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MY YEAR AS A TEACHER

By Larry Slonaker

Sometime in February, it all started caving in on me.

I was scrambling to get my students ready for the district writing test, but many still were having problems just writing a coherent sentence, let alone an essay. And I wasn't sleeping very well, because every night I was having the same nightmare, over and over—the naked-in-front-of-the-students dream.

Then, around Valentine's Day, the principal called me into her office.

She had a note to show me. One of the janitors had found it in another of the seventh-grade classrooms.

The page, which had been ripped jaggedly from a spiral notebook and viciously crumpled, had one word written on the first five lines: *Kill . . . Kill . . . Kill . . .* On the next 17 lines, a second word was added: *Kill.. . . Slonaker. Kill . . . Slonaker. Kill . . . Slonaker.* The same words, over and over.

I was still sort of reeling from this when, that same week, one of my male students shyly gave me a valentine. I thanked him and set it aside to read later, because the class period had already begun. It wasn't until after school that I remembered to open it. It read, "I've got a crush on you."

It was about this time I decided that teaching might be too hard for me to do.

In the 2001-02 school year, I took a leave from the Mercury News to fulfill a longtime goal of teaching. After earning a temporary credential, I found a job teaching "language arts" to seventh-graders at Brownell Academy, a public school in Gilroy.

What was my year like?

It was heartbreaking. It was fun. It was surprising, irritating, elevating, frustrating. I gained some insight into why people might think California schools are -- to quote the

popular refrain -- "so screwed up." And I came away with some ideas on what might make them less so.

I learned the 23 helping verbs; the use of slang such as "hecka tight;" and how to improve student test scores, even though the usefulness of that information often was dubious.

But mostly, I learned that teaching is hard.

Even if you teach poorly (and I'm something of an expert here), it's hard. To teach well is ridiculously hard. It's probably equivalent to batting .380 and driving in 140 runs for the Giants. Or singing the role of Violetta in a major opera company's production of "La Traviata."

The difference between those feats and teaching is that hardly anybody knows it if you're teaching well. Even the students don't know.

"People go into teaching with the greatest of intentions," says Caren Black, the vice principal at my school. "And before they can even get their mouth open, there's this tugging at their sleeve that's completely unrelated."

Completely unrelated, as in, *Mr. Slonaker, I'm going to be absent tomorrow because I have to go to my dad's trial.* As in, *I'm late because my sister moved in with us and her baby cries all night.* As in, *My friend has to go to the bathroom because it's that time of the month and she's too shy to tell you.*

Teaching involves more than presenting material in front of a class (although that in itself is a staggering challenge). You have to be a pretty good amateur psychologist. You also have to be a credible authority figure and a confident leader.

There's more. You must be flexible. You must have a sense of humor. And -- without this attribute you cannot be a teaching success, no matter if you have all the other traits -- you must have patience.

In fact, the amount of patience you need is roughly equivalent to the depth and breadth of Lake Huron.

Teachers who possess these traits are the most crucial part of education. Without them, reform in any guise -- whether it's state-imposed standards or back-to-basics curriculum or billions in bond measures -- won't work.

But many school districts in California throw new teachers into the classroom with little preparation, and only sporadic support once school starts. This is especially true in the poorest districts, which rely heavily on teachers with emergency credentials. And of course, it's the students in those districts who need good teachers the most.

Much of my work in the classroom was, by necessity, trial and error. Methods that I was optimistic would work often proved to be ridiculous failures. And, once in a while, I tried

something thinking it was a waste of time, only to find it worked great. A classroom of seventh-graders yields surprise after surprise, and oddity upon oddity.

But out of all those surprises and oddities, the one that threw me the most was the inability of many students to simply listen.

Blame it on MTV, blame it on their parents, blame it on computer games. Whatever the reason, these students could not absorb information without a titanic struggle.

Sometimes I thought they simply weren't listening. Eventually I came to believe they didn't know how to listen.

I tried to address this by mixing up my methods to enliven the classroom. Sometimes this helped stimulate the students, but it didn't ever seem to make them better listeners. No matter what technique I used, when it came time to do the assignment, there were always four or five who sang the same refrain: *What are we supposed to do? I don't get what we're supposed to do.*

Ultimately, I settled on a ridiculously simple technique: I just kept repeating the information until they got it. That took a large amount of time, and a larger amount of patience, but it seemed to work better than anything else.

