

Writing Works

Teaching as an Undercover Agent

by Jamie Cooper, T-C '00
jscoop5@yahoo.com

By day I am a fourth grade teacher, by night a college educator. I spent my internship at Towson University teaching Writing and Communication Skills for Educators. At least, that was my cover. Granted, I am certified to teach elementary school and I am qualified to teach the college course, but I had my own agenda. While working with all of the students on their writing skills, I carried out a covert operation to track the learning process and behavioral characteristics of these two age groups. One would think there is a stark contrast between my daytime students and my night-time students. Let's look at some examples of the observed subjects, shall we?

FOURTH GRADERS

"Ms. Cooper, here's my late pass."
"Is it snack time yet?"
"Ms. Cooper, I forgot my homework."
"I lost my book."
"I'm not sure if this is the preposition."

COLLEGE STUDENTS

"Ms. Cooper, sorry I'm late."
"Are we having break tonight?"
"Can I e-mail you my assignment after tonight's class?"
"I lost my book/I didn't buy the book."
"I don't know what a prepositional phrase is."

Shocking, isn't it? The mere similarity of the minds of these two groups of students is frightening. I know what you are thinking: "This can't be! What kind of farce is this?" Well, ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that there is no farce. Apparently, things are worse than we thought. Fourth graders and college students are on the same wavelength. How this happened I have no idea. It literally boggles my mind. My mission is not over yet. I still have to report on my findings from my operation, or my "internship" as I am forced to call it for safety reasons. This might be difficult to do as the results are clearly upsetting, but I will try my best.

Stepping into the new world of teaching at the college level was exciting. Though I had no prior experience with this, I felt

strangely calm about the whole thing. I didn't doubt that I could carry through with the task. I am an educator and I was looking



Jamie Cooper

forward to teaching future educators. I fantasized about the information I would convey to my students. My mentor advised me to use the same techniques with the college students that I use with my fourth graders. I compiled lesson plans, assignments, and guest speakers to take these individuals through a learning process. I was ready.

On the night of the first class I was standing with my students outside of the classroom, waiting for the previous class to be dismissed. I felt like I was eavesdropping. What they didn't know was that I was the professor. This aside, my expectations were high as always. I couldn't wait to work with these older, more responsible students. As it turned out, the class was not as easy to teach as I thought it would be.

Out of my seventeen students only half were education majors. The other students needed an advanced writing course and signed up for mine. I tried to cater to this by giving some general assignments when I could. My syllabus consisted of different learning experiences. I taught concepts through fun, interactive activities for the students to work on during class. I used real world experiences to lead them to conclusions. I even had them gain experience dealing with future colleagues by role-playing. When I became familiar with the personalities and work ethic of my students I was taken aback. These were college students I was dealing with, and yet they seemed more like my fourth graders. Actually, my fourth graders were more studious in some ways.

The quotations by college students

(continued on next page)

Teaching as an Undercover Agent

(continued)

that I included above were truly from my students. Maybe this is normal for college students, but I was surprised. When I was in undergrad no papers were handed in late, I always bought **and read** the book, and I shared my thoughts/opinions with the class. Part of the requirements for the course I just taught was practicing communication—oral and written. These students were not too keen on the oral communication portion. However, I would have to say that the largest difficulties I encountered were with their grammar and mechanics. Week after week these students' fellow classmates and I edited the written assignments. I brought someone in from the English department to go over certain skills the students needed to improve upon. When I gave the students a grammar assessment toward the end of the semester, I was surprised by the results. They were not something to send home to mom and dad. In the column next to the prepositional phrase portion of the assessment, one student wrote that he forgot to study. Another student wrote, "I don't even know what a prepositional phrase is." And the English major wrote, "Clueless." I was very disappointed.

So, what did I learn from my internship? I learned that college students are just students. Maybe some were not interested in the material, maybe others had life happenings to deal with, or maybe they just didn't care because their parents were footing the bill. I know that sounds negative, but I had such high hopes before the semester began. They seemed to react well to the different activities I provided them with, but they were not enthused enough to take it a step further and extend their learning. I made it clear that they could come to me with any difficulties they were having (and several did), and that they should feel free to give me

suggestions or topics they wanted to learn more about.

Throughout the semester my own grammar and mechanics skills have improved. I am very thankful for this skill growth. To assess their papers I not only had to know more than they; I had to be able to explain the processes as well. The college students' uncertainty about grammar carried over to my day job. In the beginning of my language arts class my students work independently on a grammar drill. They must use editing marks to correct sentences. Once they have finished I call on a student to act as the teacher and write the corrected sentence on the board. Now, I have my students explain **why** they are changing the capitalization, word usage, punctuation, or sentence structure to the rest of the class. I don't want them going to college not knowing grammar.

I have always been pretty good with time management. When teaching elementary school there is always work to be done before and after school. When teaching elementary school and taking a grad class there is always much much more work to be done before and after school. However, when teaching elementary school and a college course there is much much much more to be done after and before school and time management takes on a whole new meaning!

My covert operation over and done with, I am very thankful for the experience. Though I did expect college students to take more responsibility for their learning, I must say that I did enjoy teaching at another level. It was an opportunity to gain insight, knowledge, and growth in my field. This is definitely a task I would take on again, but I do love my elementary school kids. It is good to know that I have options.