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What I Learned From the Student Who Knitted During Composition

by

Poppo Rich

It was a late Friday afternoon, and I had had a long week. Very long. The class was sitting in a circle as usual, and Kathleen was in class. I liked it when she wasn't there because she was one of those students who seemed to disagree with everything everybody said. I don't think she did it on purpose. I think she trusted her own take on the world, and only her own. She was older than the rest of the students, and she had a three-year-old son. The father (who had abandoned them) was of another race. She believed she knew much more about the world than the rest of us. Whenever I imparted my philosophical insights to the class, she would invariably raise her hand to offer "an alternative" view. I believe the other students judged my competence as a teacher by how well I dealt with Kathleen's never ending interruptions, not by how well I knew the course content. I hate when I have to be subjected to this kind of scrutiny. So when Kathleen was absent, we were all much more relaxed.

On this particular day, Kathleen was quite present, sitting next to me in the circle. We were discussing some very important concept when I glanced at Kathleen and noticed she was looking down into her lap. What was so interesting on her lap? Then I saw a trail of yarn leading from her lap to a bag, filled with more yarn, right next to her desk. She was knitting! In *my* class! At first, I was completely jarred. I lost my train of thought, felt my face suddenly grow ten degrees hotter, and experienced an awful, wrenching feeling in my stomach. I was flabbergasted. The class waited to see what I would do about this outrageous show of disrespect.

She looked up at the silence, and I looked away. For some reason, I couldn't ask her to put it away, not in front of the rest of the class. I continued with the class discussion, and she continued with her knitting. I stood, walked around the room a bit, and at the first chance I got, I walked to her desk, livid, and politely asked her to put her knitting materials away. She seemed very surprised and did as I asked.

After class, a student who had apparently sensed my disgust came to my desk and said, "Don't worry about the knitting thing, Ms. Poppo. I'm in her history class and she does it there, too." I was embarrassed that one of my students was trying to make me feel better by telling me that Kathleen was intolerably bored in all her classes, not just mine. I smiled and gathered my books.

That night I thought and thought about why this was bothering me so much, and I couldn't figure out why, other than the fact that my ego had been squashed. So I took the easy way out. A week later, I attached a note to her assignment when I returned it. I said something to the effect that I thought it was extremely rude of her to be knitting during my class, and that her inquisitive nature could be a real asset in the class if only she would allow it.

She wrote back the same day. She apologized for offending me and explained that she knits because she has a short attention span. She wasn't knitting because she wanted to tune out the world. She was knitting because it helped her tune in. If she could keep her hands busy doing

mindless work, her mind was better able to concentrate and contribute. However, because it was construed as offensive and disrespectful, she wrote that she would not knit again in class. And she didn't.

And she didn't. Kathleen never knitted again in class. I wrote this story, exactly as it appears above, for a professor of one of my graduate school courses in narrative inquiry. In his response, he mentioned two things that linger in my mind. First, he wrote, "But couldn't she listen and talk *and* knit?" Second, he wrote, "Your anger and your intolerance come through more strongly than her arrogance." My professor was asking questions and making comments that made me feel slightly uncomfortable. More than slightly. Later in the semester, during a class discussion, that professor "invited" us to consider retelling one of our classroom stories from a different point of view. As I look back, he probably meant that we should retell our stories from the point of view of a different character in the same story. However, at the time, I saw the invitation as a challenge to find a different point of view inside myself.

I had told *my version* of Kathleen's story using my narrow perspective as a teacher, and I was unhappy with the results. What new story could I tell if I would be willing to remember the story as a student? Could I begin again by placing myself in the role of a student who could examine this situation as a learning experience? If so, what had I learned? In what ways had Kathleen been my teacher? So, I considered these questions and I told a new story.

A few years ago, when I was relatively new to the teaching field and feeling somewhat self-conscious (and defensive) about my inexperience and my young age, I had a challenging student who taught me a thing or two about what it really means to be a teacher. She didn't teach me these things at that time because I was not willing to learn. However, the lessons I've learned through the memories of that experience have proven invaluable to me.

Her name was Kathleen. Kathleen was extremely bright and had been through quite a lot by the time she entered my composition class at Bergen Community College. She had been married, divorced, and was single-handedly raising a three-year-old son. She often came late to class because she worked full time as a nurse's aide.

I didn't like Kathleen very much because she was one of those students who seemed to disagree with everything everybody said. She seemed to feel very strongly about always stating her beliefs concerning every topic. Often, this meant that she would disagree with me. I was so concerned about maintaining my authority and respect in the classroom that I never did look for ways in which I could use Kathleen's knowledge to help the other students in the class.

