

Chapter 4 – Results

Student Teacher #2 – “Amy”

Background

Amy was a “traditional” student teacher, in the last of her four years of undergraduate work. She had a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and an Associates Degree in Arts and Sciences. She was seeking composite science certification, and loved learning about science. Her mother was a teacher, so she was very much aware of the challenges of teaching.

Classroom and School Environment

Amy’s host school was a very diverse school. The majority of the students in the school and the majority of the students in her classes were Hispanic. The school had a bad reputation, which Amy could not understand. She loved the school, and felt that her students were “good kids.” She believed that the reputation arose from ignorance, and that if people would actually visit the school, their opinions would be more positive.

She found the equipment at her host school, especially the computer equipment, to be lacking. Consequently, many of the faculty at her host school were unfamiliar with how to use computers in the classroom. Amy found herself in a very unusual position when she wanted to use computer projection equipment in her teaching. Some veteran teachers from the host school actually came in to observe her class – to learn how the equipment was used! Amy found the role reversal interesting, if anxiety inducing:

I guess they wanted to see how it actually worked, because they’ve never done it. It was kind of shocking that they would actually come see me when I was supposed to be learning from them. (laughs) But, um, that

kind of made me feel special, for them to come watch me, even though I was a nervous wreck that day.

In general, Amy felt very welcomed at her host school. The veteran teachers made her feel comfortable and welcome, and tried to help her in any way they could. Getting along with her colleagues and working together to help students was very important to Amy, and she was disheartened to see the amount of gossip among the teachers:

I don't know; I really don't like that. I'm not a gossipy person... I've seen some of that, and I don't know, it just kind of affects me because... we all need to be working together, not against each other. You know, some of these teachers may be friendly to you, but then they're off with another talking about you, you know?

In addition to avoiding office gossip, Amy and her host teacher occasionally clashed with administration. In one incident, a vice-principal pardoned a large number of students who were being punished for excessive absences. A large quantity of paperwork was required from Amy and her host teacher to initiate those punishments, so the two were quite upset when the administrator took this action. In another incident, a hall monitor attempted to cajole Amy and her host teacher into giving two students a write-up for missing class, when the two were merely tardy. Amy feared that the monitor held a grudge against the students, perhaps with a racial motivation. Amy was disappointed that members of the administration would try to undermine and intimidate teachers when everyone at the school should be working together for the students.

Connecting with Students

Amy felt that a teacher has to eventually make a connection with students, or else the classroom is going to be chaotic. According to Amy, a teacher must convince

students early on that she cares for them and wants them to succeed. The teacher must also communicate that she is serious about education:

...you want to make an impression to the students where... you won't be their best buddy, but they'll like you because they know she means business.

This connection with students did not happen immediately. Initially, Amy and her students regarded each other as strangers, and the classroom atmosphere was very awkward. The students were very distant, and for the first few weeks of the semester, Amy was worried that she would never be able to relate to the students.

Slowly but surely, however, Amy was able to get to know her students, and they were able to get comfortable with her. Time constraints prevented her from researching each student as much as she would have liked, but she was able to gather enough tidbits here and there to become aware of many of the adverse situations that her students were facing. This helped her to understand the actions of some of her students better, and to better judge when extenuating circumstances were preventing students from doing the things they needed to:

You never know what's going on behind doors, and I think you need to be able to relate to each individual... if they have to work, y'know eight hours after school, you need to be able to relate to their situation, y'know and not just get on them constantly.

Amy believed that it is essential for a teacher to demonstrate caring for students. She characterized caring as an essential "skill" for an effective teacher, and asserted that if a teacher cannot master and display that skill, students will not care about the teacher. More importantly, they may not be able to care as much about themselves either:

A lot of kids out there have low, low, low self-esteem, and by you caring, and you telling them “You can do this. Hang in there.” If you show them that you care, then they’re going to care about themselves.

