

Final Reflections – Angela Jurgensen – Fourth Practicum, February 2014

This practicum was very, very interesting. I learned an amazing amount. I don't even know where to start, so I will start with what worked well.

One thing that worked in general was my art class experience. This class is smaller, more focused; every one of the students who shows up actually wants to be there, wants to improve. And even the ones who are uncertain can be coaxed into working – the only one I missed was a boy named Nathan, who refuses to work, and only showed up twice. Otherwise, the class just ticks along; it's such a pleasure.

Ms. Kloppenburg told me that the fact that I posed for the kids for the first week, and was willing to be open and let them draw me, really helped get the class to pay attention to me, to listen and like me more. That was an unintentional bonus... I was simply trying to get them to loosen up their motor skills, as writing and drawing can be quite different from each other, and most starting artists tend to hold the pencil much too tightly and make marks that are much too deep.

The second week came along, and by then, I had turned into more than just art teacher. The students really listened to my ideas and suggestions. Some of them even confided in me during moments of trouble, and I was able to comfort them and boost their self-esteem. I think I helped this class in more than one way, and I feel thankful for it; it makes me happy knowing I will be back there for five more weeks. Ms. Kloppenburg helped me figure out what we will be teaching on those five weeks, and we have a pretty good idea of what will happen.

I still have a problem giving kids directions, which is not so much of an issue on art class, as I can recover by talking to each table individually; but it is noticeable during science. There have been improvements, but seems like my brain works a little like a blender sometimes, and what makes sense to me is a bunch of mashed fruit for everyone else. I started making lists, and planning every step more thoroughly... but

there are steps I think are so clear, I don't need to plan every little portion of it, and that's the step of the lesson that implodes.

Continuing with the happy stuff... pottery was a great choice for my next practicum; adding pottery will be fun and rewarding. I love working with clay, and have worked with one type or another since I was little. I started with modelling clay, then moved to pottery clay and finally when I left college, I found polymer clay, which has been one of my favourite hobbies ever since.

Ms. Kloppenburg was mentioning that I should have a project to work on with the kids, but that maybe I could just help her guide her usual projects, and I said that was ok by me; but then, something really neat happened. She was looking at her book of projects one day, and she sighed and said that she would love to do one of "these" but she never had the courage to try the project. Of course I got curious and asked her what they were. She showed me the picture of a clay ocarina! An actual, playable musical instrument... and I love music! So, of course I decided to try... I finished one the very same day, and it whistled four different tones! The next day, I finished another one, and this one was even better... it whistled eight tones. And I didn't even have the proper hole maker...

I just ordered a nice, small hole maker online, and also two books on making clay ocarinas. I told Ms. Kloppenburg she has created a monster! I want to make a bunch of them and collect them... they are so beautiful, magical and tiny! I can't wait to get the kids to make their own, as Ms. Kloppenburg has OK'd this as a project for my 5-week practicum. I have read many comments from teachers saying that having the students build the ocarina is easy, but having their ocarinas actually play is very difficult. I wonder how it will be with 8 graders? The teachers I read about online had to fix each ocarina so that it held a whistle. I may have to do the same.

I also had the opportunity to assist on the textiles class, under Ms. Williams; she is a very nice person, and has given the students the freedom to pick their own projects. It's been fun helping the kids on sewing, and I plan to continue this next practicum.

Now, for the science class.

This was a difficult experience, but in the end, I loved it. Strange, right?

The day when Mr. Venables was watching me felt a little bit like me being back in high school, in the sense that the kids were acting a bit like little monsters for most of the class. That day, I got home very upset. I thought I had somehow lost what made my previous class listen to me, and that maybe I was somehow less efficient now. And of course, the girl with the eternal scowl, rolling eyes and whispering, sitting near the front, didn't help one bit.

Feeling defeated was an upsetting moment during my practicum. I am so good at brushing things off and starting over, but that day really got to me. I had so much planned, and I felt like the students didn't want to work with me.

I guess I thought that since I had a good rapport with the previous class, I could just come in, be myself and everything would work out. But maybe because this was just the second day with the class, and maybe because Mr. Orton wasn't there, and maybe because there are quite a few kids in that class which are poorly adjusted and in need of extra support... or most likely a combination of everything.

