

I am proud to be a teacher. I have taught middle school and high school students for 23 years. I have tutored all ages from early elementary through college. I have degrees in English, education, theatre, and reading. When it comes to teaching, I believe, as my grandfather always said, "It's simple. You do what it right." Yet, according to our new frame of reference for evaluation and assessment, I am not doing it right. I am only developing, and in areas, ineffective. My students aren't doing it right either.

It is time to rethink the way we make evaluation decisions about students and teachers. We need appropriate standardized testing, and we need better equality in curriculum expectations. But we do not need either at the expense of learning.

A brief statement and a poem cannot adequately capture my teaching world, nor can it do justice to the world of those I have been entrusted to teach. However, given the opportunity to have a voice, I feel it is my duty to provide a glimpse into both worlds.

So as Charles Dickens's once penned: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

It is late. A red message notice appears on my computer screen. I painstakingly guide an AP senior through the complexity of desire as shown in Sir Philip Sidney's poem "Blind Man's Mark" so the student can independently arrive at its theme and write an essay about it.

It is early summer. I open an email from an alumni requesting I "green pen" the application essay for graduate school. I slash and burn it with the ferocity and compassion expected. Why else would I have been asked to "just look it over"? Months later I receive the happy news of the arrival of the acceptance letter.

It is a few days into winter break. It is snowing large, awe-inspiring flakes. Wrapped in a blanket and my cup of tea, I tackle a stack of tests waiting for my green pen. I read the junior high student's open-ended extended response. With insight, evidence, fluency, and meaning, the student shares a life-changing moment. I am again in awe. I am honored to be trusted with this and relieved, at least temporarily, that, as the student penned, the attempt was not worth it because life is too precious and too many people care. I celebrate the failure.

Friday - an hour past official closing time. A student shuffles into my classroom requesting my attention. After thinking about the choice made in cheating on homework a few days earlier, the student requests my forgiveness. Not because anyone asked but because, as the student painstakingly explains, the decision hurt other people and niceness matters. I agree. I accept the sincere apology and reassure the student that things have been made right with me. The student leaves and I quietly choke back tears.

These are typical moments - moments in my life trying to do what is right as a developing teacher. These moments having been happening since I first entered a classroom, first made contact with a room of teenagers. I work hard. I play hard. I laugh with abandon. I cry with gut-wrenching sobs. I struggle to find the right words, hoping it is something, even if not quite enough. I get so excited with a discovery I forget there is a bell. I try every day to live my grandfather's words to do what's right. Sometimes the students too are able to forget the bell, laugh, cry, struggle, celebrate, and do what's right.

But those who do not live in my world, those who are not privileged to share the significant moments in the daily life of teenagers, require that I now do things in a new way. I embrace the improvements, skim over the nondescript, and challenge the inane.

My world requires questions of all types on all levels all the time. But all those questions have meaning, have purpose, have a higher goal. The questions the new way is demanding of both students and teachers lack - they lack depth, lack foresight, lack understanding, lack compassion, lack empathy. They are misguided in that they believe they have meaning, purpose, and a higher goal.

When we arrive at a place where those of us who daily strive to do what is right, when we developing teachers can no longer challenge the new ways but must blindly accept and implement them to remain a teacher, we will have achieved irrevocable damage, both to those who need teachers and those who need students.

I implore you to reconsider the new way of student assessment and teacher evaluation. Teachers need students; students need teachers. We are not and cannot become data-driven machines with quantitative results. We must maintain our ability to laugh, to play, to work, to challenge. Until which time we can redirect our focus in evaluation and assessment, I will work doggedly to remain, at best, a developing teacher. I will do what is right as best I can.

In closing, I would like to share words penned for me 18 years ago, words for a then developing teacher who had a life goal of doing what was right:

Socrates' Ghost

As a teacher,
see each child's mind
as a bottle that has traveled
across the sea.

The journey of these ships are
difficult and varied. They have floated
through birth to a level of instinctive
sentience and biological growth
to end up
for a time
on the island of
your life. They wash
upon the beach
awaiting your discovery
and care.

The vessels are full.
You can put nothing in them.

Rather, help to remove
the corks and stoppers so that
all the knowledge and messages
resident in them
from before breath
can be released and
discovered and shared.

As one of Socrates' ghosts,
this is your purpose.

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