The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

As teachers, we can almost always, at any given time, pull a mental file from our teaching memories outlining the best and worst situations we have ever had as classroom teachers. We can often recall in great detail the students involved, the activity in which we were (or were supposed to be) engaged in, and perhaps even the weather at that particular moment in time. It is very important to use these experiences to shape our current classroom practice, to build on our successes, and learn from our mistakes.

[Importance of reflection in classroom practice; research to support]

In my own experience as a young teacher, I can recall several very vivid situations which made my classroom either an Adventure Land for learning or a mine field for impending educational doom. Two particular experiences, both occurring during my second year of teaching, continue to shape my classroom practice in profound ways.

*“It was the best of times […]”* I had a class of low performing students who really weren’t interested in anything, especially writing. When it came time to write a short story, students complained that they had no ideas, or that they simply wanted to write about themselves (imagine a teenager being so self-centered! Who would have imagined it?). So, after using an entire planning period to find material and writing strategies, something of an idea began to form in my mind. I gave students a one-line story starter and asked them to write in silence for three minutes. After three minutes, students silently passed their paper to the person on their left. Students read their peers’ stories, then continued that story from where the other person had stopped. We continued this silent writing, passing, reading, and writing cycle until stories had been circulated all around the table. The final person in the circle wrote a conclusion for the story, then all stories were returned to their original owners, who read the completed story that they had begun (usually accompanied by hysterical laughter or complaints of “Who added this to my story?”). Even students who never participated couldn’t wait to read their stories aloud. All students were actively engaged in all aspects of the process, and from this activity, students generated ideas for their actual short fiction piece.

*“It was the worst of times […]”* I once (and I emphasize the term ***once***) attempted to teach students to write an essay using the five-paragraph formula. To do this, I had students come up with a topic, and then together we developed the introduction, body, and conclusion on the whiteboard. Next, students were given a topic of their own to write about—however, students hadn’t paid much attention to how we had asked questions and brainstormed on the board, and most of them couldn’t translate the process from one topic to another. After this near complete failure, I reflected on the lesson and everything that had gone wrong. The strategy was good—model the writing process for students. The resulting conversation, though, lacked relevance and even authenticity for students. We needed a focused, intentional discussion of the writing process, rather than a discussion of content for the model essay. Since then, I have started walking my students through the model essay, closely examining the elements of the writing process and discussing how to work through each step (i.e. what questions to ask, which transitions to use, how to incorporate supporting evidence).