

Journal

Friday, 10/11/24

I've tried Socratic Seminars in the past, but they haven't always turned out the way I want them to. The first time I tried it was my first-year teaching Black American Playwrights. I had a class of mostly seniors that were highly invested in watching *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka, so I wanted to give them the space to really talk about the racial implications of the play. At the same time, I had a much smaller section of predominately freshmen that were expected to learn the same material, and they unfortunately had much less to say on the subject.

In my efforts to revamp my approach to teaching the curriculum I wrote, I decided to move the first Socratic Seminar to focus on a compare/contrast of two plays that both deal with societal pressures surrounding black women. The students knew going into the unit that they would need to make comparisons between the two plays, so their brains were already prepared to do such as they were reading the texts.

My big thing with this is making sure there's an accountability factor. We've got a short class period compared to what I've gotten used to, and with a class of almost 30, I needed to make sure everyone participated within the 30-or-so minutes we had. I've had a stuffed octopus in my room since I started teaching, and it's been purely decoration, but today it became the "talk-topus" (much like the talking stick) and I was surprised at how much the kids liked and respected the concept! There were some students that I knew would try not to talk while others would take over the conversation, so I was diligent to keep track with a clipboard (I'm not normally a clipboard guy) and give reminders to students who had not yet contributed.

Two big take aways:

1. Students will make space for their peers if you let them. I was surprised at how many of my normal contributors were mature enough to take a backseat, even when I could see them squirming to comment. Thankfully, students also had to complete a guided note sheet of the seminar, so many students got their comments out on paper.
2. When space is made for the "quiet ones," they will talk! I had one student who, through some encouraging, said the most succinct yet sophisticated comment about the plays (and it pains me that I'm blanking on it). Of the entire class, only one student refused to participate in the discussion.

Tuesday, 11/12/24

I'm fried. The play is this week and it has been a strangely smooth process, much smoother than in any year previous. Yet it doesn't negate the fact that there's still a lot of time and energy going into it, and I can't help but feel like I must work extra so my classroom doesn't suffer.

The good thing about being able to develop my own curriculum is that I can modify it whenever necessary. And with a lit class, the order in which we study the plays isn't always the most important thing, as long as I am scaffolding skills throughout the semester.

It feels a little bit like cheating, but planned ahead for this week to be a "movie" week so I don't have to do so much teaching in front of the class during this stressful week. I planned for this week to be the week we watch *Passing Strange*, and I already have the guided questions for each day written from previous years.

Sometimes you just need one of those back pocket things. I'm trying hard not to beat myself up about it, but I think if I continue to stop-and-start the film as I usually do and do standard-driven check-ins throughout the film that I can still make this lesson meaningful and remove any feelings of it being a "cop out."

Tuesday, 11/26/24

It's field trip day!

When I tell you this field trip couldn't have gone better...

Most of these kids have not seen a live play, or if they did it was an elementary school field trip. I was admittedly nervous about their theatre etiquette... I've had issues with that in the past.

Not sure what I did differently this time... I still gave the theatre etiquette speech, but they exceeded my expectations. Not a single phone, very minimal side conversations... But the real clincher was the group behind us... The group behind us was also from a uniformed school, but I didn't catch the name. That group was so *loud* and *disruptive* and they *brought food into the theatre*. About ten minutes before intermission, I was hit in the back with a gummy Starburst. At the start of intermission, I made eye contact with the kid that threw it.

The responses from my students? "Dang, that group needs to calm down." "Mr. Celeiro, were we allowed to bring food here? Cause they made a mess!" "I can't wait to see what happens next."

Unfortunately, it seemed like the chaperones for this group did not do much to curb these behaviors. I told house management, but didn't make it into a big deal. But the very blasé nature of the chaperones bothered me... I didn't witness the chaperones attempting to engage with the students about their behavior or even simply about if they were enjoying the play.

Thankfully they calmed down before the second act (maybe something was said to them), but it didn't stop them from reacting loudly when the plot really began to unfold and shit was hitting the fan.

It kind of made me realize how much of an impact I've had with the students and the level of appreciation they are developing for the artform through studying the texts like literature.

Reflection, 12/02/24

Maybe this is just me, but my reflections seem generally optimistic. Maybe it's because it's year 6, or maybe it's because this year has been going much smoother than years past, but I find myself coping with stressors much better than in years past which is allowing me more flexibility to try new teaching techniques.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to be able to try this out at the time that I'm doing it. I feel like having the five years under my belt to establish my presence in the building and develop curriculum and classroom management strategies has laid a solid foundation for me to now be able to experiment with new approaches to this material. I feel that, compared to years past, students are getting more out of the texts that I teach and are much more engaged with the materials

During my first few years at BL I don't think I would have been able to try these techniques because I struggled tremendously with classroom management. Many students that come back to visit are surprised to see that I'm still here, predicting I wouldn't make it past the first two years. The students are conditioned to teachers succumbing to burnout, and I've even heard students say the same about other teachers in the building. It's a shame in retrospect to think that I wouldn't have been able to incorporate more variety in teaching styles earlier in my career, but I do think that cementing my position in the school community has helped afford me the opportunity to implement these techniques with fidelity.