

One Struggle after Another

Vickie P. White

As a first-year teacher trainee, I did not know what to expect for the school year. Though I attended public schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District all my life, I realized that students have changed with the times and are no longer the quiet, swat-fearing brood with whom I was educated.

The neighborhood where I grew up, in south central Los Angeles, has not produced many college graduates. My older brother graduated from Jackson State University in 1980 when I finished high school, but no one else in my immediate family had graduated from college when I entered. Therefore, when I was accepted to UCLA, I was proud but not pressured. I finished my English B.A. in 1984, and the course work for my Afro-American Studies M.A. in 1986. While at UCLA, I worked with the campus affirmative action program, the Academic Advancement Program, where my educational pedagogy was largely formed. I was also affiliated with the Black Student Alliance and was active in campus politics.

Before I was assigned to Carter High School, the only other teaching experience I had was in UCLA's Freshman Summer Program. I taught composition to entering college freshmen. I had never worked with the 9th and 10th graders that I work with currently.

Carter's student body numbers approximately 2,700; black students comprise about 90% of the population, while the remaining 10% are Latino. I purposefully sought a position at Carter for I feel that I share similar experiences with the students there and have much to offer in the way of instruction.

Since I began teaching, my English 9B classes have been one struggle after the next. Not only do all of my students have distinct personalities, but they have a variety of skill levels as well. Lessons become extremely problematic when we read. Some of my students are strong readers, but many of them have serious difficulty reading. My weakest readers, however, feel hurt when I do not call on them. Unfortunately, calling on a poor reader often means losing most of my students. Rather than listen to someone struggling to read, many students enter into casual conversation.

When I announced we would be reading *Romeo and Juliet*, the class displayed mixed reactions. Some, mostly girls — true to their set gender roles — showed enthusiasm and rejoiced at the prospect. *Romeo and Juliet*, it seemed, was the most romantic experience they could conceptualize, and for that they welcomed reading it. Other students mostly groaned. "Why?" It was more a plea than a question. "Because . . ." was my response, ". . . because *Romeo and Juliet* is required reading for all 9th graders as stated in the curriculum guide."

Meaningless. They didn't buy it. That was my first mistake in teaching the play. I had not really thought about why I was teaching it. I only knew that I was going to teach it because the guide said so. I did not anticipate that the majority of my students would want to know *why*.

Back in September, I used to incorporate the value of the lesson into my plans, but I stopped because I did not think my students were listening. They also didn't seem to appreciate the reasons I gave for doing certain lessons. Eventually, I even stopped thinking about most of the why's myself. Of course, I had strong convictions about most of the material I covered, but I realized that by not preparing to discuss the lesson's value, I was not ready to have an impromptu discussion. Given the opportunity, I could think of many reasons to read *Romeo and Juliet*, but I was taken by surprise. When put on the spot, I remember beginning to rattle on about Shakespeare, "A new literary form and style for you . . . enjoyable . . . identifying themes . . . *Romeo and Juliet* has, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood lines in all of literature." Needless to say, the students weren't excited.

Before we began the actual reading, I had prepared a lesson to help acquaint students with the language, knowing that they would have difficulty with it. But again, my lesson, my entire plan, was not thorough enough; it just didn't penetrate. Their preconceived notions about the play came mostly from *The Little Rascals* and *The Three Stooges*. I had not anticipated how misguided most of them were about everything in the play. Even the ones who thought it was a swinging romance were in for a disappointment.

After two days of preparation, we were "ready" to read on Wednesday. I assigned parts and we began. I picked my strong readers for the long parts. However, all of the students had difficulty reading. They did not know how to make the language sound conversational. They had not been trained in meter and had no idea of how to stress the appropriate syllable. I stopped often to explain the action and did some reading myself to model tone, pace, and inflections. It was notably tedious and they began looking at the clock very early in the period.

Since Wednesday was official homework night in English, I had planned to have them reread Act I, scene i, at home and write a brief plot summary, just to make sure they were following. They were not ready. My assignment only made the play repulsive to them. I received very few homework assignments on Thursday. This wasn't unusual, but their reactions were. They were grumpy. I think some of them

actually tried to do the work, but being frustrated by the language, they gave up. And, during Thursday's class, most of them flipped through the text, counting how many more pages the play was instead of following the reading. "God! Do you see how long this play is. Aw, Ms. White! We can't read this." Some students began to put their heads down.

