

Teaching Autobiography

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Without sounding cliché, and hopefully not naive either, I've always been good at teaching. I was an oldest sibling, and then an oldest cousin of six on my mother's Vietnamese side of the family, so I was babysitting quite frequently. Originally, I used to think it was unfair to see babysitting and teaching as similar, perhaps because they're women-dominated jobs and often seen as not paying well, but the truth is that a lot of group management and especially children management skills goes into taking care of children, and teachers really do take care of their kids.

I became a student, and after having a rebellious phase to prove that not all Asians were smart and had good grades, I realized that I really liked learning. I would over-analyze my books for literature class and host study sessions for my AP Statistics classes at the Zaxby's across the street. When I got to college, it finally clicked to me that classes were structured in specific ways to communicate specific lessons, and assessments were only checking for understanding. Once that happened, I started collecting syllabi and taking my education seriously – which is a funny thing for an art major at a private college to do. I held my professors accountable and tried to understand where they were coming from, and if I didn't think the class was rigorous enough, I'd bounce around until I found one that was. I criticized many of the professors I met for being talented artists and insufficient professors. I harbor great respect for those few I met who were able to balance both.

During and after undergrad, a lot of the jobs that I had that weren't in the food industry were teaching through summer camps, nonprofit organizations, or government programs. I tutored, I lesson planned, I coached, and I graded students at a variety of different levels.

One of my hesitations with coming to teaching was the stigma against artists. "If you cannot do, teach," was the mantra that I heard over and over again. Teaching art meant that you hadn't made it as an artist. I've made my peace with that stereotype in the face of wanting a better life for myself. After being in a committed relationship and recognizing that I do want to settle down instead of going from gig to gig with no job security, I decided to work in public

schools. I'd also been afraid of ingratiating myself into the system, and so drifted from one grassroots organization to another, who all started with great promise and taught me much, including that sometimes the system that sticks is because it works, for better and for worse.

My greatest fear in going into public schools is the administration. I worry about the support I will receive from my colleagues and superiors as a trans man who has no surgery, and no legislature to protect me. I worry too about how my ideas and teaching style differ from many of the teachers I knew and had in the past, as I want to change the way things had been for me. That's why I'm grateful to this cohort, which has provided me with other like-minded people who I can commiserate with. This is a risk that I know I have to take, and hopefully, will be worth taking.

Aside from my own personal hesitations, I'd spoken too with teachers I respected who advised against becoming a teacher due to its thanklessness and difficulty to balance work with life. With the rise of school shootings and COVID shutting down schools, I waited a long time before I felt like I was mentally prepared to take on this endeavor. In the meantime, I've been able to build up a support system and find people who love and care about me the way I didn't always have in the past. I know they'll help me through whatever I want to do, and I'm less afraid of these factors outside of my control now.

A moment that inspires my teaching practice is actually not from school. At my favorite job I was ever afforded to have, I was shadowing a mentor while we were facilitating a group of neurodivergent children. I was asked to try to lead the group, and immediately had a child show pushback. We were virtual, so as we were talking over Zoom, the child physically threw himself on the floor and had a tantrum. The other children were nervous, and tried to help him. One asked permission to step away because he was getting stressed out, which was granted. The mother came into the camera, and while she soothed the child, my mentor talked him through the issue, and explained the situation as neutrally and calmly as possible, with options for what he could do next and how he could respond through his feelings. We talked things out and were

able to mostly get back on track. Later on, when I was speaking with a group of coworkers, I admitted, "I don't know what I would have done if he wasn't there." They challenged me by asking: "What did he do that you're so grateful for?" "What will you do when he *isn't* there?" This caused me to break out of my panic cycle and to really consider what had happened, but more importantly to recognize what *worked*. Just that empathetic, observational question and conversation with colleagues was able to make me see that, and perfect my practice.

A moment in my teaching career that I think about quite often is when I was hired to be a tutor at a low-income high school. It was a strange tutoring job because I taught supplemental math classes with lesson plans and worksheets, remotely, from 9am to 4pm, had to grade the students who came to my classes, and call their parents when they didn't log into Zoom. Even though I was overworked and underpaid, I kept trying to engage the students I had and I remember one that stuck with me. His name was Sharif, and I was teaching him how to graph exponents. I had him the first period of the day, and he told us he wanted to be president. He was involved in basketball, though I'm not sure how they pulled that off remotely, and loved his coach. He responded to my questions and had questions for me in turn. I remember specifically one day after my class with him was finished, I switched tabs to go to second period and came back to find that he was still in class, and had written on the sheet "Is this correct Mr. Warren?" He wasn't allowed to speak because he was technically in his next class, but had stayed behind to finish his worksheet and make sure he got it. Although I shouldn't have encouraged him to ignore his second period class (he was lucky that I had incredibly low attendance for my second period, and I had no other students at the time), I communicated with him through text how to finish the problem, and he was able to complete it. He sent me a lot of stickers and smiley faces once he figured out how to do it. Through examples, positive reinforcement, and communicating effectively through the tech and the problems, Sharif was able to learn his lesson and did very well on his test in his actual math class.

All things considered, I truly believe I will be an effective educator because of who I am fundamentally as a person. I love learning, I love teaching, and I love people. I want to hold people accountable and I want to see people succeed. I look forward to deadlines, discussions, and discourse. At the end of the day, I like to help people become people, and I think that's what teaching is. Content area, to me, is just a vessel through which that can happen, a way that people can learn about themselves and also the world around them. I've been able to build up a life that I want to not only preserve but share with others, and have enough confidence in my capabilities and skills that I know I can endure. It will be far from easy, but I believe in myself to try, as hard as I can, to bring the best out of the students that come into my classrooms.