Amy always made an effort to listen to students with a nonjudgmental attitude when they would come to her with problems. Even when Amy could not help them directly, she always tried to point them toward someone who could. Students generally reacted positively to this display of interest and compassion. She was very gratified to make a difference in students’ lives:

Y’know, by you caring, you’re telling them – which I had an incident like that, I mean, that smile on this little girl’s face just made me love teaching. I mean it brings chills to my body, because it happened. It actually happened today. And I mean she just smiled, she was like, “Gosh, it’s so good just to hear that.”

Amy was very pleased whenever she was able to get students interested in chemistry. The research she did on student backgrounds and the connections that she made with students facilitated this, as she was able to talk to the students in their own language, and to construct analogies that students could understand and enjoy. She often employed humor to capture students’ interest, and increased student interest and participation. The favorable reactions of the students often motivated her to go the extra mile:

But, um just seeing them smile and laugh and actually want to learn puts a smile on my face and makes me want to do even more. I mean, makes me not even want to sleep; I’ll stay up all night, which I did last Thursday for my first lecture. I stayed up all night long, did not go to sleep, just because I wanted to do good for the kids...

Unfortunately (but perhaps inevitably), there were times when Amy was simply not able to “click” with her students. Despite her best efforts to engage students, there were still days when students were not “with her.” She estimated that about half of her students were naturally interested in chemistry, but the other half often required a great deal of prompting. She estimated that about 70% of her students had excessive absences. Not only did these absences impede student progress, they also meant a lot of paperwork for Amy and her host teacher. Frequently, all but a few students would have no homework to turn in. Amy and her host teacher tried to motivate students to do homework in a wide variety of ways, ranging across the spectrum from granting bonus points for completing homework to refusing to review homework problems when no one did the homework. Amy realized that homework is essential to student success, but she also realized that students often have priorities that are very different from hers. Students often tried to plead lack of time for not doing homework, but Amy would have none of it:

... when a student comes to me with that... that attitude, I’m like, “Well, have you done your homework?” “No, I don’t have time, I work.” And I was like, “Well, you know what? I don’t have time, either, but I still do your notes worksheets, quizzes, tests...” You know, I tell them that, and I said, “You need to get your priorities straight if you want to graduate, you know?”

Amy’s individual relationships with students also frequently hit snags. One male student approached Amy early in the semester, proselytizing for his religion. Amy was worried at first, but her host teacher assured her that the student was harmless. While Amy felt that a little worry could be constructive, she soon got over her trepidation after getting to know the student. Amy complimented a female student who had managed to turn her grades around in the middle of the semester, and the student was unresponsive. Amy did not get upset about the possible snub, because she realized that other things could be going on in the student’s life to cause her to be withdrawn.

One student in particular had a very strained relationship with Amy:

... you have this one student in your class who's going to just make you miserable every single day, it's just like when this kid, for instance, is absent, everything runs smoothly and the rest of the class is great. But when this one kid shows up he just wants to like make you look stupid in front of the rest of the students.

The student made no effort to make a good first impression; when he realized that a student teacher would be teaching the class, he said to Amy, "Why do we have to have you teach us?" This student would often make a scene in class, consciously or unconsciously drawing the attention of other students. In one of the instances where Amy and her host teacher refused to go over the homework because students did not do the assignment, Amy characterized the process of just giving students the answers to the homework problems as a "waste of time." The student responded, in a loud voice, "That's not wasting our time! I want the answers!" Amy was very grateful that her host teacher was there to back her up.

The frequent back talk from this problem student initially made Amy feel "stupid and foolish," because she did not know how to handle the situation. The fact that the student was very bright and made good grades despite his bad attitude confused her even more. However, she soon discovered that the student had had problems with other teachers, and had even been arrested. In addition to her host teacher, other students in the class have backed Amy up, attempting to apply peer pressure to get the student to be more respectful. Amy was very grateful for that outside assistance.

For her part, Amy has tried to take a gentle approach, calmly reprimanding the student and asking for a simple show of respect. This approach appeared to make some progress with the student in class, but the student still did not take school seriously. She

got the impression that the student did not really think he was doing anything wrong, and perhaps just wanted attention:

I tell him, um, I tell him, I said, “You know, you don’t have to scream at me,” and he’s like, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He doesn’t think anything’s wrong with it. That’s the problem: he doesn’t think anything is wrong with his behavior.