I realized something needed to be done, but I felt quite at a loss, looking at all of my students' disinterested faces. I decided to try one more thing. I told them I would have some friends over on the weekend, and we would make a cassette of the play so they could hear how it should sound and make better sense of the dialogue. I explained that we would listen to the earlier scenes and, hopefully, become familiarized enough with the language to read the rest ourselves.

On Sunday, I had two friends show up to read a very long play with over 20 parts; I was the only female. One of my friends had had previous drama training at Yale and read quite well. He read most of the major parts, including Romeo. In reading the play aloud, I realized that it was not easy, even for people familiar with Shakespeare's diction. It took a long time, but we did it. I felt like I had taken care of a major obstacle and was ready for Monday.

On Monday, we passed out the texts so that the students could follow the words on the page as it was being read on cassette. When the play began, the students (in all classes) gave me strange looks. One student asked, "Ms. White, are your friends white?" I nodded. Because I am black (and so are 97% of my students), I suppose they expected to hear black people reading. As the tape continued, they would pinch their noses, indicating that one of my friends had a nasal voice. They were listening at least, but barely. Toward the end of scene i, when Romeo enters, they discovered that the nasal voice was Romeo. "Oh, naw. Uh-uh. We can't listen to *him* do Romeo." I was angry because they did not appreciate the fact my friends and I had given up a Sunday afternoon to make that tape. Even though I stopped the tape periodically to ask questions, I still lost most of them. It was time to seek help.

I went to the mentor teacher in the English department who, coincidentally, teaches the Shakespeare elective. I told her where we were as a class and the difficulties I had been experiencing on the unit. She suggested that I not play the tape for them anymore. I had seen myself how they do not listen. She also assured me that if we only read four lines at a time it would be okay, as long as the students were following along and trying. Poor readers were not going to get better by listening to someone else. Eventually, they would get it. In talking to

her, I realized even more so that I needed to be strong in my own convictions before attempting to teach something to my students. Her students know that she loves teaching Shakespeare and she has no problems telling them why. My students, on the other hand, could sense that my attitude about *teaching* the play was lukewarm and, as I'd inadvertently confessed, I was only teaching the play because I was supposed to.

I also sought advice from my English department chair, who suggested that I be more careful in my preliminary exercises. He shared some lessons with me that he uses to help students deal with the language. The exercises modeled tone and influx for the students. I realized, upon seeing them, that they would have helped. He also suggested that I not give reading homework early on. His experience was that students get frustrated, exactly as I had witnessed, and give up. Instead, he proposed that I give my students a few questions related to plot development to find the answers to. As they search for the answers, they would become familiar with the language indirectly. But I couldn't stop thinking that I had "lost" this bunch. Nothing I could do was going to create new interest in the play.

In talking to others and thinking about my failures in teaching this unit, I realize that I was not sensitive enough to my students' needs and capabilities. I expected them to take on heavy reading loads before I had adequately prepared them. I have also read quite a bit of Shakespeare; I have extensive knowledge of his life and works. Yet, I could not pass on or share this information with my students because I did not think out the proper ways to reach them. I based my lesson planning on ideal situations where the students would understand and accept the material the first time I presented it. I did not plan for remediation. Because of these things, it did not matter how much I knew about Shakespeare; I could not convey it anyway.

I am still teaching the unit, and I have used many of the strategies offered by my colleagues. The suggestion from my department chair about not assigning heavy reading homework was very helpful. Not only do more students do the homework, but they have a greater understanding of the material. I also spend more time on lesson planning and am more sensitive to my students' needs and capabilities. It took outside help and suggestions, which I reluctantly sought, to provide me with more useful strategies than I was using. I still feel that I ruined the atmosphere for the play, early on, and that my students will never be very enthused about finishing it. The next time we begin a difficult unit, though, I will not hesitate to seek help initially, during the early planning stages, to avoid unhappy circumstances later on.

Reaction

Joel Littauer (Experienced Teacher)

One common misconception in working with literature resides in the idea that one is “teaching literature,” that one is “teaching” a poem or short story, or *Romeo and Juliet*. Vickie’s situation is a typical one resulting from that misconception. English teachers teach concepts and skills. The literature, then, becomes the vehicle through which those concepts and skills are conveyed to students. The skill is what is valuable to students, not the play, and it is much simpler to convince a student of the value of learning a skill than it is to convince students of the need to learn a play.

