Should Shay Be Squelched?

Striking a Balance Between Discipline and Creativity

by

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Squelch...Squelch...Squelch...not the sound of feet in wet shoes, but the battle cry of Yoda, my English department head, who shuffles past my office, hunched, chin out as though expecting and warding off a blow; a slight turn of her head allows her eyes to slither in then dart away to look steadfastly and unimaginatively forward just as eye contact is established. She plods on.

Moments later, she sits across from a student in her office. "This just isn't college writing!" she shrieks, gnarled fists curled and waving the air above the crinkled paper in her lap. Tears stream from the student's eyes. Her white flag is up, and she sits beaten, ready to write whatever and however Yoda wants. A half-hour later, the student pushes through the half-open door, past me, and through the swinging glass door at the end of the hall, and I am admitted into Yoda's lair to discuss her evaluation of my teaching. That's how it was—really.

The most pressing concern of Yoda's department was student misconduct. English students had been known to issue death threats to their teachers and get into fights outside the English building. And yet, this school is located in a rural area in a conservative town that is not known for an exceptionally high crime rate.

I taught the same levels of required composition courses as those teachers who reported students who stalked them and students who sat in the back rows during lectures chanting and meditating, yet I encountered none of these behaviors. Oh, Dan required repeated reminding that chatting during mini-lessons was distracting to other students and to me, Gwen's wearing of wings made of gauze and glitter over her dress caused a slight stir, and Stephen had to be informed that "Oh, shit!" might not be the most appropriate response to missing a quiz question, but overall my students were similar to those I'd encountered at previous community and state colleges. They occasionally spoke out of turn, were consciously and unconsciously combative, and frequently had lengthy and impassioned reasons why their homework was not done.

Looking back now, I realize those stories of aggressive students and the departmental policy that we issue a handout on disruptive student behavior the first day of class with the syllabus had its effect on me; I entered class each day with an underlying dread that my average, everyday students like Justin, Jose, or Anne might that day metamorphose into psychopaths.

Yoda had taught at that school for over twenty-five years at the time that she penned the following evaluation of my class:

For the most part, students were cooperative and interested. Some comments students made were perceptive criticisms of the reading and suggested that Stacy taught critical thinking. But one group of young men were horsing around and might have been reined in . . .

Reading this, I reflected back on the group of young men that had included Rod, Jesse, and Mark. They did
tend to be loud as the discussion in their group gained momentum, and yet this change was such a pleasant one compared to the first few weeks when they sat, cross-armed, purse-lipped, and unresponsive.

“They need to be squelched a bit—that’s all there is to it,” Yoda explained. I wondered, though, if indeed that was all there was to it. As the year went on and not one sociopath emerged from the very diverse body of students in my classes, I wondered why squelching was so important, when and on whom it worked, and when it was that squelching went awry. I explored the issue with my colleagues, in my writing, and through observation of my students. Six months later, I took part in the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project. It was there that I grew as a teacher and a writer. It was there that I attended a portfolio reading for the kids’ summer writing camp — and it was there that I met Shay, a sixteen-year-old who enlightened me.

Shay was like a brightly decorated Christmas tree, decorated, then forgotten to waste away into the month of March. A blue plastic clothespin dangled from the fold of skin separating her nostrils; two others, lavender and florescent yellow, hung from each lobe so that both ears were elongated, the blood drawn from points of contact to flame back angry red at the base of each lobe. A once-soft faded pink sweater stretched tautly across her emerging breasts, now adorned with hardened balls of knit, clumps of dried grass and crumbs. Dangling listlessly from beneath her pink sweater, her white wrists hung limply off the edge of the desk; slender fingers gripped a thick handmade book. Beneath the metal desk, two bare feet crowned with matching toes poked from beneath the frayed hem of baggy blue jeans, their perfect uniformity broken only by her right big toe for its nail had been halfway ripped off. Between each toe was a ridge of grime made up of dirt and sweat. Shay was part of the writing group assigned to me that day.

The room was like those found at any state university — one wall covered with impersonal green chalkboards riddled with chalk smudges, bare colorless walls and floors, desks clumped without plan in the middle of the room. Slumped teenagers wearing the trendy grunge look — straight hair, no make-up, striped shirts, faded and frayed baggy jeans, no shoes and bulky bead necklaces tied on with string—stared with practiced lack of interest.

“Who wants to share a piece from their portfolios?” I asked brightly, wondering if I would get a response, and worse, wondering what I would do if one of the creatures in front of me did respond.

“I don’t have nuthin,” Shay mumbled then disappeared with surprising agility into her pink sweater, flipping the back up so it covered her face, her arms, and her book. Only a jagged tuft of dark brown hair poked out creating a stark contrast to the stained white T-shirt that failed to hide the pointed angles of Shay’s protruding shoulder blades. Soon, even the tuft of hair was quelled beneath the straining knit seams, and only a quiet rustling, crackling of paper, and measured smacking was heard beneath the pink sweater.
“Would one of you like to share?” my teaching partner Annie smiled placidly, her wide eyes flickering from one slumped form to another. “Or would you like one of us to share?”

They stared back at Annie, unblinking, unmoving, except for the odd sway of bare feet.

“You,” one grunted. It could have been any one of them or all of them at once.

Annie looked at me expectantly so, clearing my throat, I began to read.

*Intimidated by a high-energy horse, most novices will attempt to contain the horse by holding tautly to the reins without relief or release; seemingly, they believe that if a firm, steady pull means “whoa” or “stop,” then a constant punishing pull means “stay stopped.”*

Shay reappeared, slinking from beneath the pink sweater and past the group to sit in a desk just outside of the circle. She dipped her back into the chair and raised her knees so that her crossed ankles supported perched bare feet with blackened soles. It was a funny pose, comically grotesque, but strangely in keeping with the group. Calmly and methodically, she began to chew on the nail of the smallest toe on her right foot.

