Respecting Students, Acquiring Humility, and Ignoring the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT: There is much talk and theorizing these days about narrative techniques and prescriptive approaches to love in the classroom and education at large as though these were new and novel methodologies. This paper as a voice(s) inside a secondary school seeks to address this issue indirectly through the experience of a teacher who has been given a classroom full of problematic grade 11 students. These students, for all practical purposes, are no longer cared for by their respective school system and they, in turn, have also given up on that system as well. They are all segregated on the basis of their poor reading skills and lack of self- discipline into a classroom that no one wants to teach. The highly unwanted job is given to a neophyte teacher, the author of this paper too many years ago, who ultimately has little choice in the matter. This teacher is highly unsuccessful in the beginning because he develops an intense dislike for these students in order to cope with their outward and self-destructive tendencies. In turn, in order to cope with his inadequacy and anxiety in teaching these students successfully, he pictures himself being ridded of them even in his dreams. Only with his emergent respect, humility, a disregard for the required curriculum and a love for his students that is ultimately reciprocated by them do they all learn to work together in a harmonious manner. Through ancient history, the opera, provocative literature and a special fieldtrip the teacher discovers that he has more to learn from his students than they could ever learn from him.

RESUME: Aujourd'hui, beaucoup de débats et de théories sont ouverts sur les techniques de narration et les démarches didactiques dans la classe et dans l'enseignement au sens large du terme, pour qu'elles soient appréciées comme des méthodologies nouvelles et novatrices. Cet article se fait le porte-parole d'une école secondaire et cherche à aborder ce sujet d'une façon détournée en se servant de l'expérience d'un enseignant qui a dû faire face à une classe de 11ème dans laquelle les élèves présentaient moult difficultés. A toutes fins pratiques, les établissements scolaires

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respectifs de ces élèves ne voulaient plus les prendre en charge et eux-mêmes, à leur tour, avaient renoncé aussi à leur établissement respectif. A cause de leur quasi illettrisme et de leur indiscipline en classe, personne ne voulait s'en occuper et de ce fait, ils étaient tous isolés. Il y a de nombreuses années et parce qu'en dernier recours, il n'avait pas eu vraiment le choix, un enseignant néophyte se retrouve donc avec le poste le plus indésirable, l'auteur de cet article aussi. Au début, il ne réussit pas du tout car il commence sérieusement à prendre en grippe ces élèves faisant face à leurs tendances auto-destructives et extraverties. Comme palliatif et afin de contrer son incapacité et son anxiété parce qu'il ne réussit pas à enseigner à ces élèves, il parvient dans ses rêves à se débarrasser de ces difficultés. Enfin, grâce à un regain d'humilité et de respect, ne tenant pas compte du programme scolaire et grâce à l'amour pour ces élèves qui, à la fin devient réciproque, ils apprennent à travailler ensemble en harmonie. Au travers de l'histoire ancienne, de l'opéra, de la littérature provocante et d'une sortie particulière de classe, l'enseignant découvre qu'il a plus à apprendre de ses élèves, qu'eux de lui.

Introduction

A few years ago my significant other and I saw an opera, Loencavallo's celebrated *Pagliace,* at Sydney's renowned opera house which brought back a flood of memories, tears, and laughter that had to find their way ultimately to this paper. As narratives, poetry, and aphorisms are often at least as useful in learning as other forms of writing, I thought, that I might take advantage of the narrative and make a small contribution to educational theory and practice by this useful back-door. Many secondary and elementary teachers complain that university teachers are too grounded in theory at the expense of practice. This paper appears to be a practical one but the bibliography will answer this narrative vis-à-vis the theoretical foundations that inform it. All good practice is grounded in theory and vice-versa. One can never say this enough!

