

SECOND PLACE WINNER

CATE '13 Professional Writing Contest

Steve Rodriguez

The Messy Pursuit of Rigor and Relevance*February 13, 2013:*

I look anxiously toward my classroom's door, hoping no one enters and observes what appears to be a scene of loud, messy chaos. Today's lesson has my English-12 students working on a project-oriented activity—one supporting an official school program aimed at seniors. Yet, I fear an unsuspecting 9th grade English teacher might walk by and look inside. Worse yet, a 10th grade math teacher!

After twelve years of teaching, I am still sensitive about giving the impression of losing control of my class, or that I am lazy and not doing what a good English teacher is supposed to do, which is as everyone knows involves working extremely hard as the obvious focus of our students' attention.

This is a block period day, and I expect to experience this anxiety for an entire 110 minutes. In fact, for the next eight to ten weeks I will use our once-a-week block period day to conduct the same type of activity.

Why such anxiety? Good question, for I am actually proud of my seniors and what they are doing. After spending the first semester assimilating/acquiring knowledge, primarily by reading a particular non-fiction book, they are now focused on proving they can make a difference in the world, on raising awareness of a cause that is important to their community as well as the world, and applying academic skills in a way that

simulates what they will someday do in the workplace. Based on written group proposals, they are busy planning the production of videos intended for YouTube or other social media outlets, class lectures for elementary students, underclassmen or local adult organizations, various community service projects, or school/community fundraising events—all designed to spread the word on water conservation.

They are trying to accomplish their objectives while working in collaborative four-member groups. These groups will stay in place for the entire semester—an acknowledgement that my school wants to address a claim made by many businesses that in today's workplace some key problems are too complex to be solved by individuals working in isolation, and the corollary claim that such businesses feel recent college grads are not used to working collaboratively.

But my anxiety stems more from what my students and I are *not* doing. I am not lecturing, or leading the class in a critical reading exercise. I am not guiding them in a whole class discussion or character analysis. Since I am not standing at the front of the classroom, I don't appear to be guiding or leading at all, at least not in the way many teachers might think.

I merely walk about the classroom, asking "what if" questions about their plans, offering suggestions about the appropriateness of different rhetorical appeals, recommending they refer back to their written proposals, inviting them to use their knowledge of technology and social media, and reminding them to apply familiar academic skills. I am a mere facilitator, and no longer the hardest working person in the classroom.

And my students are not carrying on in typical student fashion. Clusters of desks are spread about the classroom. Many of the groups are noisily talking or laughing, while

some are in heated discussion. Some are writing or typing on their laptops, but others are drawing or mapping out a story board. Others walk casually in and out of the classroom with video cameras, stepping outside to film a scripted scene on the nearby lawn, or to capture a random student interview. Another group heads out the classroom, politely reminding me they are scheduled to deliver a presentation about water conservation at a nearby elementary school. Some students even have their cell phones out, viewing their YouTube videos and actually texting people to also view the videos! Most students are working hard, though some are wasting valuable time (just like some employees in the real world), but all are aware of the project deadline.

The normal rhythms of a high school English classroom are not in evidence. But this scene is actually what I have been building towards since the first day of the school year, for rigor and relevancy *are* evident.

Accordingly, I press on.

Minutes later, I emit a smile, secure in the knowledge the future will soon catch up with me. As our district begins to adopt the Common Core Standards approach, I expect to see more classrooms resembling this one. My fellow teachers will begin to embrace the inherent messiness that occurs when students “Apply” and “Adapt”, and I will no longer be the anxious outlier.

On that February day my seniors were carrying out what has become a proud tradition at our school--what we refer to as the Common Senior Experience (CSE), a senior capstone experience that entails applying the school’s so-called Academic Literacy Skills (Description, Summary, Analysis, Relate and Apply, Synthesis and Evaluation) we so eagerly promote on a school-wide basis. The CSE was devised when

our school—which opened its doors in 2006-- formed its first senior class. The program was designed to help our seniors bond as a class, and more importantly, to have them *apply* their Academic Literacy Skills in a real world setting, to help them understand how individuals can make a difference, and to prepare them to be productive global citizens.

This is how the CSE works. During the first quarter of the school year all seniors read the same book in their English classes. Previous years' titles have included *Outcasts United*, *The Zookeeper's Wife*, *Three Cups of Tea*, and *Mountains beyond Mountains*.

Most books feature a heroic individual who battles great odds to make a difference in the world, and address issues like building schools in Afghanistan, human rights, the plight of refugees, and medical access for the poor. This year's book *The Big Thirst* addressed the issue of water, with an emphasis on water conservation.

In addition to writing research papers/rhetorical analyses, and analyzing related short non-fiction texts, students also read how other students (high school and college) succeed in making a difference.

During second semester the class shifts its emphasis almost entirely to applying our 6 Academic Literacy Skills. This is when things start to get messy in the classroom. Though the course curriculum still requires seniors work on traditional assignments (i.e. essay writing)—one block period a week is devoted to working in collaborative groups. In this setting, the familiar rhythms associated with a traditional classroom are disrupted to pursue the type of rigor and relevance expected in the real world. As such, the classroom more resembles the workplace—where unscripted action and the application of skills are valued over “orderly” information acquisition.

Early in this semester students are tasked with forming into these long-standing collaborative groups. After inventorying their respective skills, group members assign each other roles such as creative director, technology director, editor, and group leader. Students quickly confront the issue of long-term group dynamics—how different personalities possessing different skills must find a way to work together, just like in the workplace.

Next, groups develop an idea for either raising awareness of a cause/concern related to the book's theme, or raising money and awareness for the designated charity associated with each year's CSE. Students raise awareness at the school, local community, or regional/global level. If raising money, the groups must raise at least \$200.00 over the course of at least three fundraising events.

In the following two weeks, student groups work to develop a written proposal detailing their objectives and how they will execute their idea during the next five weeks.

Once I approve their respective proposals, groups begin carrying out their plans, using the once-a-week block period to discuss, plan, refine and execute their ideas (though much work must still be done as homework/outside the classroom).

Upon project completion, groups spend the next three weeks producing a five-minute video. In this video, students explain the objectives of their project, provide evidence that demonstrates the extent to which they met the objectives, and reflect on what they learned. The videos provide students an opportunity to demonstrate their rhetorical skills, while practicing the effective use of accompanying language, images, pacing and music. Videos are evaluated, with top ones featured at our school's annual Senior Showcase—an evening event held in late May during which students, parents and community members celebrate our seniors' CSE work.

Striving for rigor and relevancy in the classroom can indeed appear messy—noisy, less structured, and a bit unpredictable. When teachers and students venture into the Application and Adaptation quadrants of the Rigor/Relevance Framework they will find the classroom often looks more like a workplace—and that's a good thing, since the Framework is designed to prepare students for the kind of complex problem solving taking place in the real world.

I now realize that should I begin getting anxious about the classroom risks a pursuit of rigor and relevance might pose, I will just take a deep breath, and repeat...messy is good...messy is good....

Steve Rodriguez teaches at Olympian High School in the Sweetwater Union High School District, San Diego.