The massed teenagers appeared not to hear the contented, sucking noises nor did they appear to notice the muddy trickle that made its way down Shay’s chin to land in silent globs on the front of that pink sweater. I continued to read.

*Unfortunately, if a horse has not been taught the cue or has had negative experiences that have led him to resist the cue, or is just exceptionally high-strung or excited, constant restraint has the opposite result.*

A whoosh came from Shay’s corner as she blew a perfect pink bubble, its limp elastic form stretched into a pink bladder-like orb.

*The horse’s resistance builds, builds and finally explodes, resulting in a grounded rider and potential injury to others.*

I glanced up periodically, shifting my gaze from one face to another. Their blank stares never faltered.

This horse is like many students in classrooms of the nineties; these students vary not only in ability but also in conduct, and they have as many different reasons and excuses for their behavior as horses like the one above have.

Shay removed the gum, bubble and all, and began stretching it from hand to hand before placing it gently back in her mouth.

*The rider in the above situation very much resembles many instructors, novice and experienced alike, who—intimidated by the growing number of students in each classroom, the—A soft whoosh was heard—growing number of student complaints and the growing number of instructor reports of abusive students—attempt to squelch the potentially disruptive students, to inflexibly restrain and control them.*

With a sharp pop, the bubble exploded, becoming a shapeless pink blob at the end of the blue clothespin.

Shay promptly and expertly spit the gum, clothespin too, onto the floor at our feet.

“Not the emphasis I had planned for that sentence,” I smiled at Shay, including the others with my gaze, “but I guess it will do.” I continued reading.

*Unfortunately, squelching often has a negative effect. The malleable students are quickly squelched; they quickly conform and work their way through our classes with blinders on, no longer attempting original thought for fear of being considered radical, troublesome or just plain weird.*

Shay melted deeper into her chair, her feet moving to an unknown cadence. She feverishly riffled through her book.

“Who wants to read now?” Annie asked. “Let’s hear from each of you . . .”

“You go, Laurie. Laurie wants to go.” As before, they seemed to speak with one voice—only Laurie and Shay were quiet. They all turned to look at the slender girl, her straight blond hair swept back from a lightly tanned face. Her smile revealed a gleaming retainer that shaped seemingly straight white teeth. Her clothes matched.

She blushed and began to read, “Raging thunder crashed and pounded with seeming vengeance . . .”
Shay’s index finger flipped the corner of one tattered page in her book, making a clicking sound.

As Laurie ended, Shay shoved her book at Jason. “Here. Read this one.”

“This one was written by Shay,” Jason muttered.

“Read it right.” Shay fingered the book as she passed it to him. Jason’s voice deepened and became steadily more resonant as he read. Lies shrieked for freedom from a non-existent truth… I looked past Jason’s bent head to look at Shay who was slumped rigidly, staring into herself… would-be warriors fought the empty war… God exists not here… Mirrors exist not here… The lines, like Medusa’s snakes, seemed to surround us; I felt myself taunted and teased by Shay’s words, dragged relentlessly down toward dark but critical revelation. Jason’s deepened voice ended quietly, and there was silence.

“Here, I’ll go next,” Shay said and plunged in. “...The concaved heart... draining life from children’s laughter...” Oh, forget it. I’m not going to read that one.”

“That’s it — you’re just going to leave us there?” I asked.

“Yes, I don’t like that one.”

Annie and I left twenty minutes later, passing through the door, calling good-byes and thank-you’s to the silent room of teenagers. As we moved down the dark stairway, Annie paused, saying with trilled laughter, “Weird kid... no social skills.”

Annie’s words played over and over in my mind, like the lyrics of an annoyingly simple but catchy advertisement jingle, and I thought of Shay. I remembered how she had huddled beneath the faded pink sweater, her odd punctuation of every sentence— whoosh—slurp—pop—and the shadows briefly glimpsed behind the reflective windows of her poetry. Weird, yes, but beneath frayed hems, limp white wrists, and gaily colored but grotesquely contorted clothespins, Shay wove a fragile web of words; Shay was a writer.

I have not encountered a large number of Shays in my community college classrooms; what makes her case so interesting is that it is so extreme. There is no doubt that Yoda would have argued that Shay’s behavior was completely disruptive, that she was “horsing around” and needed to be “squelched.” And yet, I am convinced that to have done so would have resulted in alienating the group and further encapsulating Shay in her cocoon outside of our activity.

Shay and several other students that I have encountered in the past year have led me to believe that true squelching in the form of challenging or berating a student whose behavior deviates from the norm can alienate not only that student but also the rest of the class and stymie an opportunity for setting up positive classroom dynamics. An easy-going acknowledgment of the behavior, a sense of humor, and continuation of the planned activity can often go a long way toward diffusing a potentially aggressive, troublesome, or otherwise disruptive student. What Shay taught me is that even students with behaviors as extreme as hers can be “caught” in the learning process—or alienated from it—depending on my response.

As I reflect back on my interactions with Yoda, I speculate that much of her advocacy of squelching has resulted from the change she has seen in students’ behavior over her lengthy teaching career. In the same way that I don’t know what came first between the chicken and the egg, I don’t know what came first between squelching and aggressive student behavioral problems at that particular school. I also don’t know whether Shay was created as a result of squelching or as a lack of squelching. What I do know, though, is that squelching is no panacea for student problems, and sometimes other methods might reel in those at-risk students.

I picture Yoda today, still with gnarled fists waving, dry voice cracking, eyes slitting away from contact— the love of students that long-ago called her to teaching squelched by her own methods. I picture her plodding on ... and on ... and on.

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