

END NOTE

# You Cannot Learn What You Do Not Love

## Teaching to Student Interest

MICHAEL COPPERMAN

IN THE TRANSITION from professional public elementary school teacher to college instructor, I have frequently been struck by how readily we abandon everything we know about effective teaching at the university level. Volumes of educational research supports the idea that students learn in different ways, that you must “teach to student interest” because students learn best in the medium of their own obsessions—that, as Goethe says, “You cannot learn what you do not love.” I learned that lesson the hard way, teaching fourth grade in the rural public schools of the Mississippi Delta, where I had to find ways to hold the interest of kids who grew up in severe poverty, hiding the holes in unwashed uniforms; kids who’d only ever known the back alley and vacant lot, the ballcourt of cracked concrete. I learned to teach them in the medium of their own obsessions and

native environment—to write similes about Shaq and metaphors about the Kool-Aid pickle, to count the nickels and dimes it took to buy a bag of hot chips. Compared to teaching those kids, eighteen-year-old freshmen at a good state school were easy—easy, that is, until the quarter I taught Tom.

In a spring composition classroom full of restless, window-gazing upperclassmen, Tom was trouble from day one. A football player, six-foot-four and three hundred pounds, a recent junior college transfer, 23 years old and ruggedly good-looking—at least judging from the response of the girls in my class—he’d pull his baseball cap low over his face and doze, or he’d flirt with girls while we were having a discussion. He made his contempt for me—earnest, over-articulate, ethnic in some unusual and probably questionable way—clear through his body language, his tone, his smug, mocking smile. We discussed student-athletics on campus, and I dropped what was usually my trump card in teaching athletes: that I went to college on a wrestling scholarship, gave four years of my life to the Pac-10 and the NCAA, had suffered a torn ACL and gotten back a cadaver tendon: that I knew what it took. He gave me a derisive, head-to-toe glance, and blew out his breath, as if to say, “Wrestling? Don’t you fools wear spandex?” Conferences

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came and went, Tom bringing a sloppy, fragmentary essay that he refused to alter, earning him a low D. The rest of the class was on board, and he was a satellite of disaffection in the corner.

And then, one day, he came in looking so down, so hangdog, that I felt I had to say something. I asked him, after class, if he wanted to walk back to my office, and on the way, I asked him what was wrong. He got a guarded look, then shook his head. “The thing is, Mr. Copperman”—he always, despite my protestations, called me Mr. Copperman and not Mike, spitting the Mister like a wall between us—“They’re—they’re taking my scholarship.” When he didn’t look at me for a while I realized, finally, it was because Tom was in tears. Turned out Tom had come to the University of Oregon with a wrist he’d broken three times, one that was healing from a new round of surgery when he arrived the year before. The surgeon had told him to rest it for six months, but the team coach who’d recruited him insisted on a second opinion from the training staff, who cleared him to participate in spring drills with an air-cast. He promptly re-fractured the wrist, spent the entire summer rehabbing, and in the fall when he tried to play, it hurt constantly. He told the coaches he thought he should redshirt, that he wanted to be a chiropractor and the doctors had told him that another injury, extremely likely without a full year of rehab, might cost him the use of his hand. The coaches were unhappy, but acquiesced since they couldn’t insist he permanently injure himself. Now, without saying a word to him, they’d dropped his scholarship, handed him a letter stripping it from him on the grounds he’d “chosen not to play.” “I’m thirty credits from graduation,” he said. “I went to the NCAA player rep, who’s supposed to be for the players but who’s the athletic director’s guy, and he told me not to fight it, to go and finish at junior college some-

where. But I want my degree from a good school, and I don’t have the money to move. I don’t know what to do.”

I sat for a moment, thinking about how much of anyone’s swagger and attitude is a protective performance. I thought about how little argumentation—divorced from the stakes of a student’s real life—means to them. And then I said, “Sounds like this is your second essay.”

As Tom’s second paper, he wrote, in four drafts and two conferences, a letter challenging the decision to revoke his scholarship. He drew on the NCAA mission statement, the Oregon Athletic Department mission statement, and the University mission statement, as well as his personal narrative: he’d come to Oregon because the coach who’d recruited him, the same one who coolly revoked his scholarship, had come from the same small town in the Central Valley and had promised to treat him “like a son.” He cited as evidence his various medical reports, rosters showing his unfailing attendance at practices despite his injury. He even called and interviewed his surgeon back in Southern California. Tom argued that to take his scholarship was to violate the ideals the university claimed to represent. His hearing with the athletic director, head coach, and the NCAA player rep was late in spring quarter. Tom waited outside my office door the next morning—beaming. “What happened?”

“They—I did like you said, told them what I had to say was in the letter, and gave them the three copies. They sat and read them, none of them saying a word. Then Coach said, ‘It seems as if you’ve thought a lot about this.’ He asked me to leave for a moment. When I came back in, the A.D. said there didn’t seem to be a problem. That my scholarship was back, no questions asked, until my degree was in hand.” Tom extended a hand bigger than my head. “I want to thank you, Mr.

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My hand disappeared in his. “No, thank you,” I said.

And the thanks ought to be returned, because Tom reminded me that beyond the rhetoric of composition is the actual enterprise of reaching our students. How can we engage them, encourage them, invest them not in the efficacy of our own authority, but in the importance of learning to think—and write—clearly and logically about their own lives? Tom reminded me that at every level, in every subject of instruction, education has high stakes—that teaching matters. When students work for their own interests, they succeed. We must offer them that opportunity. ☺

Chrysanthemums towed one  
fountain, because schizo-  
phrenic sheep  
telephoned two Klingons,  
and five mats tastes thirsty.