

## ***ONE TEACHER'S CRITERIA***

**By Michael Ventura**

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Background: Four months a year I teach literature to high school kids at a nonprofit private school in California. As usual in my life, this new (for me) direction rose from my writing. Several teachers and parents in the school knew my work, asked me to give a talk, liked my talk, asked me to teach. I made clear that I'd never graduated college. My only qualifications were a lifetime of reading and writing and a gift for gab -- insufficient credentials for a state-supported school. Private schools have more leeway and they took a chance on me. I will always be grateful to them; teaching has been among the richest (and happiest) experiences of my life. Recently we had a "mini-conference" of teachers at the school in order to compare our criteria for grading. Which brings me to this column.

Most discourse on education these days comes from politicians, mostly about issues like vouchers and standardized tests. Rare is the book written from a classroom perspective (like the excellent *Possible Lives* by Mike Rose). I offer my notes for our mini-conference not as expert testimony, and still less as a program for anyone else to follow; rather this is a modest attempt to widen a discussion that needs to go far past vouchers and standardized tests. (Anyone who's ever crammed for an exam knows you can ace a test without really knowing the material. George W. Bush, a self-proclaimed C student, should admit that.) Here is one teacher's criteria, given to spark thought on the real questions: What is education, and how do you measure it?

Notes for school mini-conference:

I teach literature. Literature is a subject in which there are few "right" answers; *there is only one's viewpoint*, based on and backed up by the poem, novel, play, etc. I tell my students they'll be graded on how thoroughly they engage the works we study. *Engage* and *engagement* are key words in how I present my criteria to them. I often mention what Etta James said when she recorded an album of Billie Holiday tunes: "I wanted to get 'em all over me." Getting the literature *all over you* is the point of the course and is the fundamental criterion. I emphasize that parroting my opinions is *not* the way to an A. You can disagree with me and get an A; you can agree with me and *not* get an A; your thoughts will be graded by how far and deep you go, how conscientiously you work, and how you relate and ground *your* thoughts to the plays, poems, etc. My classes are about thinking for oneself.

I also emphasize that the journey a student makes during the class counts on the grade. At the beginning of the class a student may be intimidated and/or baffled by the material -- she may never have seriously thought about literature before. She starts with Cs and Ds on her assignments. But in the course of her studies this student may overcome her intimidation, engage the works as she had not imagined possible, ending the class with an appreciation of literature that was utterly foreign when she began. I don't average grades; I'll count her later B+s far more than her early Cs. Another instance: A student begins by "hating" poetry and ends with several poems he loves, though he is still not terribly articulate about meanings and such. Such a journey may not be accurately reflected in the grades of individual assignments. A student may have made a significant journey, a *beginning* of a worthy appreciation of literature ... yet still get Cs or Bs on

assignments, though the journey itself required tremendous inner effort and change. Such a journey is itself a kind of A. I take that into account in my final grade.

This is important to me: I see the class as a journey. Journeying well counts on the grade.

I tell students that I only have three ways to measure their progress on this journey: their writing, their tests/quizzes, and their presence in class. I emphasize *presence* rather than *participation*, because presence *is* participation. A seriously attentive student whose eyes are always big with interest is participating as much as a student who often raises a hand to speak. The learning atmosphere of the class is created at least as much by interest as by speech. I add that it's easier to gauge their understanding if they speak in class. But if they choose not to speak (I never force a student to give a spoken opinion), then they'd better concentrate hard on the homework ... because I need some proof of what they're thinking. I emphasize my recognition that some people don't do well on quizzes and tests; some students talk well; some write well; some attend well. In the final grade I'm going to emphasize their strongest suit. But -- and it's an important "but":

The thoroughness and punctuality of homework is important. If a student's presence and participation in class is excellent but he/she is regularly late with, and/or doesn't do, the homework ... the grade obviously suffers. However, I'm flexible about how much the grade suffers. A student who is not punctual but who is putting in considerable effort in other ways gets the benefit of the doubt. As is clear from all of the above, my grades are not based on percentages, but on a close evaluation of the individual student's journey.

There is one more crucial criteria. I only make this speech if people in the class give me cause (which hasn't happened in every class), but the speech goes something like: "I don't expect perfect behavior. But I will flunk you cold -- no matter what you get on your tests and homework -- if you make a habit of chattering while *other students* risk expressing thoughts in class. When another student is contributing, best listen. And I will not tolerate any student mocking another student. That's *zero tolerance* for mockery. Intelligent passionate argument is great. But respect for each other is required."

I make my grading criteria clear on the first day. I make "the speech" the first time the issue comes up. I ask for engagement. How much? Total. That's what I give, that's what I ask. But I'm careful to recognize that individual students have different *styles* of engagement, and I don't try to determine or control an individual's style. The anchoring element is that they ground their engagement *in the work of literature*, rather than bullshitting on the fly.

I teach subjects in which "correct" and "incorrect" are murky areas. I expect that fact to be respected by my colleagues, as I respect how in science, mathematics, grammar, languages, and history, correct and incorrect are much more clear. I respect the personal style of any sincere, prepared teacher. I respect the importance of students experiencing teachers who have drastically different styles and criteria.

I would add this (not covered in our questionnaire):

We're here for the kids. They're not here for us. We are the elders. We're passing on an inheritance -- an inheritance of culture and knowledge. Ours is the responsibility. We have no right to a *personal* beef of any kind with any kid. Any teacher who feels a *personal* difficulty with any student -- that teacher needs *immediately* to seek the counsel of his/her peers to resolve the issue. I define "personal" as follows: If other teachers are not having a problem with a kid but you are, then the difficulty probably resides with

you. We do not have the luxury of "not getting along" with a student. If we can't educate and/or "get along with" a student we must assume (absent medical evidence) that it's our fault. I do not mean that students are not accountable; I mean that the burden of education and the responsibility for classroom atmosphere *always* falls on us. I feel that a "D" or a "C" is as much my fault as the student's; it means there's something I missed, some effort I failed or was unable to make. I'm the grownup. He or she is the kid. I'm responsible. It's *my* C or D as much as the student's. I tell my students that I give tests not so much to test them as to test myself -- to test what I've taught, test what I've enabled them to learn. If they fail, I fail. That's the contract. That's the bond.

Hey. There are kids who aren't smart enough ... kids who won't give you the satisfaction of teaching them anything ... kids who just don't *get* math, or poems, or dissecting a reptile ... kids who are too high or too troubled ... spoiled kids, medicated kids ... kids whose parents set no limits and expect the school to parent as well as teach ... obviously no teacher can take responsibility for all that. And we all know that kids, being kids, will probe or test any sign of weakness in the teacher. Still, I'm the grownup. It's not their job to reach me. It's my job to reach them.

And I've begun to hand out, at the beginning of each course, something Buddha said: "Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and common sense." (History records that Buddhists don't start wars.)

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