Jump the Track

by Jane Hancock

I picked up a pile of portfolios and raced to the principal's office. She wasn't in. The assistant principal was talking to a student. As I stood outside his door, waiting, I decided to play a little game.

Masking my joy when I entered his office, I said, "I've got a problem, a big problem."

The assistant principal shuffled some papers on his desk and sat up straight in his chair, ready to face anything. He was accustomed to my dropping in. He had been there for me in September when the problem first surfaced.

Fellow teacher Dan Kimber and I were going to teach two classes in American history and American literature to juniors in the new Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) Academy at Hoover High School in Los Angeles, a course integrating literature, history, and the arts. When my schedule arrived in the mail in late August, I didn't notice that one of these classes was called American Literature and the other Junior Literature. This made a difference because Junior Literature was an English course that made students eligible for graduation but did not make them eligible to attend schools in the California university system.

On the day school began, I received my class lists. I had 22 students in my first-period American Literature class and 42 in my second-period Junior Literature class. I checked in with Dan. Yes, he had 42 in his first and 22 in his second. The Junior Literature class was larger because these students had not made As and Bs in their sophomore year and therefore could not take American Literature.

Since I planned to teach American Literature to both classes, Dan and I took matters into our own hands. He would send me 10 students from his first period class. Any good mathematician knows that we now had 32 students in each class. The numbers were all right, but the balance bothered me. One class still had all the A and B students in it, and the other had the C and below students, but we would make it work. I sent the list of the 10 changes down to counseling so they could set the record straight. Before the week was over, I received a note from a counselor asking me to drop by.

"You can't do this," she said, "you can't teach them American Lit. Students who didn't get As or Bs in their English class as sophomores can't take American Lit."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It's a prerequisite. The English department sets the standards. It's in the registration booklet, Prerequisite for American Lit: an A or B in sophomore English."

"But if I'm teaching both classes alike, then they should get credit for American Lit."

"It doesn't matter. They didn't make the grade. They can't take American Lit. Those 10 you put in the American Lit class can't be there."

"Let's call it something else," I cried. "Let's call it a pilot program. Let's call it research. I don't care what you call it, but I'm going to teach them American Lit, so they should get credit for American Lit. Let's try it; let's see if it works."

I wrote a letter and sent it to the principal, the assistant principals, the dean, and the head of the English department, detailing the whole story. The English department did not approve, but I received support from the administrators. They found a loophole. The VAPA Academy was a school within a school. We could make up our own rules.

When I returned to school the second week, I found a note in my box from the assistant principal that said, "How does it feel to have won a philosophical battle?" By the next week, the students had been officially changed on the computer; both my classes were called American Literature. So I trusted my teaching methods, went about business as usual, and waited for the results that would appear in the portfolios turned in at the end of each quarter.

On judgment day, I started reading the portfolios of the infamous period two, the period with the students who should never have been allowed to take American Literature. And as I read them, I became apprehensive because they were almost too good. Was I inflating their grades to prove a point? I went back and checked the portfolios again. I talked to an American Literature teacher and compared assignments. I asked another to look at a portfolio and tell me what she thought. Finally, I decided that the grades were fair. This was when I picked up the pile of evidence and headed for the principal's office.

"Remember the class that wasn't American Lit that I made American Lit?" I said to the assistant principal, deliberately hesitant and morose.

His face fell. "They failed," he said. "It didn't work!"

I let long seconds pass and then I shouted, "It worked! It worked! These are their portfolios. They are wonderful!"

I wish I could say that the whole class received As and Bs in June, but they didn't. However, period two held its own when compared to period one, with two As and six Bs. Areg earned one of the As and signed up for AP English and journalism for his senior year. I gave him a used copy of Strunk and White's Elements of Style and told him it was the writers' bible. Nathan earned a C. He was probably the most gifted student I have ever taught. During the year, he brought me hours of joy with his writing and hours of frustration with his inability to turn it in. He could have been valedictorian.

A few students failed or received D's because they didn't do the work. One of these was Mary. Her cumulative files revealed she had extremely low skills, read at a third grade level, had not had much experience reading anything, and had never written multi-page, multi-paragraph essays. But during that first quarter, and throughout the year, she, along with the rest of the class, read poets like Anne Bradstreet and Joy Harjo. They read Arthur Miller's The Crucible, and they tackled grammar and explored vocabulary. They wrote on topics of their own choice as well as assigned writing; they revised their writing and learned how to talk about their writing and the writing of others in peer groups; they read books and responded to them weekly in journals. They brought history, literature, and the arts together in their special projects and reports. At the end of the year, they came in groups of 15 to either my house or Mr. Kimber's house for in-depth discussions of history, literature, and current events.

I hope I started something that may evolve into change. I am no longer at that school. However, wherever I teach, the standards will remain high, and I will never deny any student the chance to get the greatest education possible. I will always help my students "jump the track."

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