

Teaching MacGyver to Write

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When I started my career, I was positive I would be flawless and effective. English was really one of the only things I loved and was good at, so my students would easily pick it up as I taught.

Sounds pretty on paper, doesn't it?

Reality set in during my student teaching, in the form of a student I'll call Mac in my section of junior English. He was always on the verge of failing. I don't think he even cracked the cover of *Huck Finn*, and his research paper was on a common subject that obviously didn't interest him, so it was a half-hearted attempt. Mac was also a mechanical genius farm kid. He stayed up late and woke up early, and he could fix anything with an engine. I mean that quite literally.

The entire junior class fit into two buses, and we were headed out on an hour-long journey to see a play. I think it was *The Foreigner*, which is about a man in a new town who chooses to let everyone believe he can't understand or speak English.

My class's bus was bringing up the rear. As we were going up a hill, the bus began to lose power. The engine raced as the driver pushed his pedal into the floor, but there was none of the diesel power that should have been behind it. We coasted to a stop alongside the highway.

These were the days before cell phones, so the driver used the radio to call the garage. It would take too long to get someone to come fix the bus to allow us to see the play. As the news filtered through the seats that we'd be stuck on the side of the road until our bus was fixed, then return to school as the other bus of kids got to watch a play, it turned ugly.

Mac sauntered up to the front of the bus. He casually popped the hatch covering the engine, which to my surprise was inside the bus, near the driver. He looked at a few things, asked the driver to manipulate some pedals, and before I could understand what was happening, he was surveying the passengers for random objects like twist ties and paper clips. I joked to my mentor teacher that we weren't in an episode of *MacGyver*. How could he fix a bus, let alone with what we had available?

Mac was soon lying on his stomach in the aisle, and I heard him mumbling to the driver. He shrugged and cranked the key. The bus inched forward, much to my astonishment. Mac popped up on his feet, closed the hatch and wiped his hands on his jeans. He had his head tucked modestly down, but he did raise his hands over his head to a roar of cheers as he made his way back to his seat. And why not? Without a doubt, he was the hero of the day. We even made it just in time for the play.

Despite Mac's prowess with the bus engine, he wasn't making the cut in my class, so when final grades came due, I assigned the dismal grade he had earned on the assignments I had given.

I like to think Mac is rolling in success and money as the owner of a mechanic's shop somewhere, but I just don't know what happened to him after that year. I went on to teach for 15 years in high schools before moving to community college and university settings, but I still think about Mac's grade in my class. It used to make me feel like I'm the one who failed him.

Initially, I thought of him when I used an unorthodox method to reach a kid.

I thought of Mac the time I dug out the marginally appropriate short story “Two in One,” about a taxidermy assistant who murders his boss and puts on the skin to avoid getting caught, only to get arrested for his own murder. It was a stretch, but the kid loved it, and it helped illustrate irony. That student also read whatever I assigned the rest of the semester, often stopping in after school to tell me which stories she liked.

I thought of Mac during the hours I spent scribing on dozens of different graphic organizers for that student who had great ideas but horrible organization, until she finally looked at the paper, grabbed it so hard it crumpled. “I get it! I can do it on my own now.” She could, and she did.

I thought of Mac with the kid who could not think of a single topic he was passionate about outside of football, so he gave all his speeches—informative, demonstrative, and persuasive—on that one topic. I inwardly groaned, but it was about the student’s learning, not my comfort. Was the assignment for me, or for the kids?

The answer is so obvious, but when we’re inundated with standards and pacing guides, it can be hard to keep that focus.

I also think of Mac when I’ve failed to connect to students.

I thought of Mac when I discovered a student was intentionally failing my class to avoid graduation and get back at her dad. I didn’t figure it out until the third go-round, and then I simply didn’t show her a single grade until after it was too late to tank the semester. Success, perhaps, as she graduated, but did I really fix the problem?

I thought of Mac when I met with a student, adjusting deadlines and helping her plan out a path to finish. She didn’t officially drop my class, but I never saw or heard from her again despite my calls and emails.

If my classrooms were set in an episode of *MacGyver*, I could be an instant hero. But I’m a teacher, just an optimistic realist. So, I’ve had to try several alternatives before I hit on one that works for the many Macs I’ve taught. And then I must realize that sometimes, despite all my efforts, I am still not able to reach a student in the way I would have liked. That one is tough for me. What am I supposed to do with that?

The last piece of the puzzle came with a student I’ll call Sarge. He was the type of kid whom I met with several times a week regarding classroom behavior and motivation for an entire semester. Most days, Sarge left me feeling completely defeated. Because I believe I hold onto specific memories and experiences to teach me something later, I’d force my thoughts back to Mac when I got frustrated. I kept trying, but I kept failing.

I was relieved when Sarge passed. I was tired of the almost daily reminders that I couldn’t figure him out.

Some time later, I was in the middle of teaching a class and heard a knock on my door. Sarge stood there in uniform, hat in his hands. He was home on a short break from military school. “Can I come in and talk to your class for a second? I just want to tell them that it’s worth it. What you do here is all for them. And I can tune up any attitudes you need me to,” he offered, puffing up his chest and holding his arms out from his body like a bodybuilder in competition.

I was so stunned I honestly can’t remember my response. My repeated attempts had had zero effect on Sarge’s attitude, motivation, or behavior, and I’d had only moderate success on the

English skills front. I wish I could adequately articulate what that random knock on my classroom door meant to me. Had the attempts I'd viewed as failing ultimately succeeded?

It seems that Mac had ultimately “MacGyvered” me. I'd spent so long thinking he taught me just to try different methods to get kids to learn my subject area, yet what he really taught me was far more basic, fundamental. It's not always about teaching them English. If I kept trying, what I was really doing, aside from furthering my curriculum, was acknowledging them, seeing their needs and trying to make a difference.

I now realize he was not only MacGyver that day, but he was also like the protagonist in *The Foreigner* who “didn't know” English. Because everyone thought he didn't understand what was going on, he ended up saving the townspeople.

Dramatic, perhaps, but this lesson has helped me shift my focus from teaching English to teaching as a series of intricate human relationships. It may not be as measurable in AP scores or accolades, but it's made me happier in my career.

Of course, because I'm human, I still obsess about the few negatives in a sea of positives. But I keep my thin “good things” file, and I go back and reread the emails and cards from over the years when I become fixated. It reminds me that perhaps I'm just helping to shape genuine humans, rather than creating scholars. I'm okay with that.

Author Biography

Victoria Opalewski is a Clinical Educator for the School of Education at Wichita State University, specifically working with the middle/secondary team. Previously, she taught English and public speaking at the high school level and coached forensics and Academic Decathlon speaking and interviewing; she also directed plays in Wisconsin, substituted in Iowa, and taught at Hutchinson Community College. Writing and reading are two of her favorite pastimes, but family, cooking, and traveling—often all three at once—are the biggest part of her life. Obnoxiously optimistic is the way she most often describes herself. She can be reached at victoria.opalewski@wichita.edu.