Michael, the Student Who Inspired Me to Quit Teaching

by

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Teachers like to tell stories with happy endings: a difficult child learns the lesson and student and teacher live happily together in intellectual bliss for the remainder of the term. However, my story is different because my student Michael learned his lesson long before I did. Mysteriously, Michael became an active learner, and I was befuddled by the unexpected transformation. I was supposed to be the teacher, but I merely observed as learning transpired. Still, by mere observation, I learned a profound lesson about teaching. Let me tell my tale, the tale of a teacher who quit teaching.

I first met Michael in the hallway outside of the industrial arts classroom at our high school. I was teaching in a job training program and recruiting students who were potential dropouts. Michael’s name was marked with an asterisk on the counselor’s printout indicating referral to our program. As I gave him our usual sales pitch for the program, my first impression was, “I sure wouldn’t want to meet this one in a dark alley.” He was eighteen years old, dressed in blue jeans, a tight black tee shirt, dirty boots, and an earring. He was of medium height and build, with a mass of disheveled, curly brown hair, discolored teeth, and a face that needed shaving. His eyes were hooded, but piercing, and he wore a permanent snarl on his face that said, “Don’t mess with me.” His grimace caused his speech to be guttural and muffled, and he seemed to weigh every word carefully as he answered, “I’ll think about it.”

The next morning he was in our office to tell me that he would be in our program. In a slow determined monotone, he said that there weren’t too many people he trusted, especially teachers, but he thought he could trust me. I didn’t quite know how to interpret that remark, but I secretly hoped I did not have “sucker” stamped on my forehead. I later learned that Michael was on our at-risk list because he was living in a foster home after successfully completing a drug rehab program at a reform school in the eastern section of the state. So Michael was officially enrolled in our class, and I had just the program to develop his skills and prepare him for survival in the world. We used structured computer programs with lessons and drills on successive reading and math levels to develop basic skill mastery, as well as a self-paced computer program for typing lessons. Students were matched by ability level and encouraged to work cooperatively at work stations. It was the answer to every teacher’s dream: built in management and motivation, tests to measure reading and math gains, and printouts to document success at the end of the year.

But it became immediately obvious that Michael couldn’t be matched with a suitable partner. He distanced himself with his attitude and his unspoken contempt for the shallowness and immaturity of his classmates. He sat with his snarl and his big chip, daring anyone to collaborate with him. He didn’t even
react to the rewarding smile of the icon on the computer screen who jumped up and down and spelled out, “Good job, Michael. Are you ready to go to the next level?” He soon became bored with the skill and drill games, but he would focus on the typing lessons for longer periods. Often I would catch him off task, playing games on the computer or following me around the room, telling fantastic tales about his best friends who were on “America’s Most Wanted.” He also told me stories of how he had inflicted bodily harm on people who threatened him, recounting injuries and hospitalizations that resulted from his rages.

In desperation I suggested that he should put his interesting stories on the computer, which he also seemed to think was a good idea. My motives were not professional; I had no set goals for Michael, no daily objectives or structured lessons, but I had to get him off of my back so I could keep everyone else working. After all, there were basics skills to be learned, so what if I sacrificed one to enrich the others.

While I circulated, helping other students, Michael was engrossed in composition. I cringed as I passed his screen and spotted a conglomeration of errors in what appeared to be a run on sentence, the length of the screen, but Michael was happily occupied for more than a week and less of a bother to me. Finally, he printed out several single-spaced pages, brought them to my desk and asked me to read them. Since the bell was going to ring, I told him that I would be glad to take them home with me and read them later. He lowered his deep voice even lower to tell me that he had written things he had never told anyone before and to make sure that no one saw those papers. To ease his mind I let him watch me as I put them in a special folder and tuck it in my book bag.

Later that evening I pulled the folder out and reluctantly began to read the secret papers, anticipating more of “America’s Most Wanted” episodes and bar room brawl accounts. Instead, I read a personal narrative written by a vulnerable, sensitive young man who wore a cold and lonely shield of isolation. The story was simple, heartfelt, and sincere. He wrote of a very young boy who ran from his house in the middle of the night seeking help because some man was beating his mother. He spoke of another boyfriend who hung the child’s puppy by the tail on the clothesline to tease him, of a father who never answered his son’s letters, and of a teenage babysitter who sexually abused him. Although his writing style was rudimentary, his message was powerful enough to bring tears to my eyes.

The next morning he met me at my desk, asking me what I thought of his papers. I told him that I admired his courage and his ability to overcome so many obstacles. He again asked my assurance that no one had seen the papers but me, and asked if they were in a safe place. I gave them to him and he informed me that he had told no one these things, not even the counselors and psychologists at the reform school. Suspecting that he was referring to the past sexual abuse, I assured him that it was very confidential, but I wished he would speak to a counselor, a suggestion he politely refused.

Michael kept himself occupied for weeks as he wrote about his life, and each time he submitted papers for me to read, we went through the ceremonial rite of secrecy as he watched me tuck the folder in my book bag. After several weeks of this, I began telling him how difficult it was to understand parts of his narrative, how it rambled and roamed, with gaps and incomplete ideas and thoughts with no beginning or end. I explained that he knew the details, but I was the reader and I had not experienced his feelings, nor could I picture the scenes and the people he discussed. He seemed eager to convey his message more clearly, and for several months we had mini-lessons on sentence and paragraph structure, focus, description, detail, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling—all done within the context of his writing. Many of the mechanics were taught through short notes on his papers as I read his revisions at home. At other times I would find time to conference with him one-on-one. We often worked with subject-verb agreement, identifying direct and indirect quotes for punctuation, sentence fragments, run-ons, pronouns without antecedents. He learned to use descriptive language and organize paragraphs around subtopics.