At first, though, I floundered.

My introduction to the problem came right away. I'd been warned that many students entering my class would be lacking certain basic skills. So in the first week of school, we began working on a list of commonly misspelled words.

The list included the words it's and its. The two are commonly confused, in large part because of the apostrophe (or "that curly thing," as most of my students called it).

But their meanings are quite different, of course. *It's* is a contraction of *it is*. ("It's time to eat.") *Its*, minus the curly thing, is a possessive; a word that indicates ownership. ("The dog wagged its tail.")

We went over the two words' meanings countless times, using countless examples. I even drew a crude picture on a transparency of a dog wagging its tail and shone it on the screen in front of the room, to the students' derisive delight.

After what seemed like an excessive amount of work on the subject, I picked out 10 spelling words. The eighth was "its." For homework, I assigned them to write a sentence for each word.

At the end of the next day, I took all the papers I had collected through five class periods and reviewed them. I was surprised to see how many words were misspelled and misused. Especially "its." The majority still used "its" as a contraction.

That was the day I first felt an inkling of how much patience I would need. The feeling was distilled in one simple sentence that came from a happy-go-lucky student in sixth period.

After several preliminary missteps ("Were are my shoes at?" and -- optimistically -- "Their is not eny homework for today"), he submitted this for sentence No. 8:

"Its a plauser to meat you Mr. Slonaker."

For several moments I stared at this -- particularly at the words "its" and "meat." I began to picture my body passing through a hamburger grinder, with the student hospitably turning the crank.

Another example:

Later in the year, we spent several days working on how to make inferences, or draw conclusions, based on text. The idea was, the author doesn't always write down exactly how a character feels. There are subtler ways of conveying it. The author might say, "Susie stomped off and slammed the door."

"So, based on that information," I told the class, "we can infer -- we can draw the conclusion -- that Susie is angry."

We went over this backward and forward, discussing example after example, for probably three days. Finally I made an assignment: "Read the story in the text, and then on the next page, answer the two questions you'll find under the heading, 'Drawing Conclusions.' "

As always, most students immediately got to work. But in all my classes, I inevitably encountered several blank stares. Many of these puzzled students shared one concern in particular, which was best articulated by The Flash.

The Flash was an energetic, fast-talking kid who could move around the classroom like a lizard around a rock pile.

His hand shot into the air.

"Yes?"

"We hafta do this?" he demanded.

He put his finger on the "Drawing Conclusions" heading in the text. This was about eight seconds after I'd made the assignment and written it on the white board.

I pointed to the board. "Yes. That's the assignment."

He seemed to visibly deflate, his hand slowly sinking. "I can't do that," he said dispiritedly.

"Why not?"

" 'Cause I can't draw good."

For several years I had been thinking about making a career change and becoming a teacher. There had been lots of publicity about mid-career professionals switching to teaching, and I thought, "Why not me?"

I had taught a class in non-fiction writing for several semesters at San Jose State University. While I didn't delude myself that the experience was directly comparable to teaching grades K-12, I found I enjoyed being in front of a class. It was rewarding and fun to try to help students improve their language skills.

Wondering if that would carry over to the primary grades, I tried a little substitute teaching. That was mostly unpleasant, but I didn't conclude from the experience that teaching was all bad. That, I thought, would be like concluding the world is flat because someone hit you over the head with a board.

Then, in the spring of 2001, the Mercury News made it much easier for employees to take a leave of absence. I decided, at age 47, that this was my chance. I'd get an emergency credential -- which would allow me to teach for a year -- and then apply at schools.

Because school districts throughout California, and especially in the Bay Area, were desperate for teachers in the past few years, it was relatively common for people with emergency credentials to get a job. The main requirements for the credential are that you have a bachelor's degree and show you can pass the California Basic Educational Skills Test.

The test lasts three hours, and has three components: reading, math and writing. (Sample questions and other test information can be found at www.cbest.nesinc.com).

My scores were good enough to pass, although ironically (to me, anyway) my lowest score by far was on the writing segment. (Later in the school year, I would become better acquainted with the wacky world of how written tests are scored.)

The next step was to find a job close to home, in South County or in San Benito County. Most schools try to fill openings in the spring, and by now it was June. Luckily, Gilroy Unified School District had a couple of openings: one at Gilroy High School, the other in seventh grade at a middle school, Brownell Academy.

