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Philosophy of Education

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Ethan Smith’s Philosophy of Education: English Education through the Power of Reading and Text-based discussion

With the recent emergence of AI tools and the presence of educational gaps from COVID, it is tempting for today’s ELA teachers to feel overwhelmingly downtrodden. In this essay, however, I seek to practically describe how I can combat these forces to create a rich and practical English curriculum. I believe that education occurs best in an engaging discussion that is substantively based on texts. In my classroom, I want students to learn their role in this type of discussion. I understand that many of the students will not have experienced this type of classroom management before. Yet, the ability of students to cultivate higher order thinking is usually overlooked in today’s classroom. Through discussion and explanation, students learn how to understand a meaningful text and apply it to their own lives; this is the kind of work that I hope to do in my classroom.

The application of texts to real life can only occur when students accurately comprehend a reading. I believe that the best kind of reader is the one who approaches a text with a pencil. Readers who internally question and comment on a reading are well equipped to discuss the text in class. This is why it is a challenge that most texts used in the public school system are reused and cannot be written on. I am fond of a strategy I found as a sophomore that teaches students how to take notes on a reading using sticky notes. The problem with this strategy is that the notes on the page will inevitably be ripped off and lost. Because of this, I will have my students write notes in a note-taking journal. This journal would only be used for texts that cannot be written on. On the pages of the notebook, I will have students write quotes that they think are important, comments on what is happening in the plot of a story, and questions they have about the text. I plan to evaluate these entries periodically as an informal assessment.

As the note taking journal indicates, a crucial aspect of my curriculum will be the consistent and ethical assessment of students. Assessment is important primarily because it informs teachers on how well students are understanding a concept or topic. It also teaches students that they are held accountable for the work they produce. In English Language Arts, I believe that critical thinking exercises like essays best gauge holistic understanding. This is highly dependent on the grade level. Students in 10th through 12th grade will naturally be expected to write more and at a higher level than those in grades 7 through 9. Essays in my gradebook will be treated as formal assessments.

Another weighty portion of my curriculum’s assessment will be participation grades. A student’s engagement with material during class expresses their important opinions and gauges the satisfaction of their learning. I recognize that participation is different for each student in the classroom and does not always mean the willingness to discuss in the large group setting. A student will not lose points in my class because they are quiet or introverted. Rather, I will be attentive in recognizing when a student is participating in class to the best of their ability. The final form of formal assessment I will use in my classroom is literary portfolios. These projects include reading anchor projects and story boards. They are effective because they cultivate students’ interest in literary topics and gauge their learning about a writer or text.

A curriculum that effectively uses assessments recognizes that each student learns and considers content differently. This is why classrooms need differentiation. Part of my calling as a teacher will be to connect individuals with my content in diverse ways. Being intentional in understanding my students will improve their quality of learning through differentiation. This connects with my overarching belief that the English classroom should center around discussion and even more importantly, reading. I believe literacy is a gift that every person deserves. Teachers inhabit a role that can be used to repair the disparity between children who are raised in rich reading environments and those who are not. Classroom management should be catered to help students who are behind in reading instruction.

Because some students in the classroom are behind others, the most beneficial form of discussion in the classroom is not always large group discussion. Sometimes the best form to use is small group conversation about a text. This format helps the teacher value and not stifle the voices of students with IEPs in the classroom. For the general content teacher in the classroom, this structure requires an awareness of when they or the learning support teacher should be included in conversation with IEP students and, conversely, when the students are better off discussing amongst themselves. What is true of discussion is also true of reading texts. The teacher should be aware of when it is better to read aloud in the whole class setting and when it is best for students to read independently or in small groups. In this understanding, reading is a form of discussion, one that occurs between the reader (internally) and what they are reading.

My belief that discussion is the best form to use in the classroom stems from my experience that students think best when they are continually engaged with the topic at hand. The subject of English becomes most meaningful when it is shared with others. The ELA classroom is a primary space for this experience to occur. Rather than lecture students from the front of the room and lose them in the process, a good English teacher strives to provide students with the necessary tools to enter into conversation with each other and with great texts. Though I have much to learn about classroom management and today’s students, I am confident that the practice of discussion will shape the curriculum I create during student teaching and my career.