.

I fell far that first year, skidding on my knees into the gulf between my ideals and my abilities. I still have a vision and purpose, to teach toward love and justice, but my expectations and methods are on a constant learning curve.

Some days, I notice the small ways I have grown as a result of trial, error, and seeking help. Some days, I buckle under lessons falling flat, lackluster feedback, and that same old first-year feeling of uncertainty and doubt. But I am increasingly staying focused on treating myself and my students with a little more love. I try to rock them gently from side to side, following the waves, opening up their horizon so they can guide the ship themselves, away. ✱

On Behalf of Their Name

Using they/them pronouns because they need us to

BY MYKHIEL DEYCH

"When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." —Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich's quote illuminated the projection screen welcoming teachers as they entered the library for a 90-minute training on Gender & Sexuality Acceptance led by the Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) — a student organization that I am the staff advisor for. Our large, urban school holds about 100 staff members. Few looked forward to this training. The rest, sitting with their arms crossed, present only because admin mandated their attendance.

The QSA kids pushed for this training all year. The principal was on board in theory, but elusive about scheduling it. At last, late February here we were. In my final year of probationary teaching — I stood mere weeks away from receiving my permanent contract. Job security slinked at the brink of my reach. And I feared ruining it all.

I felt panic at the thought of losing my job for being a transgender and queer teacher leading the transgender and queer students. This progressive, liberal community and its wealthy, demanding parents held power and sway that made my nerves pulse irregularly. I woke some nights in a sweat from dreams of tantrum-throwing parents and their hate-inspired monologues directed at me: "What even are you!? Despicable! Unfit to be around kids — how dare you. Stay away from my kid!"

When you are a member of a marginalized group — especially one that's been villainized and degraded — safety is not an automatic privilege, even when you're white. Although my whiteness does provide shelter that trans and queer teachers of color are not afforded.

The students and I met to plan the staff training for several weeks before the Monday night meeting. Kids were both gung-ho and noncommittal. The students really wanted to yell at the staff, misgender, and ridicule them. These students hurt and wanted to lash out to ease some of their pain. Many of them felt strongly, but few of them wanted to stay after school for two hours and say anything into the sea of mostly heterosexual entirely cisgender teachers. They were great balls of fury and they wanted to pitch fire in every direction at once. Few had the courage necessary to face the staff in a meeting. These teachers were supposed to be theirs. Students say, "*My* teacher." This simple possessive pronoun makes the pain of not being seen by said teacher feel like a self-inflicted wound.

Some teachers ridiculed students in front of the class, scoffing at the idea or trouble of using they/them pronouns. One teacher flat-out said, "Well, what is the kid biologically — that's what they are to me." The incredulousness of this statement essentially translates to: "What's that kid's genitalia — students are equivalent to their genitalia." No teacher needs to be thinking about children's genitalia.

Students say, "*My* teacher." This simple possessive pronoun makes the pain of not being seen by said teacher feel like a self-inflicted wound.

During the weeks of planning for this training, I floundered in a borderland where I wanted/needed to be with the kids — really have their backs and support their lived experiences, listen to them, validate them. But also being an adult and a colleague, I worried that yelling at staff wouldn't change anything. And we really needed staffwide change. Kids skipped classes, kids hurt — each other and themselves, kids avoided their education because adults couldn't just get their names right. Everything begins with a name. We exist because we know each other by name. Students change their names because this gives them the power to exist. To refuse to call a student by their painstakingly chosen name — whether it matches the gradebook or not — denies a student's right to be wholly present. This erasure snatches away identity just barely emerging.

I kept asking the QSA the questions: "What outcome do you want? What is your purpose in this training? Do you want to educate the teachers? Share your stories so they're known?" Aliya said, "We want to be seen. We want them to try." Sal added, "How is it so hard to use my right pronoun?"

While politicians and professionals and teachers argue about the morality of gender variance, real children are disappearing in the classroom — figuratively and literally. Two trans students dropped out, another on the verge, QSA members barely hung on, and Grant lost a transgender student to suicide the summer that followed this training. And this in a very progressive district at a high school with gender neutral bathrooms.

I let them hash out their ideas for a couple meetings without much of my own input. I would nod and say yes. I'd empathize and I meant it all, but inside I was kind of freaking out. Will this implode? Is staff just going to scoff and roll their eyes? Will they even listen or just be on their phones the whole time? What if students don't show? What if my colleagues blame and hate me for all this? What if I get fired? Am I really going to come out to my whole staff in this training?

