

CATE Professional Writing Contest
Third Place, 2011

From Corner Office to Corner Classroom

By Lucy Filppu

Palo Alto High School, Palo Alto Unified School District

“Back in the day. Tell us about back in the day,” begs Lewis, legs swaying under his desk like buoys. We chart a course through the roiling sea, my 15-year-old freshmen students and I, our waters churning or calm depending on mood, moment and question.

Today’s inquiry tempts me to hunch over, grab a cane and act every part the Captain Ahab English teacher from “back in the day” that Lewis and others hope will distract me from a lesson plan on topic sentences.

But my anchor remains steadfast. I look Lewis straight in the eye. “Back in the day I had a corner office. Now I have a corner classroom. A better deal.”

So many of my students long for the money, fame and reality show construct of “success.” That’s why I use my former career in Silicon Valley’s high tech industry as a teachable moment. Yes, I made more money in the corporate world than I do now as a public school

teacher. Yes, I occasionally stayed in fancy hotels, traveled, and got to feel a certain charge of self-importance. But what was missing in my life was some element of human service, some core and essential meaning. Like Reese Witherspoon in her 2006 Oscar speech, I was “just trying to matter” but didn’t feel that I did.

It was around this time that I was assigned to manage several high school interns at our software company. Funny, earnest and remarkably idealistic, far more so than my hardened colleagues, these young people became my oasis. I found myself wanting to know everything about their classes, lives, teachers, and most especially, what they were reading, thinking and writing. Our pizza parties trumped those business cocktail masquerades. These interns brought out a new me, or rather the old me who loved literature and young people and the written word. They became my early inspiration.

While those high school interns served as a collective prod, urging me to leave high tech to forge a career in education, actually performing such a feat in my forties was no small decision. Every night I attended classes for my credential program, I left behind a spouse, two young children and a mortgage. The stakes felt high, but far more authentic than anything I had done before in my professional life.

When my first student teaching job landed me in a classroom of mostly below grade level students, my teaching advisor nodded knowingly. I had been so clearly forced out of my comfort zone that all I could do was face the reality before me. One of my students was homeless and chose to tell me the difficulties of his life. Yet he came to class every day and performed a flawless rap to demonstrate iambic pentameter. Another student allowed me to shadow him so I could see firsthand the divisions based on race and socio-economic backgrounds that he encountered at school. On the last day of teaching, when the formerly homeless student hugged me and told me he had found a place to live, I was hooked. Despite my late bloomer status, teaching had saved a spot for me, brought me into the fold. I landed my first full-time job at a neighboring high school a month later.

The path out of high tech and into teaching that first year on the job was rocky. I hit bumps, broke down and crashed. Basics became Herculean challenges. I could not figure out how to juggle bathroom breaks between classes. I often “held it” and wondered how other teachers functioned. I forgot to eat, misplaced my keys and tripped over backpacks. The days of company-provided diet soft drinks, expense accounts, and a little peace and quiet beckoned. Similarly, I, who fancied

myself mature and adept at handling a variety of temperaments, found myself face-to-face with the most baffling temperament of all: the teen who has all but given up on school. Yet, when one reluctant reader wrote anonymously on an index card, "I am Holden Caulfield" I knew the connections were happening, despite myself.

The "hire and fire" mentality of the high tech workplace is a foreign concept in the classroom, thankfully. We can't fire our students, ever. Nor can we run the risk that they will fire us. Just the same, I worried endlessly that my students would fire me by ignoring my lessons and the authors we read.

Yet, just the opposite occurred. When we brought *Romeo and Juliet* to life, students jumped at the chance to debate the poor choices made by adults on behalf of teens. Similarly, when we put George on trial for the death of Lenny in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, I watched some of our most hesitant learners take on the role of characters and trial attorneys with composure and focus. The lesson was clear: the joyful journey as a teacher starts with never underestimating yourself or your students.

I am now in my third year of full-time teaching and was granted tenure in our district this year. Does this mean I've arrived? Hardly.

Each day, each class I still catch myself worrying that I am not reaching all my students, that my wait time is not sufficient or that my plan for differentiation may not be effective. But this type of anxiety actually fuels me. It gives me the charge to grow, question and reassess my own practice. This is the real joy I find in teaching; the feeling that I will never stop learning, asking or wanting to be better.

Sometimes when I see a businesswoman racing through the airport, latte and carry on suitcase in tow, I remember “back in the day.” Sure I miss the perks and paychecks of my former life in the business world, but we teachers know who we are. While others lament “those teenagers,” we actually like to spend our days with them and prefer their company to that of many adults. So when Lewis or any student asks about my work before teaching, I start with the joy of my corner classroom. That corner office was a long time ago, a port visited before I charted the course for the real journey of my life.