

Learning About Students from the Teaching Practice of Others

Step I: Focus on the Learners

Claire makes a strong effort to get to know her learners, and for that reason, she can tell us many things about them by directly posting their letters and by writing about them on her website. Letters show us that her students are interested in family (e.g. in talking about being a responsible babysitter for younger family members) and interested in accomplishments and achievement (e.g. in telling a story of making goals on the soccer field.)

Claire herself writes about how school is a foreign place for many of her students. It is not a place where they feel comfortable and confident. She points out that for many African American and Latino students, participating in class is a big risk. They may give wrong answers and thereby lose face; they may not have role models that excel academically and they are navigating a new self-identity. Claire is also aware of her students' social adolescents. She writes about her awareness that the social interactions in the hallway are painful for many students. They are thirsty for a safe environment, both socially and academically.

In many ways, Claire's students are typical middle school students. We see her students as adolescents just by watching them in the videos. They wiggle their feet. They talk in questions. But as is the case in any classroom, her students are individuals more than they are stereotypes.

Students in Claire's classroom are forthcoming with their personal thoughts in their letters. They share intimate stories with her in their letters that they are less likely to talk about in person. There is both a sense of anonymity and a sense of having the teacher's full attention in writing a letter. Claire's students talk with more hesitation when having lunch with Claire, although they seem to really enjoy the experience and warm up to the casual environment. This difference in sharing information by writing and by having a verbal conversation may be exaggerated in adolescents, but it is not unique to adolescents.

Similarly, Claire's students come to science with some misconceptions as do people of any age. One student's misconception is exemplified in her science journal. The student explains earthquakes as a result of the earth's gravitational pull. As a credit to Claire's lesson, the student later modifies the initial gravitational pull idea.

Claire uses explicit ways of getting to know the students in her classroom. Two of the major ways she gets to know them is to write personal letters back and forth and to invite them to have lunch with her on special days. In the letters, Claire tries to reflect back to the students their own positive self-image in order to build their self confidence. She also tries to point out something unique that she has noticed about them.

Lunches with students appear to be a great way of connecting with students on a more casual/social level while still asking them their opinions about things that will enlighten her practice. She asks a group of students to tell her what they thought would be the best ways for her to teach lessons to future students. She suggests that the future students may be their younger sisters and brothers. This seemed to be a good way of personalizing her question for the students.