Back in the mid-1970s when I was in my very beginning years as a secondary school teacher working in a small town in northern Ontario, I was assigned the difficult task of teaching a small group (12 students) of unwanted grade 11 "Special" students. You may have thought that such a class ought to be delegated to the most experienced teacher in the school rather than to a neophyte – but that was not the case. The idea was to give the experienced teachers the good classes and the beginning teachers the difficult ones. Ironically speaking, one had to pretend that

the experienced teachers could have taught these as well but simply chose not to do so as new teachers would then be given this splendid opportunity. But do allow me to back up a little here as I am getting slightly ahead of myself. I will first explain what a *difficult* class or student meant in those days.

If you were a student, parent or teacher living in the 1970s you will undoubtedly recall the term *Special* education, a term, mostly extinct now in Canadian education, though commonly retained in the United States. I am not really interested in the theoretical, vestigial implications of this designation but more in the actual understanding of its meaning in practical terms: to put it bluntly these Special students were unofficially and clandestinely labeled as the *losers* in our high schools; but, many educators hid themselves behind the term Special students to avoid political incorrectness. In other words, these were the kids who were deemed to be unsuccessful learners, really the perceived failures in our school system. But even more to the point, they were deemed mostly the difficult kids, the so-called disciplinary problem kids who had a good deal more aptitude and talent than was willingly admitted to by shortsighted teachers and other school administrators. They were kids who more often than not could not sit still as they were constantly fidgeting and showing off their prodigious ability to push teachers to their extreme limits – especially the inexperienced ones and that most unfortunate and unsung hero – the "supply" teacher. Regardless of their great potential and talent we mostly saw to it that they ultimately became unsuccessful in and out of the school system.

How did these classes work? It was very simple really. To recap, the worst kids in the schools, those problematic kids who no one really wanted to teach, were grouped together into one class under the legal and thus acceptable designation of a Special class. Next you had to designate the "sucker" who would teach them. And that is where I get into this story.

The head of our English Special Education and Basics department invited me to his office just before the summer holidays. After sitting down, he explained that I was especially chosen to teach such a class as I was well known to be a sensitive and caring person. He made me feel confident and quite optimistic about the prospect. But all of this naive confidence was shattered the first day of teaching this class.

The First Day

In September I went to my grade 11 English Special Education class, with a nauseous sickness punctuated by negative throbs of fear and anxiety. In panic I quickly closed my door and started to pray very seriously despite my lack of religiosity. In the brief space of quantum time I lost most of my confidence and ease that I had laboriously stored up from my first year of teaching. I was terrified.

It took about half the period (35 minutes) to calm them down – and this went on for weeks. I was severely gripped by unalleviated stress from my first day onwards. That day and every day I was terrified of the vice-principal or principal walking by and witnessing the mayhem in my class and my inability to deal with chaos! In my mind's eye I readily saw my job disappear and the inevitable foreclosure on our recently acquired home and mortgage.

I became delirious after that first class and in my dreams began to devise the most unbelievable modes of revenge on these unruly and seemingly incorrigible students. To my shame, I even looked the other way when I found out they were skipping class and rarely worried about it. I actually prayed they would be absent and jumped with joy on the snow days. (Although classes were cancelled we had to risk life and limb to be there ourselves). But more to the point, I realized just as readily that the fundamental answer to the question – What to teach them? – was beyond my capability. The curriculum was hardly helpful in this regard. To have followed it religiously one would have had to hang oneself; that is, it was suicidal for this class. I know – I really made a gargantuan effort in this regard. Those calm but utterly nonsensical "aims and objectives" proved to be useless. Those who have taught long enough know the futility and tyranny of such aimless designations in curriculum writing and theory ENRfu (Barrow, 1984; Kazepides, 1989).

Getting Students to Read

All teachers know that getting senior students to read who cannot read well is not an easy task. I started off by reading to them. I read the most humorously indecent stories taken from Boccaccio's, *Decameron* (1348-1353), ENRfu (Boccaccio, Waldman, & Usher, 1993), Chaucer, and Shakespeare (Chaucer's Miller's Tale from *The Canterbury Tales* ENRfu – Chaucer, Hieatt, & Hieatt, 1961), and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet ENRfu (Lamb et al., 1975). I had a strategy of stopping the story short before it really became interesting. I did this with helpful films as well such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) by Zeffirelli ENRfu (Hussey et al.,

1988). The students were so good with their knowledge of that play that they were able to tell when Zeffirelli had "ripped them off!" Basically, all very good stuff, this Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Shakespeare – guaranteed to sustain anyone's interests.