I noticed that as Michael wrote more, he wrote less about his own pain. He wrote of his mother, who was obviously emotionally crippled, his grandmother and his grandfather whom he fondly remembered, and his foster parents, whom he respected. He also wrote of deep religious convictions and conflicting doubts. As his writing changed, there was a simultaneous
change in his personality and his appearance. He no longer wore tight black tee shirts, but donned crisp cotton shirts; his face was clean shaven, and his hair was tamer. His snarl softened and he removed the big chip on his shoulder. We no longer suffered through his fantasies of underworld connections and super feats of injury to wrongdoers. I even caught him helping classmates with word processing, since he had achieved mastery of spell check, insert, delete, and mark and move options through countless revisions of his own work.

At the end of the term, my other students showed the expected gain in basic skills on the computer test, but Michael’s gain was measured in self-confidence and self-acceptance. And what was my role in all of this as Michael’s teacher? I didn’t teach. I got him off of my back and I stayed out of his way, only offering assistance when he asked for it. The other students learned basic skills, that may or may not be remembered and transferred to real life, but Michael learned that he wanted to learn, and he discovered himself in the process of writing.

This teacher’s tale doesn’t end here. The next year when I got my tentative schedule, I noticed Michael’s name on three class rosters. I was no longer teaching job training, but Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior English classes. To graduate in 1993, Michael had to repeat Freshman, Junior, and Senior English which he had failed in his former school. Again my reaction was unprofessional. What was I going to do with the same student for three hours? I would either bore him to death with my lessons, or he would become totally overwhelmed with so much literature from so many different periods, considering the scope and sequence guidelines in our English program.

To spare Michael the torture of enduring me for three solid hours, I usually alternated his required attendance, freeing him for independent reading and writing two hours each day. He either went to the library to read or to the computer lab to write. He kept up with all of the literature readings and continued to expand his writing genres to short stories, poetry, research papers, persuasive writing, and reflections on literature and life. He read hungrily, and Steinbeck became his favorite author after he read Of Mice and Men. He couldn’t wait to read The Red Pony and The Grapes of Wrath when he discovered Steinbeck had written them. Perhaps he could readily identify with the plight of the unfortunate characters in Steinbeck’s novels through his own experience. Regardless of his motives, he became an avid reader that year, and branched out to read at least twenty novels as well as the short stories in The literature books. As he read more, his speaking and writing vocabulary expanded and his sentences became more complex, his writing style more sophisticated.

But his greatest accomplishment was his term paper on Steinbeck and The Grapes of Wrath that he wanted to share with the senior class and with Mr. Edmonson, the Vice-Principal in charge of discipline, a man well-known to my crew. It seemed that Michael needed to say to everyone — peers, teachers, and administrators — “Look, I’m not an ‘at risk’ statistic, I am one of you, a part of society, and I’ve got something to tell you about life.” He said it well, first in writing, and later in action.

That Christmas, I gave Michael a gift, the book Jonathan Livingston Seagull, because the message was his own story and I hope he read it with insight. He easily passed the English courses and graduated that summer after he made up additional credits from former years. The last time I spoke to a relative, he had a steady job at a brickyard in another city, and I hope he has continued reading and writing. I think of him often, because there aren’t many stories as remarkable as his with such unexpected rewards, and Michael’s story has been my secret inspiration. Yet his success vexed me for two years.

As I said at the beginning, Michael learned quickly and I learned slowly. I observed his transformation, his untiring efforts at self-expression; I witnessed his hunger for literature, and wondered why. I knew it was nothing I did, except maybe accepting him as he was, and that wasn’t easy. I didn’t even listen to him at first, until he wrote it down in a half-cryptic style. Finally two years later, after reading Linda Reif, Nancy Atwell, Thomas S. Meyher, and others, and attending many professional workshops, it has come to me. It wasn’t what I did; it was what I didn’t do. I didn’t restrict him to endless drills and worksheets; I let him discover his needs through his mistakes. I allowed him to take risks. I didn’t limit him to the scope and sequence of the curriculum, but I gave him freedom.

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to choose books that he enjoyed so he could explore and find delight in the pleasure of reading. For his initial writings I provided the audience, but he had already established his own purpose and voice. I let him work from the top down, allowing him to see the whole picture so the parts would fit in somewhere. His message was his goal, and the mechanics became the means to convey his urgent message more clearly.

I no longer teach high school students. I now teach language arts to seventy-seven seventh graders in three ninety-minute block classes. And I no longer have the luxury of a computer lab or small class sizes, but I have Michael's story to remind me to quit "teaching" so much and to give my students room to learn by capitalizing on the reading-writing connection.

I now give my students more choice in reading selections and writing topics, so they can explore, take risks, and express themselves as Michael did. Because of Michael's need to write about his own life, I allow my students more opportunities to write about themselves. I require my students to keep reading journals, to which I respond. I want my students to play for real as Michael did, and not play the game of reading for the right answers and the next skill level.

I may never have another Michael in the classroom, but I now know what a learner can accomplish when he is given the freedom to learn, control over his writing, and the opportunity to take risks. So thank you, Michael, wherever you are, for inspiring me to quit teaching and to begin coaching, guiding, challenging, listening, sharing, and giving students the freedom to learn.

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