Despite the occasional problem, Amy felt that she had built strong bonds with her students and that her students were caring and loving kids who were very appreciative of the things she did for them. Other teachers also noted her dedication to students. She confessed amazement at how positively she had impacted the lives of her students. The students in each period that she taught, even the ones she had been teaching for only a short time, threw her surprise farewell parties. She videotaped herself with her students on the final day of class, and was very sad to be separated from them.

An “Overwhelming” Relationship

On her first day working with her host teacher, Amy sat in a storeroom grading papers instead of observing the class. She was also immediately set to the frustrating task of learning how to use a new piece of computer software for record keeping under pressure from the host teacher to learn it quickly. These incidents set the stage for what Amy described as an “overwhelming” experience with her host teacher. She described her host teacher as “meticulous and compulsive,” and “a very organized person” who “likes everything to be as perfect as possible.” This perfectionist attitude translated into a great deal of pressure being placed on Amy. There were many instances during her student teaching when she wished that her host teacher would just leave the room, so that she would not have to be under the host teacher’s watchful eye. She described living up to her host teacher’s expectations as being the most difficult part of student teaching:

I forgot something, which – there’s a million details being a teacher and had forgotten one detail and... she didn’t really yell, but you could kind of tell that she was getting a little frustrated. Stuff like that’s kind of a pressure for me.

The host teacher expected Amy to learn and do a great deal in a very short period of time, a situation Amy found very stressful. The host teacher required Amy to create detailed lesson plans with lecture notes, when she would have preferred to work from an outline. Combined with the effort required to create laboratory activities and worksheets, as well as the ubiquitous administrative paperwork, the workload was definitely taking a toll on Amy’s time:

And, um, it’s basically just a time issue. Other than that, if I had all the time in the world it would be just wonderful. But I don’t, y’know, and I’d like to have some life, maybe one hour out of the week. (Laughs)

She would occasionally attempt to communicate to her students the amount of time she spent on preparing materials for class. However, she always attempted to do so with humor in a positive manner:

I mean like I told my kids today, “I spent three hours on this color transparency because I love you! But I can’t give you a color copy, because that’s pricey. But I did do this! Poor college student, y’know, three dollars is a lot!”

Amy realized that some of the pressure she felt was self-inflicted. She confessed to being something of a perfectionist herself, with a tremendous desire to have things run smoothly in the classroom, and to do what is necessary to insure this. She also described herself as a very obliging person, and not prone to complaint:

Well, I should just say overall my host teacher is one of the best host teachers that any student teacher could have. However, (laughs) I feel I was worked to death, and I almost had like 5 or 6 nervous breakdowns because of the workload she placed on me. I don't know, because... my personality is "Oh sure! No problem! I can handle it!" And I never ever let it out to where, you know, "That's too much. Slow down."

Despite acknowledging her role in the pressure that she felt, Amy expressed a desire to have the host teacher lighten her load. The stress was intense at times, and Amy frequently contemplated giving up on her teaching ambitions:

With all – and I have to be 100% correct with her. You know, anything I do has to be 100%, you know, and it's just... you know I've actually wanted to quit throughout the semester (laughs) and walk out. But I can't do it, it's too much. I'm gonna have a nervous breakdown, y'know? And so that's just my point of view, and even my student teachers at... the other ones, they think that I've had it hard too, so it's not just me. (laughs)

Although she was reluctant to complain to her host teacher or her supervising professor, Amy sought support from a number of other sources. She frequently confided in her fellow student teachers, and in the interviewer, about the pressure she was feeling. She also received support from her parents, who frequently heard of the stress and despair she was experiencing. Often, the language she used was intense:

I called my Dad and I said, "I can't take it anymore. It's just... It's just... She's just... I feel I'm being... I feel like I'm a slave." I really did.