To find out how the stories ended I would have them read the rest of it out loud (it could take awhile – but no one was forced to do this – volunteers only). Gradually most of the students increased their confidence with the improvement of their reading skills and began to settle down and concentrate on their tasks at hand. They were also thrilled to find out that these "cool" stories actually took place anywhere from up to 3000 years ago. As you would expect they did not believe this at first and had to verify it for themselves.

In a few weeks this clandestine and dirty activity in my classroom reached the ears of our principal. I was hauled down to his parochial office to answer for my sins. In particular he wanted to know if I had lost my mind reading that kind of "pornography"(!) to my students. He made it very clear that I could be fired if I persisted with such unhealthy practices. What if a parent gets hold of this – and on and on the tirade flowed with ever increasing virulence. In a very chicken-hearted way I indicated that I would change my ways and then found myself promptly falling back into my usual routine. Mind you, the students did begin to read and improve ever so gradually – and I never did find out how the principal found out – and why he left me alone.

But I was not really getting anywhere significantly speaking. Yes, the students were reading and improving. And yes, the students were a little less rowdy but what really mattered was that the real desire for learning was missing. As time went on it became evident that the fault of this malaise lay in my court and not in theirs. I knew that students would only give their best if I could find the means to engage their interest, heart and soul to the utmost of their ability. This revelation might have been as cataclysmic in my life as St. Paul's was on his way to Damascus 2000 years ago. My secular conversion happened this way: It was my turn again to be on bus duty all week after school. I had to wait in the parking lot until all the buses left. But on this particular Wednesday the bus was late and I had to wait for one of my special student's bus. My student looked pale and listless. Not the way he usually appeared in his disruptive mode in class. (Little did he know what mishaps he had suffered already in my nightly fantasies and dreams). I asked him how often his bus was late? He answered that it was late most of the time. I then asked him how long it took to get to his

farm. I was appalled that his ride home took an average of 50 minutes. I also found out that he had to get up at 5:00 a.m. in the morning to do his chores and get ready for school. Coming home from school was just as busy for him. But the crushing news was that his dad was in jail and he had to do his father's share of the work on the farm. As well he found himself in frequent quarrels with his mother and younger siblings about what he perceived to be his unjust proportion of the work.

His case, his life, overwhelmed me with feelings of regret and remorse. I was ashamed of myself for having ignored him and his plight. He was no longer just another student in my class. How much easier was my life in comparison to his. I had it easy when I was his age and his life was so very hard already. The short of it is that I had not done near enough to warrant the students' respect and attentiveness in class. My student's evident unhappiness and despair and my seeming callousness became utterly intolerable to me while waiting for the late bus on that most fateful day.

For the first time *as a teacher* I felt empathy and compassion for these kids in a way I never had or could before. Up until now I was mostly concerned with my selfish needs inextricably involved in acquiring a permanent teaching contract – my ticket to economic security and well-being. My greatest anxiety was to not get fired for lack of so-called management skills and my reliance on unorthodox, not to mention, illegal teaching methods and materials, outside the scope of the required curriculum. I realized that I had been teaching my negative anxieties and was very adept at evading an authentic caring, feeling ENRfu (Barrow, 1990; Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996) for my students – much as some uncaring waiters do at restaurants who go through the motions but have no real interest in their customers or what they are eating. Now I wanted to communicate authentically with my students and demonstrate my new-found respect and *feeling* for their needs and wants. I felt that I was a changed person and teacher in those few but most revealing moments in my teaching life. I could hardly wait for the next teaching day and vowed that tomorrow I would turn a new leaf and never worry about getting fired from the profession or losing that stupid house; that is, I was resolved to continue to teach according to my convictions and amend the curriculum as much as was necessitated by the individuation of any given teaching circumstance.

