DR. FAUSTUS, RODENT-ENVY, AND THE TWO PARTY WEEKEND

There is someone in a hamster suit distributing leaflets on a street corner in Union Square. It is not a very convincing costume; the fur looks like shag carpet and one cheek pouch sags. Shoppers brush by, ignoring the outstretched paw. Still, fleetingly, tragically, I entertain the notion of offering to swap jobs. See, I get this hamster suit; I get the Oedipus essays; I find a street corner; I distribute the papers to passers-by with, "Please make comments and mail to..." What do you think? The hamster probably has no stack of student essays on the kitchen table wailing, "Mark me, mark me."

I was invited to two parties one weekend in November. Coincidentally, it was the same weekend I had set aside to read the Dr. Faustus essay finals written in World Literature on Friday. It was my guess that neither party would be the kind after which I would want to curl up with a green pen and a list of reasons why Mephistophiles resembles Lady MacBeth. A dilemma. Change the final date? Inform the class the essays would not be returned for a week? (Notice that forgetting about the parties was not an option.) I decided to stay with the original test date. But now what? Aha! I informed the class that they would be reading their essays aloud the week following the test. They would choose one of the six questions from the study guide and prepare in advance. I attribute the lack of complaints to two factors: the advance notice of what would be required; their experience in reading aloud to the class. (I give big points to people who volunteer to read their writing. Only those who've done a good job volunteer to read, so it usually works out well.)

On the Friday of the final, I noticed a significant difference in the length and detail of most students' outlines, maps, and notes as opposed to their usual preparation for in-class writing. They had taken more care this time because it wasn't going to be "just Mrs. McLester" reading them. At the end of that class period I collected the essays, stacked them neatly, arranged them tastefully in the top drawer of my desk, and only by force of will avoided rubbing my hands together. I wouldn't be reading essays this weekend, and the class had just written half of next week's lesson plan. Ha!

Monday, I asked the students to take out a piece of paper and write the name of each reader, followed by first, a compliment about the essay that each reader presented, and second, a suggestion for improvement. They would receive points for the thoughtfulness of their comments. I distributed the essays and asked for volunteers, noticing how students looked over their work and scribbled hasty changes in the margins, giving their first drafts a fast edit. Had I written comments this weekend, they would have made no changes. During the readings students were attentive to each other, listening for positive elements in the papers. (These we discussed directly after each reading.) The writer received immediate positive reinforcement from his peers. We didn't talk about suggestions for improvement—these were passed in writing to the author. I wrote a grade in the gradebook without collecting the essays. Because they were not final drafts, I wasn't looking at spelling and mechanics, only ideas.

By Wednesday, mid-period, all essays had been read. I asked the class for some feedback on the activity. How had they felt about doing this?

"I liked hearing everybody's ideas," Leo said. "Some people had points of view I'd never thought of." I knew what Leo meant; I always gained new perspectives on the literature when reading students' papers.

"Some of them were boring," Michelle said, squirming sideways in her seat.

"Why were they boring?" I asked, holding my breath.

"Because they were the same. They all just repeated the same things we'd gone over in class. They used the same quotes and everything."

"Which papers did you like?" I was starting to get excited now. Something was happening here.

"I liked the ones where people used their own ideas or found their own theories," Mike said.

I had intended this discussion to last ten minutes, but we talked for the rest of the period. Shane thought the readings "started getting old" when we began hearing too many papers on the same topic. Laurie felt the most difficult topic made the most interesting paper because it allowed for a more personal point of view. This from Kim:

"The papers with the most specific evidence were the most persuasive."

And from Alan:

"The quotes really helped show what people meant."

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How much have the students retained of this? How much have they really taken it to heart? For me that still remains to be seen. I’m anxious to find out what my class does with “Tartuffe.” I don’t know if their writing will be better or worse, or if it will change at all. I do know that I won’t be reading papers over the weekend, and that beats a rodent on a street corner any day of the week.

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