Any Tilt Will Lose the Game

When a student expresses resistance to an assignment in a confrontational manner, the author is forced into that well-known difficult position: finding an appropriate response. In her narrative, Thomas offers an intimate view of the situation, reflecting on the ways she could respond (or has responded in the past), and, ultimately, the way in which she responds this time, hoping to diffuse the situation without severing her ties with her student.

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Orland High School, nestled in the midst of dairy farms, cattle ranches, and almond groves, houses 650 teenage Trojans—as well as my English classroom. The school remains the social hub of Orland, a small rural town in California that owns more bars and churches than traffic lights and signals combined. In Orland, the Friday night football game is the highlight of weekend entertainment, and a new pinball machine added to the local bowling alley is sure to score front-page news.

It was a typical fall Friday at Orland High, and the upcoming rally had my fourth period wound up and in high spirits. But John, a dark-haired charmer and the Trojans’ star running back, swiftly changed the mood. John is a strong student, the kind of student who doesn’t need to work to get a B and shrugs off the occasional A with indifference. He is a leader with strong and sometimes dangerous opinions—and a mouth that runs faster than his best day on the gridiron. What John taught me on that rally day will be imprinted in my memory for the remainder of my teaching years.

“I ain’t gonna change it. It’s perfect. And I don’t care what you think anyways. Your opinion don’t count,” John blurted that day, just after I’d gotten the attention of my fourth period. He had his head cocked to one side and his face was filled with fury. I recognized this was the onstage John talking. For him, poor grammar is a cover; he wants his peers to view him as a tough jock who doesn’t care about school or pleasing the teacher. He does not want to let on that he is, in fact, an intelligent student concerned about his grade.

Gasping in unison, the other nineteen students in my sophomore class took the bait. Heads swung back and forth. English class had been transformed into a spectator sport, a competition between two gladiators. Who would win and who would lose was their only concern.

My concern and theirs were entirely different. Mine wasn’t about winning a teacher versus student battle; it was about maintaining mutual respect. I thought of John not so much as my competitor but rather as a lone player at the bowling alley pinball machine. John’s pinball had darted down the wrong alley—you know, the one where no matter how hard you push the flipper buttons, saving the ball is futile. He knew it, as did I. But I was the teacher, the adult, the mature one, and the one who had to think fast so as not to tilt and lose the game.

The previous day, I had given the class an assignment for which John had displayed an unusual interest and passion. I had asked the students to write a personification poem, choosing an object that was unusual or one to which they had an attachment. Because of John’s intense love for martial arts, he chose to write about his treasured sword. Immediately following the explanation of the assignment, his pen hit paper. He trekked through a thesaurus, checked out a rhyming dictionary, and continued in his poetic frenzy, bringing his sword to life, right up until the bell rang. I was impressed.
On this particular rally day, John, clad in his numbered blue-and-white football jersey, coolly ambled into my room, poem in hand. It was complete, typed, double-spaced, thoughtfully titled, and a rough draft (revealing little to no change between that and his final work) was attached to it. He recited the poem to his friends, and he confidently shared it with me. I knew little about martial arts, and even less about this type of weapon, but I loved the piece, and I told him so.

As always, a revision rubric was passed out to the class. I explained that each student could choose a partner with whom to work, and that the writer could choose to make any suggested changes, but I wanted each to share with a friend and be cognizant of meeting the assignment requirements. Immediately, cries of “But mine isn’t done yet,” and “I left mine in my locker. Can I go get it?” rang out from several students. But John’s words, “I ain’t gonna change it. It’s perfect. And I don’t care what you think anyways. Your opinion don’t count,” silenced the class.

Fifteen years ago, I would have burst into tears, vacated the room, and feared my administrator’s disapproval once word got out. Ten years ago, I would have ignored it, allowed it to fester, and most likely dreaded the class each and every day. Not too long ago, I went through the “tough-girl” period: I was the boss, and there was room for only one opinion—mine. During those days, a direct verbal lashing would have been my response, knowingly shaming him, and he would have been the one to dread the class each day. Now I have learned that this kind of reaction hurts me and is irresponsibly ineffective. I have vowed to make better use of my time and energy, but I do know that I cannot tolerate unacceptable behavior. Because I was grappling with this issue, my reaction this day came as a surprise for me and for John.

Elsa Auerbach, a renowned leader in critical pedagogy, writes that it is at this point of conflict within a learning environment that true lessons emerge. It is at this precise moment that a teacher does indeed become a sponsor of literacy—the literacy of socially acceptable behavior. She suggests honestly and succinctly “that the trick is to express your views without imposing them! You can be a facilitator and a person at the same time,” and adds, “one way of doing this is by asking questions that prompt people to think about their own statements or views.” (Auerbach 1999, 47).

But here, facing John, what use could I make of Auerbach? With a reddened face, tight chest, and shallow breathing, I faced the forty staring eyes that watched my every move. Softly, and à la Auerbach, I stated, “John, I want you to think about something before you say or do any more. First, I am a human being with feelings, and secondly, I am your teacher doing my job. Would you think about that?” Removing myself from his locked stare, I turned to face my blackboard. It was a necessity, as further talking would have tilted my brimming tears.