The next day in class, and a month or so into the semester, I was indeed a changed teacher; my conversion was complete. I was a human being once again and a teacher to boot. When the students were all

assembled I looked at all of their faces – for "the face is the soul of the body" ENRfu (Wittgenstein, Wright, & Nyman, 1984, p. 23e) and encouraged them to spend a few minutes every day getting to know each other better and helping each other to overcome unhappy feelings and moods by sharing their feelings with one another. They were startled but resoundingly in favour of such discussions and in a manner that neither excluded nor alienated me; that is, they invited me to do the same as well. And I did, I went first, in order to get things going.

Naturally enough, when I was finished with my confession about my shortcomings as a teacher in general and as their teacher in particular, they were hesitant at first to actually speak out about their feelings; but then, one student, the same one from yesterday who had so changed my teaching life, put up his hand and told the class what he had told me yesterday. The students were empathetic to his problems and all were able to make him feel better. Another student explained that he had had a bad argument with his mother that day. She was nagging him continually about doing his homework. He said that by the time he did all of his chores he could no longer find the time or energy to do his homework on a regular basis. His father was ill with cancer and he too had to do all of his dad's work and his own. Another girl spoke of her distress over an imminent divorce in her family – her Dad was caught cheating by her mother. Another girl gingerly put up her hand and explained that she had a very serious problem that she wanted to discuss with me only. Hers turned out to be a dead serious situation of incest. I was shocked as a young teacher to have encountered this problem on more than one occasion throughout my teaching career. Such tragedies in northern Ontario as elsewhere are not that rare. You may think that some of the students were making this up but that was never the case as all as the situations discussed were verified by the stream of collaborative events that followed them.

We did this every day for a few minutes and the students began to open up to me in a manner that I had not anticipated. It was a whole new class and I was confirmed as a new teacher. Finally we had bonded as though we were harmonious characters right out of *Brothers Karamazov* ENRfu (Dostoyevsky & Garnett, 1996). Teaching was now a pleasurably ethical challenge ENRfu (Kierkegaard, Hong, & Hong, 1987, pp. 7, 13-14, 145, 367) and I looked forward to waking up to each new day of it. I wanted to go to work and learn from my Special students.

In our daily readings I continued to hide the fact that much of the literature they read was old. I continued to read to them and attempted to develop a sense of history in their thinking. I brought in ancient Egyptian documents. One of these was about a father who complained about unruly youths in his time. It contained the usual litany of complaints: that is, their loudness, their disrespect for authority, their utter disregard for spending their money unwisely, their lack of discipline, and so forth ENRfu (Simpson William, Faulkner, & Wente Edward, 1973). When I did reveal the age of my sources, once again, as in the Boccaccio story, the students simply could not believe it: "*Come on sir, you're shitting us aren't you?*" – "*No I'm not and watch your language please!*" – "*But that couldn't have happened over 3000 years ago!*"

They loved it and gradually overcame their prejudices about the past and learning and would make the necessary effort to read the rest of my fragments on their own. And this was good. For those of you who have been patient with me will now know how I taught students to read Boccaccio and by extension Chaucer, Shakespeare, ancient history, and all other such sordid things. But what about the opera? And why the opera in an English class? Why not? It's just another drama with music. Two for the price of one basically!

The Opera – A Preamble of its Narrative Potential

We should teach the opera in all our classes whether it be mathematics, science, history, or English. And yes we should do it in all our music classes as well. But I believe that there is a real trick to it and if you don't do it this way the students may hang you before you actually get started. And the sad truth is that you would probably deserve such a punitive punishment.

The cardinal rule is that you should never use the word *opera* and you must not tell students that you are about to teach them anything to do with music whatsoever – you don't even tell them the name of the opera until much later! You may get away with this in Europe but not in North America! You have to be very devious in this regard! (We can thank the very well-off women in Boston society of the 19th century that started the unfortunate North American schism between popular music and so-called "classical" or "long-hair" music and other such pejorative terms ENRfu – Swan, 1977). These well-meaning women ENRfu (Locke & Barr, 1997) saw to it that the "riff-raff" were kept out of concert halls by imposing exaggeratedly expensive seats on the public ENRfu (Mussulman, 1971). Often the artists, out of sheer indignation at such

unfair practices, played their recitals for free the next day in some factory or warehouses of the city.

