



TEACHING STORIES

Observations and insights of a high school science teacher in a large suburban public school system.

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EPISODE 3: END-OF-SCHOOL-YEAR THRILLS

The end of the school year is getting oh, so close. Boy, do we all need it. My sense of humor has almost disappeared. I'm so tired of the same old shtick, over and over: Take off your hat. Give me your cell phone. Don't use that language in here. Take out your headphones before you walk into the room. Don't forget to come in at lunch to make up your quiz. No, you may not leave early today so that you won't have to wait in the line at lunch. Especially when you skipped my class entirely last week. Twice. (The word "chutzpah" comes to mind.) Yes, you really do have to move to that seat, because you were talking to your table partner while I was introducing the lesson. Yes, your homework counts as late even though you were absent one day last week to go to the dentist – it was homework, for crying out loud, and it was assigned out two days before and due two days after you missed class. No, you may not charge your cell phone during class. Please make sure you've turned in your lab. Yes, the one you've been working on today. Yes, it's due. Yes, you had time to finish it – well, at least you would have if you hadn't spent so much time during the lab admiring your classmate's new shoes. Yes, you can turn it in late. No, you won't get full credit. Just push my "auto record" button and then let me rewind, and we'll go through this shtick again next period.....

Tuesday, first period, 7:25 am, the first class to meet again after the Memorial Day weekend...an honors class. Almost every student is comatose from staying up too late and forgetting it wasn't actually summer yet. We're about to wrap up the plant and animal systems unit today, so I have the world's easiest warm-up on the board for them to contemplate as they take their seats. "Name one body system and two structures in it." I take pity on all the slumped heads and deliberately call first on one of the quickest student in the room, the one who gets perfect scores on tests and is bored at the pace of class despite my efforts. "Cody, get us started. What's one body system." Cody raises his head, his eyes half shut, and says very slowly: "I can't think of any." Me: "Anything. An organ system. How about the one we watched the movie on." Cody: "Um...I'm sorry. I can't remember what the movie was about." Me: OK, Jackie, he's your table

mate – help him out.” Jackie, hesitating: “I don’t remember. I’m so tired, I really can’t remember anything.”

I will say, it was one heck of a quiet day Tuesday. Which has its good points, though student recall was most definitely not one of them.

Today – Wednesday -- was not just shtick, though. It wasn’t very quiet, either. Seventh period, also an honors class, full of well-meaning but highly rambunctious teens who Just. Want. School. Over. Unexpected delight. It went like this:

We’re about to start the final project, on viral and bacterial diseases – I made it up new this year because the H1N1 virus scare put viruses at the very top of my list of optional topics. (The district curriculum doesn’t include the topic and it’s not on the state science exam. No complaints in one sense – the curriculum is way packed as it is – but I’ve decided it will be the topic we do between the state exam and the district’s final exam, when I can finally just teach something I think they should know.

So in class today, I have introduced the short video on viruses that I’m about to show (a really nice one from Discovery Channel), and I’m reaching up to turn it on.

Nick raises his hand. I pause: “Ok, I’ll take one question before I start the video.”

Nick: “Hey, are we going to get to watch the Osmosis Jones movie next week?”

Me: “No.”

Several students simultaneously: [whine, complain, why not?]

Nathan: “But I heard Ms. Spencer shows it in her class...” (Ms. Spencer is the other Honors teacher this semester, and all the boys are in awe of her because she is drop-dead gorgeous.)

Me: “That’s because Ms. Spencer is a paragon.”

Sudden silence (in 7th period, no less!). Finally, somebody says, timidly: “Is that a bad word or a good word? Like, if I tell Ms. Spencer you called her that, will she get mad at me?”

Totally made my day. I never did tell them what it means. I told them to look it up.