Romeo and Juliet is a play about young love. It is a play about naive children who die because they do not understand the destructive power of hate. It is a play which demonstrates the role luck plays in human destiny. None of these concepts is new to literature. They are good themes before Shakespeare’s time, and they have continued to provide good thematic material to modern writers. These themes may be found even in such light fare as a *The Three Stooges* comedy. If Vickie can find parallel themes in a *The Three Stooges* comedy and a tragedy by Shakespeare, then the comedy should be used as an introduction to the tragedy. Given a recognizable vehicle into the play under study, students will find Shakespeare less alien, less fearsome, and the analogy will aid students in understanding what is meant by *theme*, if theme is what Vickie is stressing. The same principle holds true when working within any genre of literature. The teacher must ask, “What am I teaching?” and the answer is never the name of the play, poem, novel, or short story, the text of which will form the bulk of the lesson. The teacher is teaching a composition skill, a principle of literary criticism, or recognition of a piece of the human condition. The literature is simply the vehicle into that instruction.

Drama is not written to be read; it is written to be seen performed on a stage by actors. Vickie’s class might be better served by being shown a videotape of a Shakespearean drama after an appropriate introduction. There is a videotape called *The Fonz Meets Shakespeare* which students find informative and entertaining. This may be followed by a class reading of selected sections of Act I, a synopsis, and then a viewing of that act.

The viewing of each act is followed by a lesson in a principle of composition. Students are then asked to write a reaction to the act using the composition skill taught. Writing assignments

should be made relevant to students’ lives in some way, e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend, forbidden love, luck, just as these concepts relate to the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. Sample question: “If your parents were to forbid you to date the person you loved, how would you react?” or, “Do you think *Romeo and Juliet* are doing the right thing by sneaking around behind their parents’ backs? Would you?” Given the appropriate writing skill and a relevant topic about which to write, students will be more willing and able to perform as Vickie expects them to. Such an assignment also reinforces students’ appreciation of the drama.

Reaction

Karen Desser (Third Year Teacher)

Vickie is earnestly trying to reinvent the wheel, at a school where experienced wheelwrights are just down the hall. In her vignette, she accurately recounts and acknowledges the mistakes she later attacks.

As a beginning teacher at a school with seasoned and gifted veterans, I did considerable foraging before I ever began my units. Vickie could either approach teachers for their two or three most successful strategies for that unit, or could suggest to her department chairman that each teacher share a gem at every department meeting. Armed with those ideas, she would find it much easier to kick off units on a more motivating note. Whenever approaching literature-based units, teachers should strive to incorporate as many game-playing, project-making, creative-writing, role-playing activities as possible. Not only will these approaches engage students more readily, but they alleviate the teacher of the burden of constant paper grading and lesson preparing. I smiled when Vickie recounted spending her Sunday with her friends recording their reading of the play. After two years full-time in the classroom, I treasure every weekend moment as a chance to rejuvenate without having to think about “What will I do on Monday?”

Another interesting spin-off from this experience was Vickie’s comment that her students made fun of her white friend’s reading on the tape. This would have been the perfect moment to tell the students, “Okay, then let’s make our own recording/production of Act I for another class/your parents.” Getting students to work with the language instead of struggling against it is always a smoother path into a text. Vickie needs to continue to solicit the help of more experienced guides.

Reaction

Lee S. Shulman, Stanford University

Vickie is a ruthless challenger of myths. A dangerous myth that pervades teacher education is the myth of survival. The myth describes how the newborn infant called Teacher emerges from the womb of the university with only one instinct: Survival through classroom management. As the myth unfolds, the infant copes by managing turns, defining and employing classroom rules and deftly employing with-it-ness, smoothness of transitions and well-placed desists to prevent the otherwise volcanic classroom from its periodic eruptions. Only when our heroic infant emerges from the year-long (or longer) trials-by-misbehavior and can assert that survival has been achieved, is attention then directed at issues of traditional instruction. Only when novices can manage classrooms will they be willing to risk managing ideas.

Vickie challenges that myth with her case report. From the very first day of her teaching experience she begins to think hard about *what* to teach, *why* she is teaching it, and *how* she should go about it with students of differing levels of ability and interest. Moreover, her thinking is not around teaching in general, but rather around the teaching of a particular and predictable text, *Romeo and Juliet*. "Why are we reading this?" is not only a question asked by her students; it is an issue that underlies her struggles with teaching the play. Having kids read aloud in turn, having them review and prepare the text of a particular scene as homework, preparing a tape-recorded version of the entire play read by others — all these exhibit an underlying conception of the purposes for studying *Romeo and Juliet* on which Vickie has not had time or opportunity to reflect.