At any rate, it can be advantageous to start out with just the libretto that is, the story of the opera in question:

Teacher: *Today I am going to tell you a new story. I think you may find it very interesting. It takes place in Italy (the inevitable interruption, of course: 'when sir'?*) "*Now, I mean, in our time.*" (One must always say "now" or many of them will lose interest immediately and daydream).

I continue:

As I was saying this story takes place in Italy. It is a story about adultery and passion. (They love that!) *A young woman, an actor by profession, is married to a guy twenty years older than her, who is also an actor. She's twenty.* (They're split on this: some say that is ok and others are not as keen on the age difference. They discuss it for a few minutes). Why not? What's the hurry? This is how the students make the story too in the immediacy of their experience ENRfu (Kierkegaard, Hong, & Hong, 1992).

They were very much in love before and did it a lot; but then...

Students: *The guy couldn't get it up any more, ha-ha,* shouted an unruly dissident!

Shut up idiot, said the romantic girl in the classroom, *he was only forty! A guy can still get it up if he's forty!*

That's true, murmured a few other good natured souls in the classroom.

Teacher: *As I was saying class they were very passionate about their love for each other for about five years.*

Student: *Boy, they get married early in Italy*! murmured another thoughtful male.

Teacher: *Well maybe she was twenty-three or something – I don't remember the exact age! The important point is that she met another guy in another*

town after one of their performances and he was just three years older than herself – and – you guessed it – very hot (don't say "handsome" – you have to use the correct word; that is why you should even subject yourself to something like *Charmed* on the TV for the latest in expressive communication. If you don't know what I am talking about you may already be in trouble).

Her husband was a little bit fat – "corpulent" is the better word – write it down in your "new vocabulary" section of your notebook – I'll spell it on the board. You can write down what it means, later, after the story – listen to the story.

You'll remember that the husband and wife were actors and her husband actually owned an acting company. They traveled from one town to another and put on these various plays – (no interruptions now – the phrase "*she met another guy*" has not missed the mark. They are transfixed now and ready to get on with the rest of the story).

Oh yes this guy was very hot and talked her into doing it. (Obscene gestures and sounds from the class are freely offered). *After that he followed her around to all the different places she went to. He kept figuring out different ways to see her when her husband was not around. Finally he wanted to run away with her to a new place and start a whole new life with her. But there were complications. The wife still loved her husband and did not want to hurt him. He had done a lot for her in the past and she was not ungrateful. But, she no longer wanted him that way. And he still did.*

Student: *He wants it! He wants it!* interjected a few of the more brazen boys in the class. The girls did my work for me and told them to shut up.

Teacher: *To make matters worse,* I continued, *her husband's best friend was also in love with her,*

or at least in lust, but he had kept this a secret from her.

Students: *I'll bet!* – (from the inevitable chorus in the class).

Teacher: *He decided to finally confess his feelings to her when her husband was not around either. He caught her alone one day and told her that he loved her. She was very angry with him and told him off. She told him that he had no business treating her in that way and that he had better forget about his love very quickly before she went and told her husband on him. He didn't like that, of course and told her that he had to kiss her now. She slapped him and called him a snake in the grass. He was not a very nice guy. He told her that he knew about her boyfriend and would tell her husband about it if she did not cooperate with him. She told him to fuddle-duddle* (The students knew what this meant as the other phrase was strictly prohibited in our classroom) *and to keep clear of her. He told her he would teach her a thing or two!*

The bell rang and it was time to go. The next day after our group therapy time someone put up their hand and asked me about the story: "*Do you want to hear some more*?" I asked feigning innocence and nonchalance. "*Oh yes!*" was their unanimous reply. "*Could someone just summarize it thus far?*" Someone did for the benefit of a student who was away yesterday.

