

The Pompous Academic

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When I decided to become an English teacher, I was naïve to the realities of such a career. I chose to teach English for the unbridled class discussions that could stimulate an individual's thought process, opening the students' eyes to new ideas, while exploring classic pieces of literature that open doors for new experiences, possibilities and fresh perceptions. What I did not realize was that I was actually committing myself to a lifetime of heartless scrutiny of my dialogue, written articles (including shopping lists and text messages), book choices, movie choices and so forth by those around me, including other educators.

It never seems to escape my daily life when I meet a friendly store clerk, parent at the park, barber and so on when I am asked what I do for a living. I'll respond casually "teacher."

"Oh really? Where?" they ask with mild interest.

I shift into the factual half-tele-marketer response "At Okanagan Adventist Academy on Hollywood road. Heard of the school? It's a Pre-K to 12 school, open to all faiths," I hopefully add.

"Oh yeah, my cousin's kids went there for a year. What do you teach?" They press on.

"Oh, I teach secondary English, History and a mix of other classes." I am less excited about sharing now, worried at where this may go.

"Oh, I'd better watch how I speak around you. Ha ha ha! I remember my old English teacher was so mean that she would make us work on grammar whenever our class was talking too much. She drank black coffee and breathed on us whenever she came over to help. She would sit perched on her stool, watching the students correct answers to grammar questions. Then she would tap, quite hard, the backs of our hands with a long yellow HB pencil when we made a mistake. She was mean. One time we skipped her class and went fishing. We caught a fish and came back to the school to slip it through the opening of her car window. She was none too happy when at the end of a hot school day, she opened the door of her '78 Datsun to go home and found a rotting Perch in the driver's seat! Ha ha ha! Hey, so... do the kids like your class?"

So it goes. No matter whom I speak with, the memories of his/her English teacher are strong. "I hated mine, she graded those she liked better than those she didn't" or "He was cool, we watched videos and only wrote in our journals. Then we played Frisbee-golf outside" or, "She/He was awesome, it was in that class I came to terms with some difficulties in my life when we read that book and wrote in our personal response journals" or "I never understood my English teacher, he always agreed with everything I said in class but my grade never went beyond a C+." As an English teacher this is disturbing. Especially when it is the teacher alone that brings about these responses.

Because of people's stereotype that teachers are smart and powerful, teachers are often received with much criticism. They hold the power to one's future. They are the personification of his/her teaching area or expertise. For example, math teachers should be able to grocery shop without a calculator, right? Science teachers should be able to act as one's own personal meteorologist at any given time. Social teachers should be able to understand the media hype over Prime Minister Stephen Harper's latest prorogue trick. English teachers should be able to spell well and answer grammar questions on a dime! Stereotypes...well-hated but so often used to make judgments.

English is used everyday in some fashion or another in most of the world. If you are reading this, you most likely had some sort of English teacher. Students who eventually grow into everyday citizens remember teachers like they remember close family. The emotions that are linked with the experience of learning, including mistakes, stay with these students. The shame of 'not getting it right' or 'the inability to spell a word' or 'feeling embarrassed and dumb because they could not understand a line out of Shakespeare when the English teacher called on him/her' . . . these feelings don't go away for the students. Emotional learning is present in the classroom for the students whether a teacher acknowledges it or not. These same emotions (good and bad) develop one's self-esteem and set boundaries for the journey of his/her life.

When teachers gather to socialize, one often find groups of 'discussions' based on areas of study. So the Science teachers gather, greet each other, then divide further into Biology, Chemistry, and so on. They sometimes will turn and speak with the Math guys. Sometimes. Physics is a very small odd little group. History teachers are in their own little group discussing the latest politics, which often leads to very opinionated results. P.E. teachers are planning the next tournament with passion in their eyes. Everyone can tell where the elementary teacher group is, since they are all raising their hands when they have a question or want to share a thought!

When English teachers get together, there is often lighthearted laughter at the latest public speaking mistake, a typo in the schedule, and serious discussion over the latest novel. "I think the use of 'fishes' instead of 'fish' is well abused in that New York best seller! Come on! The author is underestimating the audience's ability to comprehend the basic direction of the complex sub-plot" shares one.

" 'Fishes' or 'fish' is not the problem, Pat. The fact that a Christian contemporary could write in such a style that would not allow for multiple interpretation is shortsighted. Faith is faith but what is the author REALLY saying?" mocks another.

"Hey, how about that 2010 Olympic theme song? It should say ME not I. 'Believe in you and me!' Where did that Nikki Yanofsky go to school?" questions another.

"Did you notice the number of sentences ending with prepositions in the (*enter magazine/newspaper*)?" adds another.

In these situations I feel awkward! I hadn't picked up on some of my colleague's insights prior to this and what would I say now? How could I have missed these 'observations' that the others in our gaggle have picked up. Even in my daily life someone says, "oh, you are an English teacher, how do you spell...(enter troublesome word)?" I think to myself, "Am I blind? Dumb? Not as educated as these experienced 'eagle eyes?' I need to brush up my knowledge. Have I sold my whole self, including areas of grammar and literary tool weakness, for a simple degree in English? Am I now expected to be a master of all...mistake free?"

After the English teacher encounter, I go home worried, concerned that I need to do better. I need to be able to know it all, pick up on other's mistakes. Have the ability to silently correct those around me while smiling and nodding as they speak. A few months of reading more novels (Oprah or not to Oprah?), practicing grammar, writing in my journal (it's been years), crossword puzzles at the breakfast table (I can yell breakfast instructions at my 3-year-old from behind the newspaper), take my summer holidays away from my family to learn more at some post-secondary class. Then maybe, just maybe, I will be able to join in with that group of teachers that know so much about grammar and literary theory and better yet, are confident enough to share openly.

