

Pearls, Groves, and Texts: Lessons Learned by Teaching ELA in Rural Places

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter situates secondary English language arts teachers as those who engage in a complex web of teaching people, teaching content, and examining the world. As such, ELA teachers must “place” their discipline in order to reach their students and be relevant to their teaching context. Reflecting on her experiences from nine years of teaching ELA in rural Minnesota, the author illustrates key moments that helped her understand the significance of teaching ELA “in place” as well as how it requires a blend of professional and personal skills beyond teacher preparations.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English language arts (ELA) is a complex web of teaching people, teaching content, and examining the world (Freire, 2008). When I went on the market in 1998 for my first teaching job, I felt prepared. I had wanted to be a teacher since I was young and was a teacher’s kid; I figured that I was ready. And I was. And I had a lot to learn. Simultaneously. For my first job as a high school English teacher, I was elated to be scheduled five sections of senior British Literature, as that was my favorite grade level and content. To take this job, I moved into a new community with new students, new ways of being, and new topography.

I likely should have paid more attention to the strange feelings I had while driving out to my interview, as it triggered a feeling I wasn’t prepared to examine. The roads were pitch-black, literally void of lights and other vehicles in a way that I hadn’t yet encountered as a driver. I recall the fleeting city lights in my rearview mirror and was confident I was traveling the right direction. At the time I didn’t realize that I wouldn’t see populated areas for hours, and I listened to my music and drove on, determined to arrive at my hotel so I could mentally prepare for my interview in the morning. I was excited. What I didn’t expect was my need to stop driving soon after exiting the city, almost shaking because it was so dark

and I felt alone out on the prairie. Not knowing what was happening to me, I breathed a literal sigh of relief when I encountered a gas station and jumped out of the car practically running toward the light. I wandered the convenience store section, touching candies, slowing my breathing as I gazed into the fluorescent lights, and made eye contact with the clerk. When I settled myself, I climbed back into my car and drove further into Southwestern Minnesota until I arrived to my destination: a town of 5,000.

Reflecting on this drive now, I recognize that I was experiencing my first and only panic attack. Using my current professional understanding, I also realize that this was my first moment of dissonance (Gorski, 2010) as a new teacher. While I had K-12 experiences growing up in central Wisconsin (in town) and teacher preparations at a liberal arts college in Minnesota (near a city), I didn't know the place I was entering for my first teaching job and it jarred me (Eckert & Alsup, 2015). In the daylight I saw the town's amenities, met people, and toured the school; I then drove away in daylight, noting the fields, prairies, and vast openness. I felt calm in the light. Bolstered by my belief that I learned how to teach in college, I confidently accepted the job when it was offered to me, ignoring my panicked feeling the night before and an ignorance of how the place would inform my teaching and build my identity as a teacher.

BACKGROUND

I spent the summer before my first job reading the novels I would teach, planning writing assignments, and thinking about how I would decorate my classroom. I began the first semester ready, with syllabi complete and my room color-coded to organize each class as students stacked journals and submitted work. As the semester began and I met my students, something was missing. What I learned over the next three years was that I needed to partake in my new rural school and community in order to teach ELA in place¹. Throughout this chapter, I offer key moments from my experiences teaching in rural Minnesota that helped me understand what it means to be a teacher and how I use this knowledge to inform continued teacher preparations.

I had tall bookcases lining the back of my first classroom and these cases were filled with literature anthologies, hard cover dictionaries, and assorted novels that I incorporated into my ELA curricula. I used the anthologies for select poems and short stories; the publisher's prepared questions and essay tasks post-reading helped me create my own lessons and I was grateful for an "answer key" as I learned new history to accompany the works. I felt capable of understanding most of the literature and I was excited to consider how authors shaped their poems and stories in ways that made their situational context visible and relevant to more recent times. Each week my 1st period students were with me: they completed their assigned readings, we had invigorating conversations, and their projects were enjoyable to read and useful to their peers as we hung them up around the room. But as each day passed in 2nd period, my confidence waned and my students became more unsettled. They swore that they were doing their assigned reading, but they "didn't get it²." They struggled to find meaning in the text and expressed concerns that the language made no sense. Our text translated Old and Middle English, but the antiquated vocabulary used did not transpose the English into verbiage my students recognized. Knowing that we had dictionaries on our shelves, I taught a mini-lesson on dictionary use, created vocabulary lessons, and made time in class for students to read while they had dictionary access. Time and again a student would raise a hand and ask me what a word meant and my reply was the same: "Grab a dictionary and look it up" as I walked to the next student. I assumed they just needed to get into the habit and once they found success using a dictionary, they would repeat this study skill. Sometimes, I grabbed the dictionary myself and placed

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