Reflections of a Distracted Teacher

When you got your teaching job, you were assessed for your knowledge of subject matter, your professional knowledge, and your verbal and organizational skills. All that's left out here is the most important thing: your humanity—your capacity to care about each of your students, one at a time. In this article, the author details her reawakening to this most basic skill.

REBECCA DIERKING

February 13

I sit at my desk at the end of the day. Before me is the box containing what to some untutored eyes appears a jumble of rubber-banded note cards and stapled papers clipped into three bunches. However, to the knowing eye—mine—this package contains seventy-one sophomore research papers and their accompanying note cards.

I place the paper-clipped scoring guides tenderly into the box, aware that I must have these graded for research style, grammar/mechanics, and content soon because, according to policy, students who fail the paper must be given a chance to correct it or face failing the class and having to retake it next year. This means that every spare minute I have free for approximately the next two months, I will probably spend grading research papers, in addition to all the other grading of course work during that time period. I tell myself, the sooner you have it done, the less time you'll have to spend worrying about it. Yeah.

February 27

Annie returned to school today after being absent for about a week and requested the homework assignments she had missed. I sighed. Normally a bright, responsible student who doesn't miss but a few days during the first semester, she had suddenly become a frequently excused absence.

"Annie," I told her, "if you'd have your mother or father call in for your homework and pick it up at the office, you wouldn't fall behind in the class, and it would be easier for you to make up."

She said nothing in response, just nodded, collected the pages, and returned to her desk. Only later did I learn Annie's mother had breast cancer and the entire family had been traveling two hours to the hospital and had spent a week at her side when she fell critically ill from the disease and its treatment.

March 14

I am on a school bus traveling the two-hour return trip from an all-day Academic Team (Brain Bowl) Meet. We left before dark this morning and are returning after dark, so, once again, the only sunlight I have seen today was through a window.

The squad competed well today. When the kids made it into semifinals, I congratulated them and gave my pep talk and strategy for the next opponent while harboring a secret wish that our team would lose so we could go home early. They didn't. In fact, they made it to the final round, and I was guilt stricken because while I wanted them to succeed, I also wanted to go home so I wouldn't have to spend all of tomorrow (Sunday) doing lesson plans, grading papers, and completing all the other jobs of an English teacher in between doing laundry, making meals for the week, and cleaning the apartment.

*****
Reflections of a Distracted Teacher

April 1
I had a run-in with Dena recently. She was sitting at the back of the room, as she usually does, in holey imitation Keds, frayed jeans, and a T-shirt so worn that I could almost see through it. Her dirty blonde hair was all I could see as she flipped through the catalog from a local department store, looking at jewelry.

"Put it up, or I'll file-13 it," I told her.
She grudgingly complied.

Today in the hallway, I overheard her two friends talking about how Dena's parents had tired of Dena's teen rebelliousness and had kicked her out of the house. Eyes bugging in shock, I was horrified to hear that a fifteen-year-old could not convince her parents to keep her at home but was able to coax them into letting her marry her eighteen-year-old boyfriend so she'd have some place to live.

*****

April 21
It's nearly midnight as I sit on my couch at home. I took a sick day today to start grading those dang research papers, knowing that my thirty seniors will soon add their much more in-depth research paper/project to the grading stack. I also spent some time trying to figure out some unit for the sophomores that would be educational and interesting but would not require much from me on a day-to-day basis so that I can finish grading these dang research papers.

It's late. By this point, I've graded seven papers, one of which is blatantly plagiarized and will require research on my part before accusations—more work for me. I'm frustrated, maddened, and bleary-eyed from trying to figure out what the students intended in their writing and research.

May 5
Earlier in the year, Sam, a senior and a publicly recognized model for good values (including abstaining from drugs, alcohol, and other potentially dangerous behaviors), sauntered into the room in his football jersey, eyes reddened, pupils dilated. He chewed the fat with some of his "homeys" and proceeded to turn in his incomplete, actually barely done, homework and to continue his discussion with his friends while I tried to address questions and begin a lesson.

Later, at parent-teacher conferences, I voiced my concerns about Sam's attitude and general lack of attention to his work and in our class discussions. No one paid much attention. Saturday, Sam was busted for possession with intent to distribute and charged with assault after he tried to deck the bouncer who wouldn't let him into the bar and resisting arrest when said bouncer called the police. He lost a multi-thousand-dollar scholarship because it included a moral-turpitude clause.

*****

May 7
I attended a before-school faculty meeting this morning. Most of the information given during the hour could have been disseminated via email and would have saved me an hour's loss. While the coaches argued about some new rule the principal had just passed down from whomever decreed it, I made a list of the gazillion or so things I need to accomplish in my forty-five-minute planning period before I leave, early, for an overnight, two-day forensics and debate tournament. The school counselor stopped me on the way out of the faculty meeting to remind me to give her an update on Chad, a student whose parents feel he should be earning a perfect A yet who consistently provides me with D work. Guess I'll do that during my lunch break and eat air. Hey, at least I'll lose some weight since I lost my morning workout to the faculty meeting.

*****

May 28
In reviewing end-of-the-semester reflection pieces today, I came upon Neil's. Neil has been absent a lot this year. Recently he turned in a preplanned absence form without a reason why he'd be gone. When questioned, he sloughed it off with a shrug and didn't meet my eyes. Well, I figured, he would have to tell the principal before he'd get it approved.

In Neil's reflection piece, instead of focusing on how or even if he grew in this literature unit, he concentrated on how the Division of Family Services saved his life by yanking him from his parents' home and placing him in foster care and on the court proceedings he had attended this year to testify against his parents as his foster family tried to have his siblings removed from a physically, emotionally, and mentally abusive situation. His descriptions of the welts from his father's belt, the cracked ribs and burns that he covered with long droopy shirts, the conditions of living among animals and their feces and avoiding the persistent offerings of drugs from his parents horrified and shamed me. His glowing appreciation for a hot meal, a clean bed, and a working shower made me cry.

*****

What's going on here? Well, frankly, I've fallen into the trap many teachers—

continued on page 39
Reflections of a Distracted Teacher

continued from page 12

especially teachers of composition—encounter. I spent so much time on doing my job that I forgot to do my job. I became so wrapped up in the papers, lesson plans, meetings, and the million-and-one other details involved in being a teacher that I forgot that my students are human beings—children—in need of compassion and attention. They need more from me than just a conveyance of knowledge; they also need an advocate and sympathizer. Yes, I still need to do all those other things, but somehow I need to devise a way to accomplish the paperwork, leave time for my life outside of school, and give my students the interest they deserve. The paperwork is endless, as every teacher knows, but there must be a way to “do it all” without suffering from teacher burnout.

I became a teacher with idealism, energy, and a desire to make a difference. I will make that difference by not only transmitting my knowledge of English to them but also by showing them that I care about more than just their learning. How? I will return to those small lessons I’d forgotten since college: greet each student in the hallway or as she enters the classroom, acknowledge a student in public and ask general questions about how his life is progressing. A greeting or small conversation every now and then doesn’t take too much effort or time from my day but will add immeasurably to the emotions of my students. By knowing I care, hopefully, every student entering my classroom will in turn care about what I teach: literature, composition, and most of all, humanity.

Rebecca Dierking teaches sophomore English II and senior composition (a dual enrollment course) at Maryville High School in Maryville, Missouri. She is a teacher-consultant with the Prairie Lands Writing Project in St. Joseph, Missouri.