But alas, I have now just experienced some of the emotions and frustration that have been shared by those one-time English students I meet on a daily basis. The "I hate English teachers" club is calling me. But, after sitting down with my third attempt at *War and Peace*, I realize my passion is dying. I am beginning to dislike teaching English because I am measuring myself with other people's gauge in order to find my place. I am losing my original passion for my area of study.

What I know about English is always changing and so is the current English language. Maybe English teachers are fearful that they aren't right when so much is changing daily in the English language? Is this why they speak about it so correctively? Some can argue, and will, that 'yes' there is a right and a wrong way to communicate. It depends what is being discussed and in what medium. But English is still rooted in a lot of theory and opinion anchored with literary tools and dusty canons. Enter: Shakespeare.

What does the post-modern SDA English teacher make of all this conundrum? What is expected of the English Teacher? Will I ever be considered a grammarian? Oh "To be, or not to be ... a grammarian. That is the challenge." Some will say English teachers should have "perfect ability" in the skills and art of English. Others will say, knowledge; others will argue that "the English teacher must teach Biblical principles directly from the Bible and nowhere else. That is the purpose, to learn skill through Biblical dialogue." Others may argue that marrying technology with English will prepare the students for 'good jobs' in the future." Some may say – "Don't sweat it!" Well, in the end it comes down to the classroom memories that the students take with them. Those emotions will either hinder or kick-start a student to move ahead in the area of study.

One day, while involved in a professional development program, I was invited over to meet the principal of a large public school. As we walked through the halls of the school, he shared his many experiences of teaching and working with other teachers. He said he

loves teaching because he gets kids! He just 'gets' them. He knows that they are seeking a place in the world with purpose. He further told me how a lot of teachers try to act smart. Or show they are knowledgeable. "They think it makes the students feel confident. How can a student gain confidence when a teacher is voicing all they know and think they know to a student? Even worse, when teachers voice all this to the parents and other teachers! They act like birds puffed up with knowledge. There is nothing worse than a *pompous academic*! They are not welcome at my school," said the principal as he turned to walk down the next hall.

After a time, we parted ways and I left the school. I never forgot what he said – "Pompous Academic." This principal was not too concerned how much his teachers knew about the subject. More importantly, he was interested in how the students' individuality was valued and encouraged by the facilitating teacher. This way the student can come into the subject area with safe boundaries and the freedom to build confidence in his/her own ability. It is here, wherein lies the true service of a teacher. They serve others for not the teacher's rewards and fanfare, but because they have respect for a greater picture, a greater picture that includes this student as one of God's building blocks for the future. We, the teachers, are the servants.

It is a bit of a poison in the world of education to have this pressure to be more, do more, know more than the other teacher. This idea is magnified when jobs are on the line. It can kill the spark that all teachers have to open up to the students with simple clarity, open attitude, and a safe environment. Anything 'pompous' will be a problem to those around, especially a "pompous academic." I teach English because I love all the possibilities it brings, not because I can wow the students with academic information or say I have this degree, that degree, and this award. Oddly, in a career of teaching service, there are awards of recognition, cash, plaques, and placement, and most teachers do not receive these during the duration of their careers. Funny. It does me good to ask myself my INTENTION when it comes to teaching. Why do I do what I do? Am I a pompous academic? Am I a lazy weak link? Am I a servant for God? Am I open to being a servant for the student and his/her family? Am I willing to step aside to be part of the bigger picture?

One night before bed, I asked my 3-year-old son, "What would you like to do for a job when you get big like daddy and mommy?" He raised his hand and, after some struggle pressed out three fingers and replied with a serious face, "ahmm, a teacher, a doctor, or I would like to fly airplanes too."

"Why a doctor?"

"I can give band-aids to make people feel better," he replied.

"Why do you want to fly airplanes?"

"So I can visit Grandpa, and I just like 'em," he stated.

“Why a teacher?” I gingerly asked.

“Cause I like teacher Darla [his playschool teacher]. She lets me paint and climb the monkey bars all by myself,” he smiled.

After big kisses, hugs, high-fives and all that routine needed to finalize the ‘good night’ for a 3-year-old, I walked down the hall and sat in my big chair. I thought to myself, “How could his teacher let my son climb up on those monkey bars all alone? I know she was watching but I would have been close by holding his hand or reminding him to hang on!” I fumed. Then I remembered, the teacher is doing her job of creating an environment where students believe they can reach farther, do more, challenge themselves, and blossom. Not only that, but the kids loved her because of that, even if they didn’t even know why they loved the teacher. That teacher created these feelings inside of my son that were good, safe, and motivational. Because of that, he climbs well, with excitement. He becomes the personification of her attitude.

If you have an opportunity to meet my son’s teacher, you will find that she is not one to brag or share uninvited parenting advice or criticism. Instead, she is a warm, happy, woman of faith that loves the kids. So should all teachers be. This sprouts inquisitive students with great classroom experiences. In high school so shall we all share this warmth no matter what subject area we teach. When a student still speaks to me about a novel he/she read in my class with energy, or when a student feels comfortable enough to approach me and challenge me with a question, even if it’s to disagree with me, I know I am doing my job. In the book *Avenues to the Heart*, a collection of short stories about the impact of teachers as narrated by students (published by Pacific Press), you will read many stories about teachers that made a life-long difference. None of these teachers were pompous academics, just willing servants of God, cheering on His children. Even the stories about English teachers!