Reflective Moments

Mr. Petrillo shows that reflective teaching is indeed an art. He urges readers to express their own art in the classroom.

BY JAY PETRILLO

We all remember those pivotal moments in our lives that seal our fate as members of the teaching profession. My undergraduate degree was in fine arts, not education. Who knows what direction my career would have gone had it not been for a single fateful day when I was a camp counselor in the Berkshires back in the summer of 1980?

I was the arts and crafts instructor for the summer. Basically, I was responsible for helping campers create summer artifacts for their family archives. There were times when I was solely responsible for large groups of kids for very long durations.

The camp was in an idyllic New England setting with woods, a lake, woods, assorted playing fields, and more woods. Sports and games were the dominant activities and largely drove the camp schedule. Whenever there was a major sporting competition with other camps beyond our woods, I had to plan arts and crafts activities for the campers left behind.

On one of those occasions, roughly 20 of the 10-to-12-year-old campers were left in my charge for the day. Because I did not have any formal training in lesson planning and implementation, the scheduled lunch break was the only constant in a day filled with too many variables.

Luckily, the night before, I had been able to discuss my challenges with a few of my colleagues who were teachers in their regular lives. They began to rhapsodize about their craft. They spoke eloquently of lesson planning, of anticipatory sets, of modeling, of teaching at the students’ level of understanding, of connecting with kids at their levels of development, of classroom management styles. Their vast repertoire of teaching tactics astounded me. Indeed, I was somewhat intimidated. These people were profession-
als, graduates of teacher preparation programs who were playing the role of camp counselor during their summers. As for me, I was still trying to solve the aesthetic dilemmas of attempting to redefine negative space.

I began my big day armed with some newly acquired rudimentary pedagogical content knowledge and ready to try using the various “work zones” that I had prepared the night before. I used my experience as a short-order chef at various fast-food establishments to set up an assembly line of sorts. I mapped out the work areas to match the various personalities of the kids: drilling area, sawing area, bead assembly area, and so on. My focus was more process than content. I was completely clueless about outcomes or assessment. I had no standards to align my instruction with, and my only objective was to get through the day without any serious injuries.

I repeated my mantra, “I think I can. I think I can.” Eventually, I had to transform this blind faith into something tangible.

We started, and after about 30 minutes, all the campers seemed content with the various tasks that I had assigned. They were busy drilling, sawing, and hammering things. So, in a sense, all of my campers were “on-task” and “engaged.” While I was enjoying this moment, I noticed that one camper off in the corner by the window was playing with a few mirrors he had found. My curiosity was piqued when I observed him experimenting with the mirrors. He was arranging them at odd angles in order to illuminate a variety of objects. Where one might easily have perceived someone being bored, I saw wonderment. I went over to him to get an idea of his interest in the mirrors. And I was hooked.

My input as a teacher involved helping him find new possibilities to explore with his mirrors. I took him outside. We settled on making a pathway of mirrors flat on the ground, arranged single file and evenly spaced a few feet apart. In this way, we created a surreal footpath into the woods. We arranged the largest mirror at the end, so it would reflect the lake. We looked at the piece from different viewpoints — the beach, the hilltop, and the common area. Each perspective gave the display a different feel and evoked a unique aesthetic response.

As we walked around admiring our finished product, the vans filled with other campers started rolling in. The mighty athletic warriors had returned. For a fleeting moment, I was able to relish the awe they showed when they examined our project. I heard choruses of “cool” and “awesome” emanating from the crowd that had gathered to admire the work.

This was my pivotal moment. In my head, I could hear Lulu belting out “To Sir with Love,” and I decided then and there that teaching would be my calling.

The elation and euphoria, however, were short-lived. Little did I know that all of our “found” mirrors had been acquired from every open building in the camp: bunkhouses, latrines, the mess hall, you name it. And worse, there was a dance scheduled that night for the older kids.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it one of those “hard lessons in life.” It is simply this: while it carries some risks, creative insubordination has its rewards. It is the innovative learning experiences that reaffirm for us the reasons that we teach. We don’t want to merely mimic what we perceive to be the good practice of others; we need to make a difference and remain open to new ideas. To borrow from Malcolm X, we need to do so “by any means necessary.” In our reflective moments, we must be flexible enough to shift our perspective and redefine common perceptions. So go out there and acquire some mirrors and make a difference.