Brownell's principal, Suzanne Damm, seemed nice, funny and enthusiastic about teaching. When she called a week later to offer me the job, I could hardly contain my excitement.

Friends soon reeled me in, sounding dire warnings. "Seventh grade? They're 12 and 13, their hormones are raging," an ex-principal told me. "You'll hate it."

I refused to listen. I asked myself, "How bad could it be, really?" I took the job, at the regular district first-year salary of $35,687.

Later I asked Damm whether my lack of experience had worried her when she made the hiring decision.

She responded that experience is always a factor to consider, but experienced teachers aren't necessarily good teachers. One of the main things she looks for is a person who can be comfortable with students.

"I can teach you teaching strategies," she said. "But I can't teach you how to work with kids."

In mid-August I was undergoing a harried orientation. I had about two weeks to learn how to be a seventh-grade teacher.

With the three other teachers new to Brownell, I was dispatched to various seminars and meetings. One day we were shown a movie about classroom management called "Defusing Anger and Aggression."

According to the film's somber narrator, you were supposed to acknowledge children who were on task and not respond directly to those who weren't. If a child created a ruckus, the narrator said, "Move slowly and deliberately to the problem situation. . . . Withdraw if the problem escalates."

It was like watching a training film for a bomb squad.

Obviously, this crash-course technique was not the ideal way to go about preparing me for the classroom. The district knew that far better than I at the time, and jammed in as much help as possible, but there was only so much I could absorb in a short period.

The problem was not mine alone. One of seven of California's 350,000 teachers lacks full credentials. The amount of classroom training these novices undergo varies, but usually it's not much.

Much has been made of the "No Child Left Behind" education bill that calls for placing "highly qualified" teachers in state classrooms. But no one has come up with a "No Teacher Left Behind" plan yet.

At first I had been too ignorant to be concerned about whether I was set up to fail. But as the days passed, with little time in my classroom to get ready, my apprehension began to grow. I was hearing all kinds of ominous warnings about "classroom management."

"Last year the kids were great 'til January. Then their hormones exploded," one of the seventh-grade teachers told me. "So get control early."

That was the most common advice. I encountered an adage that many of my colleagues seemed to take seriously: "Don't let the students see you smile until Thanksgiving."

Michael Tanner, a veteran eighth-grade language arts teacher at Brownell, helped me out. He gave me some supplies, since my supply order wouldn't come back from the warehouse in time for the first day of school. But more important, he gave me good advice.

"Identify the troublemakers early," he said. "Enlist their help. They're getting attention from you, which is what they want."

"Keep the door open when kids come in after school. Don't try to be their friend."

"Wear something dark on the first day. Try to appear authoritative."

I met with my adviser from the district's program for new teachers. She warned that I would be getting some students reading at second-grade level.

She also gave me lots of information on classroom management, including a laminated sheet with a list of vague "preventions" and "interventions." (Prevention: "non-contingent reinforcement;" intervention: "removal procedures.")

Staff meetings were dominated by discussions of the new California standards that we were supposed to teach. In fact, every lesson, every day, was supposed to address one or more specific standards. But I barely had a chance to look at them, let alone draw up lesson plans around them.

Finally, time simply ran out. I spent all day the Sunday before school getting the room ready. The floor was recarpeted over the summer, so all the desks had been removed, then shoved back in.

My desk had been cast off to the side. The handle was missing from one of the drawers. And the middle drawer was broken apart, its contents -- pins and pens and post-its -- strewed on the desktop.

My next-classroom neighbor, Lisa McFarland, took pity on me and lent me a bunch of material with which to decorate the classroom. This was not my forte (I was beginning to wonder what was), and even with her splashy posters and corkboard borders, the room seemed stark and cold.

I finished my preparations by putting away a bag we'd received from the nurse. It contained antiseptic wipes, Band-Aids and plastic gloves. I wondered if I'd ever use them.

"What's your biggest fear?" Tanner, the eighth-grade teacher, asked me at lunch.

"That I'll lose control. That I won't be able to keep control of the classroom."

He nodded sagely, as if this was a good answer -- which was not particularly reassuring to me.

Tomorrow was the first day of school. I surveyed the room: my poor but earnest efforts at decorating, the desks I'd arranged in neat rows, the white board on which I'd written, "Welcome!"

And I asked myself: What have I gotten myself into?

I was about to find out.