

Why I Decided to Become an English Professor

Tracy Valentine

Course: English 577

Instructor: Dr. George Dorrill

Assignment: Literacy Narrative

Growing up, I never thought of myself as a writer. I loved to read, but writing was something I just could not do. I felt that my favorite authors, Zora Neale Hurston, Stephen King, and Michael Crichton were good writers. These writers were artists who took readers into other worlds, and they used their words to paint vivid characters and scenes. I loved these writers, and they were my heroes. Little did I know that through reading their works of art, I would learn skills that came as a sixth sense. I was a magician and my stupid human trick consisted of being able to find imagery and symbolism in any story, and my pulling the rabbit out of the hat included me being able to explain those concepts to my teachers in a structured form. I had various teachers who saw in me someone that I did not, for they knew that I had these talents, so they pushed me. They were also my heroes; they were accessible and were actually interested in my well-being and education. Their actions had an enormous impact on me back then and today, still.

My first day at George Washington Carver Middle School was not really nerve racking. It was a regular day like any other. I roamed the halls as lost as many of the other sixth graders. When I arrived to my classes, I sat down and paid attention, then I heard the voice on the intercom. "Tracy Valentine, would you please report to the office."

It was the first day of school, and I wondered how in the world I had gotten into trouble so quickly? As I picked up my books, already mortified at the fact that everybody in the entire

school heard my name, I tried not to think about why I was being called to the office. “Was Mama okay? Was Grandma okay? What is going on?” I reached the secretary’s desk and gave her my name, and she in turn handed me a schedule.

“Tracy, we’ve recently received your records from your elementary school, and it seems that we have placed you in the wrong classes. Sweetheart, you are supposed to be following the AEP schedule.”

I was always a quiet and shy child, and I never asked questions. For example, if someone would have told me to go and run and jump off of the Mississippi River Bridge, I would have done it, no questions asked. Even though I did not know what AEP was or what it meant, I made my way to the class that I was supposed to be in. As I walked in, all eyes followed me to the teacher’s desk. She introduced me to the class as the newest member of the Accelerated Enrichment Program, which I later found out was what AEP stood for. “Oh, now I get it, I am a smart kid now, and I am in a class full of smart kids.” Again, I took this information with a grain of salt; I was a naïve kid, and I did not understand the importance of the classes that I would have to take—that is, until I met my English teacher, Mrs. Zelda Johnson Smith.

When I walked into Mrs. Z.J. Smith’s class with the rest of my classmates, she told us what she expected as soon as we passed the doorway.

“Your group is qualified as the best of the sixth grade students. For this reason, I expect nothing but the best from you. You will do your best, because I know you can, and there will be times when I will give some of you an extra assignment in addition to your regular course work. Any questions?”

As I looked around the classroom, I observed numerous expressions including glee, happiness, giddiness, awe, horror, and shock. The look on my face probably resembled the latter.

I could not believe what she was asking, extra work on top of the work I still have to complete? I thought to myself, “Woman, are you mad?” It seems that my first impression of Mrs. Z.J. Smith was the complete opposite of the person I came to know and admire.

A month into class, Mrs. Smith asked me to come and see her. As I walked to her desk hesitantly, I wondered what it was I forgot to do this time. Mrs. Smith smiled and said, “Tracy, I have this book that I would like for you to read. This is one of those extra credit assignments that I was talking about. I would like for you to read the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. I want you to read the novel and then write a summarized book report for me. You think you could do that for me?”

I mumbled a short and incoherent, “Awright.”

Mrs. Smith went on and explained how she wanted the book report formatted and gave me a week to finish the assignment. I listened attentively, even though I had no idea of how I would approach the assignment. I was looking forward to reading the novel, so I ran home and got started. Even though the novel dealt with some heavy emotional material, I really enjoyed it and quickly got through it. I finished the novel in three days and went to work on my book report. I did what Mrs. Smith asked me to, and the assignment was completed by the deadline. I turned in my assignment and was very frightened about the grade I would receive because I knew that once the assignment left my hands, my grade was left to the mercy of Mrs. Smith. About three days later I received my book report back. Mrs. Smith stated that I did an excellent job. I was praised for my thorough reading and interpretation of the text. In the sixth grade? I was reading thoroughly? What? I just explained how I felt about the story and what I observed. It seems that I had done a good job. I was excited, and this moment served as a certain turning point in my educational life. I realized that if someone took an interest in what I had to say and

had at least an iota of faith in me, I would be able to do things that I didn't believe nor knew myself capable of doing. All I needed was an extra push. There were many other things that I admired about Mrs. Zelda Johnson Smith during my three years in middle school, and she made an impression upon me. But I believe the main concept that struck me was the fact that she cared; she cared enough to push me. I do believe to this day she was one of the reasons that I decided to become a professor. The second reason was Mrs. Anatole, my sophomore English teacher.