Teacher: *As I was saying,* (I continued) *her husband's best friend had told her he would teach her a thing or two. And sure enough he went straight to the husband and told on her. Yes, he told him the whole business. He even told him when and where they could catch his wife with the other guy that very same evening. The husband was furious but very anxious to catch his wife's lover. And so the evening came very slowly for the husband. When it did arrive the unsuspecting wife, went out to meet her lover while the*

husband and his so-called friend got ready to intercept their date in the woods.

I then stopped the story because we had to do grammar that day. They groaned, of course, but acquiesced grudgingly. I told them I would continue with the story tomorrow if they were interested.

The following day, someone reminded me that I had promised to tell them the rest of the story. The main point here is that I did not tell them I was telling them the story about Leoncavallo's celebrated opera *I Pagliacci* ENRfu (Leoncavallo, 1892). It took another two days to finish the tragic story that ended with the suicide murder of the husband, wife, and her lover during one of their performances, which coincidentally featured a play within a play, which mirrored their own situation. These things do take time with one's embellishments of the story and the inevitable comments of the students as one goes along. When the story was finally over, I told them in a very nonchalant way, just before the bell rang that someone had actually written a musical – never say opera – for this tragic story. Just that little peep and nothing more.

No one took up my hint for two days but I was not to be disappointed. On the third day a student who happened to love music – don't we all? – put up his hand and said: "*Sir, you said that someone had written music for that Italian story about the girl getting killed by her husband and the murder-suicide.*" "*Oh yes?*" I said in my most neutral voice but really screaming "oh yeh" inside of me. "*Well sir do you think you could bring in the music for that neat story?*" "*How does the rest of the class feel about that idea?*" I said with my fingers crossed like mad behind by back.

Oh yes they really wanted to hear the musical but it took them a few days before a student asked me to actually bring in the music. I told them I would. They were very pleased. Yes, I was about to play an opera for them and maybe, just maybe get away with it! But they cannot know that! You may find this highly manipulative. If you find all of this too manipulative for your taste, may I remind you that teaching is a very highly manipulative art of communication and suspense.

Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci" – The Actual Music

Now this part is nerve wracking to say the least. To actually play the opera and get away with it? I was scared that it just wouldn't work. How to do this? I decided to go very slowly with it! I concentrated on the most famous aria, that is, song, for them: *I Pagliacci's* famous aria, "Vesti la

giubba," where the protagonist (sung by the great Jussi Björling) pours out his soul in some of the most heart rending sounds ever composed by humankind. I explained that the musical was written in Italian. I had the words of the aria projected on an overhead projector. We read the words with the proper Italian pronunciation. I then put out the English translation side by side with the Italian, (the complete libretto was inside the record jacket – as yet they didn't get to see the record jacket for obvious reasons – I still took no chances with the word opera). I had taped the records so that I could teach the music better and locate examples readily and conveniently. I had found Jussi Björling's rendition of it in a complete recording of the opera with a wonderful soprano and conductor and cast of singers, including Victoria de los Angeles and Renato Cellini respectively ENRfu (Leoncavallo et al., 1970).

Before I played it I told them a little about the singer's life ENRfu (Jackson, 1997). I told them that he had a great voice and that often just before a performance he could not be found. The manager would send out the scouts to all of Jussi Björling's most well-liked bars in New York city. They usually found him drinking and singing for other patrons. Although he may very well have been the greatest tenor ever, or second greatest after Caruso, he had a very serious drinking problem and died prematurely because of it. I then reminded the students of the setting of the song – the husband is alone and utterly in despair; he was not able to catch his wife's lover who got away just in time; he knows his marriage is over and there is nothing else for him to live for and he is about to pour out all his suffering and remorse into this great song. They listened and a few even had tears in their eyes. "*Poor guy*" they said. They were very sorry for him and Björling. It was amazing that some of them thought they had recognized the aria. But that should not be all that surprising! That was all for that day! We moved on to some of the more mundane subjects of an English class.