In addition to her support system, Amy was comforted by the knowledge that the heavy workload was a good preparation for the real world of classroom teaching. She described her host teacher as "one of the best" and "top of the line." Although it was

occasionally difficult to notice due to the pressure, she knew that while she was working so hard, she was learning a lot about being a teacher. Preparation is a high priority for her, and she knew that her workload would reap many long-term benefits, even reducing stress in the long run. She reported short-term benefits as well:

I complain about it, but when I'm in the actual classroom, teaching, everything is so smooth. So I think there's a plus side to it, even though when I'm actually doing it, I don't see it. But at the end I see it, because... whatever it may be: the students may make hundreds on their quizzes, or, you know, they may tell me, "Miss, you're an excellent teacher," which they have, you know. Just the reward is there; it's just when you're actually doing it you kind of get frustrated and don't see it...

From her conversations with her fellow student teachers, Amy had the impression that other host teachers were asking far less of her peers. Her host teacher made her do things that other students' host teachers took care of themselves, such as writing student reports. Amy's host teacher also placed priority on many things that other host teachers did not find important, such as the meticulous keeping of attendance records and the attendant filing of multiple disciplinary documents. In fact, many of her fellow student teachers expressed sympathy upon hearing of the many things that she had to do. Amy was upset about this inequity and her poor luck:

My other student teacher peers don't seem to be... maybe this is just my impression, but this is just between us... but it seems like their load is a lot lighter. I don't know why, because I mean... I don't know. I don't mind the load; it's just overwhelming at first. I mean all this stuff coming at me at one time is freakin' me out, y'know?

Amy wished that her supervising professor and teaching assistants had taken steps to monitor the workloads of the student teachers. Although she partially blames herself

for not speaking up, she wished that those in charge of her preservice classes had been more involved. She did not feel that the limited visits made by the teaching assistants gave them an adequate picture of what she or any of the student teachers were experiencing:

I mean, because the TA coming in 5 times, they really don't know what's going on. They just see you teaching; they don't really know what's gonna happen, what's really going on.

While she feels that her experience with her host teacher was very beneficial to her as a teacher, she is not sure that she would wish such an intense workload on other student teachers. She did say that every student teacher should at least observe a teacher like her host teacher, to learn from her experience and organizational skills.

Preparing for Problems

Amy believed that it is very important for a teacher to be prepared in order to be successful. She felt that thorough preparation will help a teacher be ready for problems, and goes a long way toward preventing problems. Accordingly, most of the questions that weigh heavy on her mind are anticipatory in nature: “Will I be able to answer every single question that’s asked?” “Will I be able to present the material in a way that they will understand it?” “What problems am I going to encounter today: discipline, y’know, outbursts, whatever it may be.”

As she accumulated time in the classroom, Amy became less and less concerned with the first question. To ease her mind, she soon realized that she was only human, and could not possibly be able to answer every question students might pose. She has resolved that in the future, if she cannot immediately answer a student’s question, she will promise the student she will find the answer, and actively seek to fulfill that promise. She was actually encouraged when her host teacher, a seasoned veteran of the classroom,

could not immediately answer a student question. It made her feel better about working with her limited experience:

I mean, I'm not an encyclopedia; I can't know everything. And they know that, I tell them ahead of time: "I'm human, you know, I just graduated from college, so there's no way I can know as much as [host teacher]. She's been here 27 years, I've been here two months, okay." (laughs)

To help her deal with her second concern, presenting material in a way that students can understand, Amy realized that it was important to get to know her students and the culture they live in. She felt that by making references to everyday situations, she would seem more "human" to her students. By being able to talk to the students with familiar words, and to use familiar situations for analogies, she hoped to keep the students' interest levels high. For example, she used the analogy of romantic relationships to explain the relationship between the electron and the atomic nucleus. She tried to use humor as much as possible to capture the students' attention and reduce boredom.

The third concern, classroom discipline, is an important issue for most teachers, beginners and veterans. From all of her advisors – her parents, her host teacher, preservice professors – Amy heard the same refrain: be consistent. Her host teacher especially has been a good role model for classroom consistency. If a teacher wishes to be fair and earn students' respect, exceptions are out of the question:

Never, never, never, never make an exception just for one student, y'know, or maybe that one time you say, "Okay, don't take the hall pass, just go to the restroom." All those other twenty eyes are going to be watching. You break it that one time, they're gonna say, "Well, why did you let Jane do it?"