While politicians and professionals and teachers argue about the morality of gender variance, real children are disappearing in the classroom — figuratively and literally.

Yes, I am.

As soon as the staff settles into their table group seats we start off with a video of Olive, the vice president of the QSA. Olive nods at me with tightened lips, and I hit play: "My name is Olive Reed and I use they/them pronouns." The video follows Olive moving through their day and discussing their experiences with school being safer than home but that they are called a faggot nearly every day. Olive says, "Everything in our society is binary, it's not just gender. But when you don't fit into that binary, take a step back and you're like, but what about me? And it's just — it feels like — there's not a place for me in this society." Teachers are watching, rapt with attention. Olive believes that "no one should have to hide who they are because of fear. No one should have to be afraid of being able to be who they are." When I first saw this video, I knew I couldn't support the students in this training and not come out to my colleagues. I owed them the overcoming of my own fear, I owed them my vulnerability. Olive's video ends with a quiet call to action: "People are accepting enough that you can come out, that you can openly be who you are, but people are not accepting enough for everyone to be safe. Yeah, we've made a hell of a lot of progress, but no, we're not anywhere near resolving anything."

At the video's end I instruct staff to write down striking thoughts, questions, etc., before sharing out at their tables. Many of the responses reveal appreciation for Olive's bravery and vulnerability. To not overcook Olive's anxiety about being the center of attention we move on to our intros. Three (of several) students and I give our names and pronouns.

"My name is D'Angel I use he/him pronouns."

"My name is Olive, I use they/them pronouns."

"My name is Asuna, I use she/her pronouns."

My heart pounding against my vocal chords, I finish us off: "My name is Mykhiel Deych, I use they/them pronouns." Shuffle, shuffle. Swallow.

A thrumming of invisible energy ripples through the four of us and out over the crowd. Air shimmering like the waving heat over an open grill in the hot of summer. D'Angel says with a smile, "Now please go around at your tables and say your names and pronouns." Some eyes roll and lips snarl, yet most of the staff conform to the simple task. A QSA member is seated at nearly every group table to help with intros. I mean, it is simple, isn't it? Just state your name and pronoun. Not far from the common instruction to state your name and birthdate or name and subject you teach. The norm of introductions at the start of a meeting feels familiar. Why the resistance to pronouns then?

The prefix "pro" means on behalf of. In English, we have gendered pronouns, so to use a pronoun in place of a person's name imbues onto the person a slew of gendered meaning that acts to define and/or limit the identity of that person. Students struggle to come into their identities no matter what. Becoming a *self* challenges everyone. One's gender *should be* a given, right? The easy part, the part of identity you've had since you were a kid, right?

Along with a handout, the next video, *Sex & Gender Identity: An Intro*, briefly defines and explains key terms: **Sex** is the biological classification of being female or male or intersex and is assigned at birth. **Gender Identity** is one's deeply held sense about gender and is not the same as sex. **Gender Expression** is the external manifestations of gender expressed through a variety of ways, including but not limited to clothes,

hair, name, pronoun, voice, behavior, etc. **Transgender** is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and gender expression differs from their sex. **Cisgender** is a term for people whose sex at birth matches their gender identity and gender expression. **Genderqueer** is a term for people who do not identify as part of the female/male binary and may experience themselves as both or neither. **Genderfluid** is a term for a gender identity that varies over time. And lastly, the verb that brought us into the room: **Misgender**. To misgender someone is to identify a person with a gender that they aren't. For example, when you call me a lady or ma'am you have misgendered me.

Teachers start sharing out about any newfound understandings or questions on the video. One teacher shares a painful incident. Mr. Xon says, "I don't know about these things but what I know is that I let a student go to the bathroom and they take a very long time and when they return I ask them where they've been and the student says, 'I had to go to the gender neutral bathroom.' OK, but I don't know if that's really what's happened or not." He stays standing for a moment palms open, facing up. He is trying to understand.

The room hushes; I take a slow breath, and another. But before I say anything, Asuna steps forward to respond, "The only gender neutral bathroom is far from your classroom, and there is almost always a line for it. This is really hard for us. We need you to believe us." This raw bravery and unapologetic vulnerability inspires me and I shiver. Are teachers who most need to hear this absorbing anything? All the students' hard work — is this going to change anything?