After a few days the miracle happened. The same student who had formerly raised the issue of the music now put up his hand and asked if there could be an opportunity to hear the rest of the music for that Italian story? He also asked what the musical was called. I told them that it was called "The Clown," *I Pagliacci* in Italian. The other students chimed in their acquiescence again as last time. They were tired of grammar and doing the other stuff.

Finally they got to hear the rest of the opera and see the overheads of the whole text (libretto) of the opera in both English and Italian. In no time at all they became experts of the Italian in the libretto and the

music as well. I began now to use the word opera. They didn't believe me of course! That couldn't be an opera they argued. That was a musical. I merely told them that all musicals are operas or operettas and that the Italian word opera just meant musical drama; whereas the Italian word for musical comedy was simply *operreta*. And that was that! ENRfu (Senyshyn & Vézina, 2002). Gradually they learned just about all that was historically available about that opera. They even knew about *realismo*, and the extremely hard work it takes to put on an opera. I no longer had to hide the term opera from them. The prejudice was all gone.

The Field Trip

It was quite a shock for me to find out that in my small class most of the students had never been to Toronto. An opportunity to take them there arose when I found out that the Canadian Opera Company was putting on the very same opera we were studying in class. They all agreed that they absolutely had to go to Toronto to see it even though special students were not allowed on field trips because they were considered to be too undisciplined for such an undertaking!

The next day found me in the principal's office outlining my plan of our intended field-trip. He thought I was crazy. First and foremost, he pointed out that "basic" or "special" students' were not allowed on field trips. They couldn't handle that sort of thing. It would have been more accurate to say that he feared that teachers would lose disciplinary control over the students during a field trip. I argued for an hour and finally persuaded him to agree. I knew he loved music and invited him to come along with us. He was very pleased and accepted the invitation. For all his bureaucratic ways he was, deep down, a sensitive and caring soul who could not fathom special students liking the opera.

The students did what students do on buses during a field trip. After all this was quite an adventure for all but one which had not flowed over into any kind of unacceptable behaviour. They knew the principal was there and they were anxious to be allowed to go again on another field trip some day. Poor guys! How could the system have denied them this kind of experience?

After the performance they were still keyed up and ready to discuss the performance. These were the kinds of comments the principal and I heard from the students:

"*That tenor was pretty lousy compared to Björling.*"

"*Yeah, he couldn't sing for beans!*"

"*The acting could have been much better!*"
"*The soprano couldn't act!*"
"*The sets were great!*"
"*I loved the orchestra and conductor!*"
"*He was really cool!*"

They were neither altogether wrong about the quality of the voices and everything else seemed dead on! I did explain to them that they saw a dress rehearsal and that the singers were saving their big sounds for the actual debut and newspaper critics. They said that that was a "*rip-off*" and that the singers should have given their all for them as well. Deep down I agreed with them. The Canadian Opera Company perhaps could have had the dress rehearsal a little earlier or later, or after all the regular performances in the subscription series, so that the singers could recover their voices in time. The other, existentialist, alternative may be to take their chances with students buying into their regular series – but with reduced prices of course! Why shouldn't the students get the best of their voices as well! In general they were very happy and neither they nor I would ever be quite the same.

Humility

The opportunity to learn humility for the teacher is not easily defined in any prerequisite curriculum. Humility is certainly not of the type associated with Dicken's Uriah Heep ENRfu (Dickens, 1975); rather, one must constantly look for opportunities in the daily interaction with students to find the opportunity to acquire more of this problematic but desirable, ineffable quality in our teaching. Of course I thought that I was a relatively modest teacher but found out from this remarkable class that I was not all that humble and had to acquire more of this invaluable quality. I must say though that I didn't want to fall into a trap where humility is perceived unpalatably with confession and other such traits. For this pitfall, or to put it in another way, *how* to avoid this pitfall, one must at least read seriously *some* Michel Foucault to shun using humility or extracting confessions from our students and loved ones as a form of veiled hegemonic power over them ENRfu (Foucault, 1990, pp. 60-61).