On this particular day, the students and I were sitting in a circle and Kathleen was sitting next to me. During a class discussion, I looked over at Kathleen, who was looking at her lap, and I noticed that she was knitting. I was very upset because I considered this a direct statement about my teaching abilities. I assumed she was telling me that my class was not stimulating enough for her so she would have to keep herself busy doing something else. I didn't say anything to her, though. I simply looked away and did the best I could to continue the discussion. Later, I quietly asked her to put away her knitting. A week later, after stewing about this "show of

disrespect," I wrote her a note and reprimanded her for knitting during *my* class. She wrote back, apologizing for having offended me, and explained that knitting was, in fact, her method of paying attention to the discussion. At times, she offered, she needed to keep her hands busy so that she would be better able to concentrate on and contribute to the discussion. She never knitted again.

Until now, I hadn't considered the fact that this was *her* class as much as it was *my* class. And, just as my colleagues might respectfully and curiously question me about my "unorthodox" methods of teaching, why hadn't I even considered questioning Kathleen about her "unorthodox" methods? Could I, even now, begin to understand what I might have taken away from her by reacting so disapprovingly toward her knitting.

At the beginning of the second semester of my first year of teaching, I developed a brilliant idea for summarizing the writing process in a way that my students would understand and remember. I brought Legos to class with me. I asked students to develop standing figures with these Legos. They hesitantly warmed up to the "weird" assignment. Then they got into it. They trusted that I was going to teach them something simply because I was the teacher. I had been given this trust without earning it, and all I had to do was earn my way into keeping the trust. So I observed as my students began laying pieces on their desks, trading pieces with each other, coordinating various colors, watching what others were building, and adding hats to their baseball players and ears to their rabbits. Then I showed them how their standing figures were their finished essays, their sharing and trading were their research, their laid-out pieces were their outlines, and their hats and ears were their final editing touches. The students' eyes lit up, and they decided that they had a whole new understanding of the writing process. And they referred to this day often.

That same day, I brought my Legos with me to the faculty dining room. I sat with some experienced professors who hardly knew me. A few had never even met me. I self-consciously (and as inconspicuously as possible) placed my Legos next to my chair. Some time during lunch I accidentally kicked the Lego bucket, and the pieces went scattering about. While I was down on my hands and knees collecting the pieces, I looked up and saw some raised eyebrows and some wrinkled foreheads.

One gentleman inquired, "Are those Legos?"

"Yes," I responded.

Another one asked, "Do you work in the childhood development center?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, what are you using those for?"

"Well, I use them in my writing classes."

"Composition?"

"Yes," I said and smiled. I was still on the ground, feeling as if I would never be able to get up.

“Well,” he said, “I’d love to take your class.” And he didn’t smile.

I mustered the strength to continue collecting the pieces and sit in my chair with my head up. “Actually,” I said, “it’s an exercise I use to explain the writing process, and so far it has worked quite nicely.”

At this point, the gentleman shifted his weight, and he and the other professors listened to my brilliant idea. In the end, they thought it wasn’t half bad.

If my students hadn’t trusted that I planned to teach them something with this exercise because I was the teacher, if I hadn’t had the courage to defend my Lego exercise to my colleagues, and if my colleagues didn’t have minds that were open enough to hear my position, my great idea may never have gotten off the ground. My creativity would have been squelched, and everyone would have lost something. And if I hadn’t gotten encouragement and understanding from anyone the next time, my idea might not have worked again. After that, I might have decided that my “unorthodox” methods were really not welcome and the “something” that had been initially lost would have died altogether.

How does the incident with Kathleen fit into the Legos scene? Well, I never trusted that, since Kathleen was a student who was extremely bright and had strong opinions about many subjects, she would have a method of learning that worked for her. And that she would be quite aware of this method. I never even considered the fact that some students’ methods for learning might be construed as “unorthodox” to other learners and teachers. I certainly never imagined that, like the professors had done that day in the lunch room, I would judge this method of learning before understanding it.

But my mistake with Kathleen was far worse than prejudgment. I never even tried to understand Kathleen’s messages to me. Before I had written her the note, and even after she had written back, I didn’t ask her what her reasons were for knitting in class. I assumed, in my own mistaken authority, that she was making a statement about my teaching. I had felt threatened by what I didn’t know or understand, and so I reacted.

Maybe I didn’t kill anything for Kathleen. But maybe I did. Maybe I inhibited her learning patterns. Maybe I made her self-conscious about her behavior in my class and in future learning situations. Maybe not. The important thing I have learned, though, is that the incident wasn’t really about how *I* was insulted or about some awful thing that happened to *me*, as I originally told the story. It was about *Kathleen* and something that happened to *her*. I am hoping that I will remember this lesson, which Kathleen taught me, the next time I am faced with a similar situation.