Amy felt that a teacher needs to be strict, but fair. To some degree, this went against her nature as “nice” person. But she realized from the start that a strict, unwavering attitude is essential for maintaining discipline:

They will run over you, they know. They will take your kindness as a weakness. So you can be kind, but don't let it get to where it makes you weak, you know?

It was often difficult for Amy to not give in to her students when they asked for exceptions, but she managed to “be strong.” She always enjoyed showing her nicer side to her students, but she also made them aware of her boundaries. She felt that she was able to create an atmosphere where her students knew that she “meant business.” They know that crossing the boundaries she set could cause her to set aside the nicer aspects of her personality. Thankfully, such instances were rare.

Reflecting on Preservice Classes

As the child of a teacher, Amy was no ingénue when it came to the challenges of the classroom. Like many of her fellow student teachers, she found her preservice classes to be easy and even boring at times. Many times she felt that her preservice classwork was a waste of time, filled with simple, common sense notions:

I guess sometimes... class would just be boring. I mean, it's just like we already, don't you think we already know this? We're grown! You know?

She acknowledged that part of this perception of her preservice classes might be due to the inevitable comparisons with her science content courses. While she conceded that her education classes could have been of average difficulty, she rated her science content courses as very difficult, requiring much more work and studying. Going from her science courses to education courses was a drastic change, in her opinion. She described

her education courses as more work-intensive than difficult, involving writing papers and creating the tools that teachers need. She found the writing papers to be “a bit unrealistic,” because teachers in the classroom do not often write papers. Thus, she thought that much of her preservice education was disconnected from the actual work of teaching.

There were elements of her preservice teaching that Amy found useful. She enjoyed the opportunity to observe actual classroom situations prior to her full student teaching assignment. These observations helped prepare her for what was to come. She also enjoyed the “microteaching” exercise, where she taught a mock lesson to a “class” of her fellow student teachers. She was happy with the opportunity to receive critique and suggestions for improvement from her peers. By allowing her to get experience speaking in front of a group, the microteaching also helped reduce her nervousness when she had to teach “for real.” She felt that the classroom discipline case discussions in her preservice classes were very useful, if occasionally frustrating. Sharing ideas and strategies with her professor and her fellow student teachers was a very good experience that she believed would enrich her classroom practice.

Amy feels that the biggest thing that made her preservice education worthwhile to her was that it acquainted her with the intense time demands of being a teacher. The microteaching, in particular, drove home to her how little time she would have to prepare for class. Splitting time between her preservice classwork and her classroom observations forced her to budget her time carefully, a cultivated skill that served her well as a student teacher.

One major thing that Amy would add to her preservice education would be the opportunity to teach more prior to her full student teaching assignment. During the semester before her student teaching, when she was mostly observing more experienced teachers, she taught a single class as a ‘guest.’ While one time is certainly better than not at all, Amy wished that she could have done it more:

One time is not... is nothing. You could mess up that one time and not have another chance, you know?

She felt that doing more than one of these guest teaching appearances would have gotten her more accustomed to the classroom environment, and might have reduced her anxiety level the first few weeks of her actual student teaching. She noted that a student teacher could get a terrible shock coming into student teaching with next to no classroom experience. She is honest enough to admit, however, that this observation is made with full 20/20 hindsight:

I personally think that they should have had us to teach more than one lesson during the observation semester. Um, I think that was great experience, and would have made us a lot less nervous for the first week or two during student teaching. So I think that we need to do it more than one time. I probably wouldn't have said that last semester, but I'm saying it this semester. (Laughs)

While she would not characterize her preservice education as worthless, she firmly believed that it would have been more useful if she could have spent more time in an actual classroom. She felt strongly that a teacher could not ask for a more meaningful and educational experience than actually working with students. She even went so far as to say that her preservice classwork was the least important and the least helpful of the resources available to her as a prospective teacher. Her preservice classwork was not nearly as useful as her experiences in the field because theoretical discussion can only go so far:

I mean I feel, like I said earlier, it helped me some, but I feel that actually being in the classroom and teaching is the most important thing... Yes, I think experience tops them all.