

# ENGLISH JOURNAL

...the modern day film, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* Penelope is as a confident woman. Unlike in the *Penelopiad* and the *Odyssey*, here she has her own voice and obtains power. Instead of waiting around for her husband to come back to her, she is an independent woman who has moved on with her life. Unlike the *Odysseus* character, in the movie, escapes jail to try and win Penelope over. He doesn't change his cunning habits: "I'm going to be a dentist. I know this guy, he'll print me up a license" (*O Brother Where Art Thou?*). This quote shows that Penelope has not changed and is still willing to do illegal actions, which put him in jail at that time. Penny is smart and realizes that Everett is not right for her at that time. She has moved on. Unlike the original version where Penelope remained loyal, she has a new fiancé in the movie. She is not sitting around waiting for *Odysseus* to come back to her. Although they are together, Penelope is more concerned for their well being than he is.

Self-Portrait While Grading by Dallas Crow

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## Bearing Witness: Oral Storytelling in the Classroom

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Teachers aren't generally drawn to the profession by the promise of great money, fame, and power. (I mean, those people might exist, but they become disappointed very quickly.) Every teacher I've ever met chose teaching because they care about students.

We all want students to feel supported and successful, but we must also concern ourselves with things like covering massive amounts of content, meeting state standards, and preparing students for high-stakes tests and exams. With the best of intentions, we gather all the information we can about students' academic lives. We track their grades and their participation in class. We collect data from formative and summative assessments and use those data to inform our instruction. We create "early warning indicator" spreadsheets that track how many classes students are failing, how many absences they have, how many demerits, dean sends, etcetera.

I'm not saying these aren't good practices or that they have no place in schools. I'm just trying to tell you that I once sat in a meeting to decide if a shy, struggling student needed special education services, and about a week later, that student arrived at school wearing sandbags strapped around his wrists. He had them hidden under a long-sleeved T-shirt. He walked over to another student and started viciously beating him. He knew the sandbags would make him hit harder. It turns out the student he attacked had been bullying him every day after school for months, and none of us knew. Because, too often, school emphasizes the *academic* over the *personal*.

In my early years of teaching, I worked at a public high school in Boston that required me to assign ten novels and twelve literary analysis essays a year. Setting aside the time to really get to know my students did not feel like an option. So, I introduced journaling, with prompts connected to the content, because there was time for that, and my students

and I started building relationships on the page. As they became more comfortable sharing those entries aloud, they started building relationships with each other as well. Then, in my third year of teaching, I was asked to teach a creative writing class where students crafted personal narratives, and I got to witness the power of that process turbo-charged. I saw students working harder than I'd ever seen them work, producing better-written products than I'd ever seen them produce, and my relationships with them started deepening in ways I'd never experienced.

The more I got to know my students, the harder they worked for me, the better they behaved. It was almost as if I were making deposits into some kind of interpersonal connection bank and then writing and cashing checks to get students to achieve what I knew they were capable of, behaviorally and academically. I was banking on relationships! What I've come to understand is that relationships are the currency of instruction. Students work harder for the teachers they love—and you can't love someone you don't know.

I can hear you saying, "What are you asking me to do? There's so much to cover! My students come in to my class behind!" Or, as a school board member once said to me, "Relationships don't close opportunity gaps." But I believe that they can, and I also believe that promoting test performance goals over things such as interaction and mutual respect can cause damaging withdrawals from that interpersonal connection bank. If that account gets overdrawn, you risk losing students' motivation and engagement, negatively affecting your teaching and their learning. After all, if there is no personal connection to school (or, worse, no motivation to even go to school), what good will dozens of essay assignments do? And yes, absolutely, academics are important. I'm not suggesting we *sacrifice* the academic for the