What makes the case so tragic, in its own way, is both its inevitability and avoidability. We know that nearly every teacher of English will have to teach *Romeo and Juliet* or *Julius Caesar* or *Hamlet* or all three during the first few years of teaching. We know that nearly all ninth or tenth grade youngsters will find the prospect of reading those plays distressing, whatever their reading level but especially if they are not skilled readers. Would we send astronauts into space without equipment for coping with weightlessness or airlessness? When we can be certain that a new teacher is going to encounter a particularly difficult problem, how can we send him or her into the classroom unprepared with appropriate materials and orientation? Teaching Shakespeare to youngsters of varying skill and interest levels for different purposes requires knowledge of content-specific pedagogy. Knowing

how to get the kids quiet is important. Knowing how to keep them on-task is indispensable. Knowing that you have to create an anticipatory set is laudable. But once they are quiet and attentive, there had better be a meaningful task, meaningfully presented, for them to address. If you don't understand how to present what is to be learned in a meaningful way, that well-managed classroom is going to break down quickly, as Vickie so painfully discovered.

Another myth that Vickie dispels is that there is a special advantage to sharing background and culture with one's students. There may well be some advantage, but Vickie discovers that it is not magical. Having grown up in a similar milieu, Vickie is confident that she can relate successfully to other poor black youngsters. But teaching is more than relating alone. It is engaging in a relationship around texts and themes, concepts and skills, values and attitudes, writings and aspirations. If Vickie is to have a successful educational relationship with her youngsters, both she and Juliet must relate with integrity.

Vickie came into teaching with no formal teacher preparation. I wish I could be confident that any teacher education experience would have prepared her to deal more effectively with the demands of her students and of Shakespeare. Far too few teacher education programs place sufficient emphasis upon a new teacher's understanding and skill in teaching particular aspects of specific and predictable parts of a curriculum to students of different ability and background. When she turned to her mentor and to her department chair, she quickly learned how valuable the "wisdom of practice" could be. They were filled with wonderful ideas, particularly with regard to coping with student diversity and trying out alternative methods and materials. They had experienced the same frustrations themselves. If only Vickie had been able to tap into their knowledge earlier.

Joel Littauer's commentary was exemplary. As I read his analysis and suggestions, I learned more about teaching than I knew before. I saw how the mind of an experienced and reflective teacher can bring clarity and insight into a difficult situation. I would only add a small observation to his thoughtful comments. Another reason we read Shakespeare and other portions of our shared cultural heritage is that those words and ideas have contributed essential images to our shared vocabulary. We read Shakespeare so that the image of "star-crossed lovers" makes sense to us when we encounter it elsewhere (especially in an age when a president regularly consults an astrologer!). Merely reading a synopsis of *Romeo*

and Juliet will not help students understand the nuances of “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Yet we don’t want to see the teaching of Shakespeare deteriorate to a focus on only the particular passages that ended up in Barlett’s *Familiar Quotations*. Studying Shakespeare is an occasion for the learning of essential concepts and skills; it is also an opportunity to enrich our grasp of the English language and some of its most powerful phrases or metaphors. Achieving a proper balance among these goals and the many others that motivate our teaching of classic texts is what makes teaching such a challenge.

Vickie clearly has learned from the experiences that she reports. As we read her account we feel admiration for a young teacher who has undergone pain and has emerged wiser from her analysis of the situation and of the counsel she has received. But we can neither overlook nor trivialize the conditions that made her learning from experience possible. She sought out help and she received it. There were able and experienced teachers in her setting from whom it was legitimate to seek assistance. They provided her with multiple ideas and she was therefore not limited by just one particular suggestion. Most important, she was provided the opportunity to reflect on her experience through the writing of this case report. Notice I

emphasize that she reflected *through* the writing, not that she reflected and then she wrote. I am convinced that case writing is an extraordinarily powerful vehicle to foster reflection and experiential learning among teachers. Without such a catalyst, learning from experience is frequently discussed, but rarely accomplished. If we want teachers to profit from experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, the documentation of their experiences for reflective purposes — through case writing and other forms of personal record keeping such as portfolio development — will be necessary.

I am also inspired by Vickie’s sustained high expectations for her youngsters. It is so much easier to reduce our standards for poor or nonmainstream youngsters rather than continue to face the challenge that we as teachers must take on: to educate all students to the highest standards possible. Vickie recognizes that teaching the language, thought, skills and images of Shakespeare to her kids is one of the many keys they will need to open the doors of future success. Whether English or calculus, history or music, Vickie exemplifies our educational obligation to keep our expectations high while we search for alternative approaches, representations and tactics to render school learning meaningful to all children.