My opportunity arrived shortly after a class a little later in the semester. One of my students who had a very serious speech impediment and who was mistakenly but secretly labeled mentally challenged by all

of the school authorities (most of the kids knew better, as they often do) taught me an unforgettable lesson in humility.

One day towards the end of the semester, one of my students approached me after class: I still remember his first and last name and see him so very vividly: he wasn't tall or particularly charismatic, but, there was a quality of an open and generous personality with a mischievous smiling face of great charm and roguish appeal. When he spoke, I could barely make out his words and had to listen very carefully to every syllable and nuance of his unforgettable voice. In addition he limped when he walked and balanced himself precariously to stay upright.

He asked me one day if I would have a game of chess with him during lunch. I thought that was a splendid idea and told him we could start the game tomorrow. He was very pleased. The next day we began to play and I did an awful thing: I patronized him and allowed him to win – shame on me! I too thought he was mentally challenged simply because he sounded and looked that way. Of course, at the end of the game I expected him to beam at me with pleasure and delight. Did I get the surprise of my life:

> *Sir, you played terribly! You just played to let me win. That is it isn't it? You can't be that dumb! You're too smart to be that stupid. Why did you do that? I wanted a real game. I thought you were for real.*

He almost started to cry. I was mortified and immediately confessed to the biting truth of his words. I asked him to forgive me, (he did) and told him I would beat the pants off of him in our next day's game, if he would permit me one more game. He smiled broadly: "*we'll play but we'll see about you winning the game Sunshine!*" (I had the usual two nicknames: "sunshine" and the "chief").

And so we played, and we played and three weeks later we were still playing the same game. I had never in my life played with a stronger player. In the end he beat the pants off of me and I was humbled forever. When the game was over I was welcomed with one of the sweetest smiles I ever experienced in my life; he told me I was a good "*shit*" and that he enjoyed playing chess with me. I told him that he was the best chess player I ever knew! He was even happier than before.

I ran down to the guidance office and told the head guidance counselor that my chess student was a master chess player and not an idiot. No one listened. They thought I was just exaggerating. And so my

poor student had to suffer the abuse of being falsely labeled and misjudged as a mentally challenged student for most of his student life.

Conclusion

Many years later when I was no longer a secondary school teacher, I went to Fort St. John, British Columbia, to give a presentation to a group of prospective teachers in one of our Professional Development Programs off campus. After the lecture, in the bitter cold of deep winter, I found myself waiting in line in a cafeteria to get a quick bite to eat before my evening flight back home to Vancouver. I sat down with my food and gradually began to sense the strong gaze of someone's eyes riveted on my person. I looked up and saw a very tall man gazing at me with friendly but decidedly diffident eyes. I smiled and he smiled back. He was shabbily dressed and projected a look of homelessness in his sensitive, intelligent face. He kept staring at me and I felt embarrassed somehow. He was friendly but very shy as I was. I felt that he wanted to come over to my table and talk to me. I didn't know how to react as it all seemed rather strange and uncanny to my inhibitive disposition.

Later that evening on my flight back home I could not get his face out of my mind. It was a benign face and in a very strange way unaccountably caring of my person. I thought how very disturbing and irrational it all was. When I got home I continually thought about this poignantly strange encounter and didn't know what to make of it. Later, in the middle of the night, I woke up from a deep sleep and knew that I had recognized his face. I was astounded. He was my First Nations student in that class of so many years ago. He was always very shy and silent most of the time. I could never tell precisely from his noncommittal, though friendly face, what he may have been thinking of my teaching efforts. But I had felt great power in his personality and quiet presence many years ago in that class.

I was empathetic to his person and hoped to see him again. It would have meant so much to have spoken to him. I never did but I will keep looking for him. Meanwhile, I will never forget that remarkable class that did so much, so many years ago, to educate me in the art of humility, teaching, and compassion. The memory of their good faces is ingrained in my soul for the rest of my days.

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