

Learning About Students from the
Teaching Practice of Others
Step I

A. What does your teacher say about the students in her class? . . .

For this project, I studied the web site of Joanne Christina de Luz, a teacher at the Life Learning Academy, a SFUSD charter school. Prominently displayed at the top of her site are links which provide some details about the Life Learning Academy, and some background on Joanne's students. According to the school's site, the school serves 60 students who have been "unsuccessful" in other school settings. Joanne is both more blunt and more sympathetic, characterizing her students as "some of the most challenging and marginalized students in the country." I say "sympathetic" because of her use of the word "marginalized," from which (and from later evidence) I infer that she feels that her students have been ill-served by the educational system. At another point, she recites some of the labels which have been attached to her students at earlier stages of their lives: "incapable of learning" and "apathetic." Clearly she does not view her students as being either, and her mention of these labels is partly an indictment of the system, as well as evidence of pride in the success of her school. Joanne does indicate that many of her students have not been properly motivated (implying, perhaps, that these students may require more or different motivations from the mainstream), and she also speaks of their needing of "shedding their [emotional?] armor."

Joanne uses a variety of methods to learn about her students. First, she obviously does acquaint herself (however skeptically) with documents which accompany her students from their prior institutions. She speaks explicitly of making observations of "body language, tone of voice and level of participation." She notes that upon arrival at her school they don't use academic language and are irritated when she uses it with them, and that this makes it difficult for them to synthesize knowledge. It seems that while she works with the assumption that motivation and understanding and use of academic language are among those components necessary for all students to succeed, she sees these as lacking in particular in her students, and she designs the curriculum to address these needs.

B. Next, take a look at the kids themselves. . .

It's significant that while Joanne documents her own ideas primarily in writing, she presents her students through a small collection of short video clips. I think she did this partly because she is more comfortable presenting her ideas in the written form, and also because there is indeed something about the tone of voice and body language of the students that communicates much more than their words can—yet. Particularly memorable is one boy who tries to explain why he always fails, saying that even when things are going well, he finds a way to fail. He doesn't know why, he says, then adds that maybe it's due to low self-esteem. As self-analysis, his words are not especially deep, and yet somehow I felt my heart go out to this boy having *seen* him—and perhaps that was the most important reason why Joanne chose to present video of her kids: although they have been singled out as unable to succeed, Joanne clearly feels that her students can: this boy comes across as speaking from that place of doubt and unworthiness that all adolescents share at times, and Joanne's students maybe just more often and deeper than most.

There is also a clip of another boy presenting his project to new students. It seems to be an important part of Joanne's projects that the students present their finished work, in

particular to new students in the class. The presenter shows signs of pride in his work, and it seems likely to me that his attitude will both impress and motivate the new students more than anything a teacher could say about the project.

C. What strategies do you see in the practices of your teacher that suggests she is learning about them as they are learning the material of the course?

After her initial assessment of her students, Joanne has chosen to implement a highly interdisciplinary “color and algebra” project that combines algebra (specifically, multiplication of binomials) with painting (which combines art with the science of color theory), writing, and speaking. The project is presented with a wealth of detailed instructions, demanding great accuracy in math, writing, and painting. Joanne therefore has the opportunity to observe student progress (as well as more about the students themselves) by examining their work in multiple capacities simultaneously: as artists, mathematicians, writers, presenters, and more generally, followers of rather detailed instructions. The lesson plans include questions that the students are to answer, many of which are “why” and “how” sorts of questions—the very sort of work that Joanne found her students “irritated” by initially. The development of their academic vocabulary will be assessed both in the writing and presenting stages; she explicitly mentions “looking at student work and listening for explanations” to “assess how well students are conceptualizing” particular algebraic skills.

It’s noteworthy that the conception and design of this project itself came out of contemplation of student work by Joanne and Justin Warren, and that components of the project are being adjusted in an ongoing manner as Joanne determines more finely the conceptual (and personal?) needs of her students. Also, the paintings have inspired “Robin” (a student?) to research the artist Piet Mondrian, whose work the color & algebra paintings resemble.

The apparent success of this project (as measured by student participation, interest, and the algebra-paintings themselves) shows among other things that it is possible to motivate even the most seemingly uninterested students to produce and be able to explain the multiple significance of complex, multifaceted academic/artistic work. It’s not clear (and it needn’t be, since this is a school and not a laboratory) exactly what factors, and at what weights, were most significant, but among them are: a teacher who believes in her students’ abilities and who cares about their future, use of novel and interdisciplinary projects as a means for attracting student interest, encouragement of academic vocabulary building, small class size (6–8), and having experienced students presenting to new students. I don’t see why these same techniques wouldn’t benefit *any* students, and perhaps that’s partly the point.