"Messing up isn't the problem — we know it's hard to get used to. We actually just want you to try."

To provide a few tangible tools we put up a slide that has problematic phrasing replaced with simple solutions. Sally reads off "Instead of calling the class to attention with 'Ladies and Gentlemen,' try 'Scholars' or 'Mathematicians.' Instead of dividing by 'boys and girls,' use 'favorite foods' or 'wearing blue,' etc. Avoid blanket statements like 'all boys this' or 'all girls that.'" Discussion abounds.

A teacher shares out apologetically, "I don't use the they/them pronouns because I just know I'll mess it up." Griffin replies, "Messing up isn't the problem — we know it's hard to get used to. We actually just want you to try." They don't say it with a smile, but it comes out calm. An audible and affirmative "hmm" sounds out at a few of the tables. After sitting for a long time we shake things up.

Kaitlin instructs into the mic: "Please stand up and if you are a dog person stand over here and if you are a cat person please stand over there. She points to the far ends of the room and a gap in the middle widens as teachers move to where they belong. A few students and teachers vacillate between the two sides and end up in the middle with furrowed brows and heads tipped to one side. One teacher raises her hand and says, "Well, I don't like either." Another says, "I used to like dogs but now I'm more about cats. Where should I go?" And another asks with a deep shrug, "But I like both. Where do I belong?"

Thank you, allies, I need your help — students need you.

Where do I belong? The question hangs in the air as several teachers release audible gasps as they catch on to the metaphor they've just played out. "Wait, I get it, students maybe feel like this about their gender. Or sexuality too, right?" Ms. Smith says and taps a finger to her lips. Some eyebrows furrow. Some grins appear. Nods slowly bob through the clumps of solidly "dog people" and solidly "cat people." If only gender was a simple choice.

Teachers chat it out as they return to their seats to try role plays where they practice four important interactions: asking for someone's pronouns, using they/them pronouns in a conversation, correcting someone misgendering someone else, and correcting themselves misgendering someone. I circulate around the tables. At least one student sits amongst each of the table groups. The role plays open a flurry of activity at each table. The air full of electricity, my breathing feels steady until suddenly, one table gets superheated. I rush over to intervene and arrive in time to hear Kaitlin nearly shout, "It is grammatically correct, we already use they/them pronouns when referring to one person when we don't know a person's gender." I lock eyes with Kaitlin and she grins, "I got this M. Deych. Thanks, though." She is proud of herself. Proud to debate a teacher we already knew going into this training would be a wall to take down brick by brick.

When we come back together as a whole group, another teacher asks, "Are we really expected to keep track of when it is and isn't OK to use a student's preferred name or pronoun?" After so much of the training going well, the hostility in this question stuns me speechless. *My head races. You know how we have all that training about getting to know*

students, building relationships!? Well, this is that! To my appreciative surprise, another teacher responds, "Well, we're not talking about a huge percentage of your class here. This comes down to a few students on your whole roster probably." Thank you, allies, I need your help — students need you.

The training finishes with a panel that responds to teachers' anonymous questions and answers written on scraps of paper that were at each table throughout the whole training. Three students, a parent of a transgender student, and I sit on the panel. Unfortunately, the final question deflates a lot of the gains we'd made: "I just can't use they/them pronouns, it's wrong, and I just can't. What do I do?" I probably don't hide the irritation when I say, "No one is expecting the grammar to change. It isn't wrong. You use it grammatically, *not* 'they *is* home sick' but 'they *are* home sick.' And if it helps to know, the reason many of us — the reason I — use they/them pronouns is because it reflects the multiplicity that I experience in my gender. So it is actually very right." Griffin relays their story of battling depression and ends with their head held high, "We actually just need you to try."

It's ongoing, the work of showing up for students how they need us to show up.

The students left feeling hurt by this last statement/question. It haunted them. And though issues persist with certain teachers, overall progress accumulates. Multiple teachers thanked me for supporting the students in that training. One said she felt defensive at first but then it really was good to hear about the students' experiences. Another came to me to hash out and discuss the issue with "ladies and gentlemen." It's ongoing, this work of showing up for students how they need us to show up. With 41 percent of transgender people attempting suicide (compared to 1.6 percent of the general population), we have to because they actually *need* us to. ✱