While gaining my composure, I heard one student, Jeanette, hiss, “Jeez, John, you made Mrs. T. cry. How rude.”

Thank goodness for Jeanette. She vocalized the feelings for the class and offered me the backing I needed at that pivotal point. Even if she hadn’t, I believe that John would have remained silent. With my questioning, revealing of my humanity, and turning my back to his dominance, I don’t feel that he would have felt compelled to continue the challenge. He wasn’t humiliated, and I hadn’t back down. Although he just plain didn’t want to cooperate with the lesson, I had perhaps prodded him toward accepting a more important lesson: that I was not some disembodied distributor of revision rubrics; I was a human being doing her job.

As for the onlookers, it was obvious that John’s apathy, his closed-mindedness toward taking another look at his piece, and his display of poor attitude wasn’t winning the sympathy of the class. Big deal. So Mrs. T. wants us to look for key elements within our poem. That John just had to grow up and feel fortunate that I was allowing another revision prior to grading seemed to be the prevailing feeling.

I’ll be honest and admit that I didn’t give a damn whether John revised his piece that day. I actually couldn’t work with him nor look at him. He kept his distance for the remainder of the ninety minutes. Nothing more was ever said about the incident.

And what has happened since? Has Auerbach remained my guide when these inevitable classroom confrontations continued on page 17
Ordinary
Like being popular

Indeed. It was autobiographical. And his family, who shopped for clothes at the perpetual yard sale in the barn around the block, had bought the book. I copied the page, his page, from the book, and hung it on the wall. And vowed to never advertise such a scam again.

Further back in my mind, a friend at community college said that she had sent a poem in to “one of those poetry things just to be published.”

“I know it’s just a scam,” she said. “But I figured, so what, at least I’m published, and I can put it on my resume.” Her grandmother bought the book.

Back to the present, I begin to wonder in earnest what my duty here is. Should I tell Joy that it is a lie that they liked her poem, probably a lie that they ever read? Should I go and tell her mother? Should I strangle the teacher who let them on the Internet, let them enter a poem and personal information—like a home address—for not warning them? I worry but do nothing except to broadcast my worry in the staff lunchroom.

The social studies teacher emails me a website about literary scams (http://windpub.org/literary scams/scams.htm) and there I find poe rypot.com with an example of a poem they found to be worthy of publication.

One of my goals this year was to get my students to have that “ta-da” moment that they get in art when they show their work, or choir or band when they finish a concert, or in drama when they take the final bow. A publication moment. I did get nine student pieces published in local papers. Two other students wrote explanations of the writing scoring rubric that we send home to parents with the writing test results. I gave essays about what should change about the school to the principal who made it a point of talking with the student authors about their ideas. None of this recognition made any of these students smile in the way Joy smiled the day her piece was “accepted.”

Would I take responsibility for ruining her smile? I wonder for a weekend if I should let my cynicism, my pessimism, my reality, affect her new heart.

It is a Monday morning when I ask to talk to her and her friend. I take them to the conference room. My voice shakes a little at the end of my truth about companies like this, about the website, about how sorry I am.

Her friend looks at Joy and asks, “Do you know what she’s talking about?” Her brow is crinkled. I sigh.

“The poem that we sent,” Joy says to Chris. And to me she says, “I’m not buying the book anyway.” She shrugs.

When I say again that I’m sorry, she says through her braces, “It’s okay. I’d rather know the truth.” Perhaps I want them to be outraged at the company for using them, at the world for being unsafe and unfriendly, at the teacher who didn’t guide them, or at me because I told them the truth that hurts, but they walk down the hall to their first-period class. Their pace is normal, faster than mine. They are already chatting about something else. Happy. The world has not changed.

I walk slowly. I am left with no satisfactory sense of resolution. I have told my truth, so afraid of the impact, but there is none. The world spins under me, with me.

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Any Tilt Will Lose
continued from page 13

arise? Well, on one occasion last year, I must admit that I let Auerbach fly out my classroom door. I allowed a student to get the best of me, and I imposed my opinion and shoved it down her throat. Not only was she humiliated, but also I was mortified and later apologized. Feeling an empty sense of failure, I immediately remembered my commitment to value my time and energy. Prompting a student to think about his behavior allows a time of reflection, quietness, and an opportunity for de-escalation. Asking someone a question demonstrates interest and caring. Requesting self-reflection displays a sense of concern instead of anger. I love both teaching and my students, and I hope to continue enacting the Auerbach philosophy in the future so that they never doubt my intentions.

As for John, he did revise the next piece. Perhaps it was because we established our roles that day—or how far our buttons could be pushed—but John became one of my more passionate and creative writers. He decided to work with me instead of fighting his sponsorship of literacy. We ended up playing the writing game together with no one scoring and no one losing. After all, I just wanted the best writing to emerge so that we all won together.

References

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