Now I thought that I was scared when I walked into Mrs. Smith's class, but I was absolutely freaked out when I arrived in Mrs. Anatole's class. She was very business-like, and the fact that the students were honors students did not make our tasks in her class any easier. I did not have much faith in my writing skills even though English was my best subject. The thing was that Mrs. Anatole was strict, and she scared me. I was in high school now, and the stakes were higher, and she did not sugar coat her requests. The assignments had to be done, and no one would help us because now our grades were dependent upon the amount of work we completed. I would be strictly responsible for my grade in this class, and she stressed this point to us throughout the school year.

During the first week of class, the freshman students in the honors class had to read *Beowulf*. The problem was that no one in the class understood what they were reading. It was the first time that any of the students had read Old English. The members of the class, including myself, were so lost, and we found out later that after completing this epic tale, we would be moving on to the wonderful world of Shakespeare. I could not comprehend any parts of this tale; I was beyond lost. I hesitantly went to Mrs. Anatole and explained to her that I had no idea of what it was that I was reading. She asked me to explain further.

“The words, Mrs. Anatole. I do not understand the words,” I whined.

“Why don’t you understand the words, Tracy? Is the poem written in a different language?”

“It seems as though it is,” I replied.

“Take a second look, Tracy, and don’t just read it, but read the context behind it.”

I wondered what kind of mumbo jumbo it was that Mrs. Anatole wanted me to perform. I simply could not understand this poem. I took her advice and performed a second, and then a third reading, Slowly, *Beowulf* began to sink in. The words did not look like foreign phrases; this stuff was actually making sense. I now understood the story and the imagery was beautiful. Once again with the gentle push of a teacher, I understood what it was I was supposed to do. I also excelled in reading Shakespeare. What some of my fellow students saw as “stupid,” I saw as beautiful, and because none of my fellow classmates enjoyed or understood these stories as I had, the only person who I could talk to about my newfound passion was Mrs. Anatole. We discussed the poetic conventions of Edgar Allan Poe and Dante Alighieri, and Mrs. Anatole asked me to look at the stories in relationship to how they would apply to present time. By doing so, I understood the love that both men had for the women they mentioned in their works. From that point onward, I have always tried to place my readings within the context of the present, and by doing so, I am able to better understand my readings. What I found myself doing unintentionally was explaining this concept to fellow students. Some could not have cared either way what the works stood for, but those who were interested began to understand. I was able to pick apart these readings and show others how to do so. Little did I know, I began moving towards my future occupation as a teacher, and I have Mrs. Anatole to thank. By helping me to

open my mind and dissect the different meanings found inside my readings, I guided others to do the same.

When I first arrived at Southeastern Louisiana University, I had no idea of what I wanted to study. As my strengths from middle school and high school began to come back, I found myself heading toward English, but I did not want to tie myself down to English, because I still didn't feel strongly about my strengths as I had in school. As a result, I majored in Liberal Arts; however, circumstances beyond my control led me back to English including working as a staff member of *The Lion's Roar*. When I became editor-in-chief, my memories of Mrs. Z.J. Smith and Mrs. Anatole came back to me. I found myself guiding the students who were working under me and mentoring them. When the time came for graduate school, my mind was already made up; I would become an English professor. The university setting was perfect for me, and the work that I was performing did not seem like a job. Most importantly, I wanted to give a chance to students in the same manner that I was given a chance. If I, a young woman who grew up in the projects of New Orleans, could get to this point in life, so could anyone else. If they need a slight push or guiding hand, I will be more than happy to assist.

Dr. Dorrill's Comments: Tracy wrote her essay in response to a literacy memoir modeled on Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* for English 577, Foundations of Language and Literacy. Tracy is a gifted writer. This memoir is a touching account of her development as a writer. I was touched by it, as were all the members of the class. I predict that she will go far.