I really want to be a science teacher. I love science (particularly Biology), and I think that loving a subject is the first step to teaching it well. I get really excited doing something as simple as a paper bag lab with fire underneath, and explaining how the molecules expand and the bag goes up because it is simply not as dense as the rest of the air, and... isn't that amazing? Isn't science in general amazing?

I signed up my husband to a Biology class this past December, and we have been talking about the greatest things... he finally gets what I mean when I say science is magical. He is loving every bit of it. His course dabs in chemistry a bit, and he is amazed at all the things he never knew. He had never heard that an electron acts like a particle and a wave – just like light! And about the areas that an electron can occupy, and how the shape can be so different. I feel as alive talking about these things as I do

with arts, except I feel I need to catch up on my science more, while my art is still much fresher in my mind.

Content aside... what Mr. Venables told me really rang true. Teaching *is* management. And so, as far as teaching goes, I need to learn quite a bit.

But then, something interesting happened with the science class. After the day Mr. Venables was observing, I hit the class with a zero tolerance policy. Mr. Orton thought I was too harsh, but that is because he was sitting on the back and didn't see as much as I did. The more I think about that day, the more I believe I was not too harsh, but maybe not harsh enough. You don't need to giggle and talk to your friends to get paper from your bag. That was my call and I believe it was right; so, there.

One of the boys, Jesse, very clearly defied me; I ended up giving him a referral, and almost called his mom. In the end, Bobbie asked me not to, as this boy has a history of violent behavior and should be treated with care (and his mom is well aware of it).

This zero tolerance policy was hard on me, but it did allow me to actually teach.

Mr. Orton finally told me that this class was not only huge, but particularly challenging, and that he was trying to get a couple of kids out of there because they obviously were not into learning. He told me that I most likely would be teaching a different group during my long practicum – “a more agreeable and compliant group”. Part of me thought, “YAY” but part of me really wanted THIS group to listen and work with me.

On the next day, I was a bit softer, but still stern. After my very stern day, the kids started warming up to me somehow, day after day, which was interesting... almost like they needed the discipline. Amazing how that worked.

I think part of it was the extra discipline, but part of it were the journals. I wrote tons on the journals, and kids started writing back to me. I found out one of the kids has a learning disability; a couple of them want to be Marine Biologists; some of them love fire and explosions, and a good chunk love astronomy and outer space. This is

interesting because Mr. Orton always cuts off Astronomy and Electricity from his grade 9 classes because he focuses on Chemistry so much. Now I have to plan a couple of days on my next practicum and throw the class into space somehow!

I found that most of them have an ok opinion of science, and that they really liked the journal time.

They also love labs, particularly the banana piano lab! I use a product called Makey Makey, and it is a circuit board that links to a computer... the students can play piano using bananas, or play pianos by clapping each other's hands. We did this on the last Wednesday, and all the students came closer to play, even the grumpier ones!

Mr. Orton told me on Wednesday that the test I had planned for Friday had to be Thursday instead, and the class was upset about it. At least they understood that it wasn't my fault; that Mr. Orton had to have the period I had taught graded by me before I left. So, I did the test mostly multiple choice, and most kids did alright – some did very well, even. Only one student failed, but it wasn't a surprise... Mr. Orton had a talk with her after one of the classes as she pays zero attention and doesn't listen at all. It was so neat to walk through the corridors and give people good news on Friday! The kids were happy to hear they did well; JJ even gave me a fist bump, he was so happy.

By the last day, I had learned a few things about myself.

I learned that I can crack even the toughest nut, given a little time.

I learned that I do better with clear instructions, and so, why should I expect any differently from the class?

I learned that, although I may want to give the class a ton of different, unique experiences, sometimes a certain group can't handle the constant changes and excitement, and some groups do much better with simple, repetitive activities, at least as a starting point. So, every group I teach will be a little different; some will want to fly

off into the night with me, and others are perfectly happy playing on the sand, and both are fine. I just have to be able to recognize what each group needs.

I learned that some groups do not like to figure things out by themselves. This group, for instance, was unanimously against using their imaginations and minds to solve different problems. I tried on a couple of occasions to give them $A = B$ and $B = C$, but they refused to make any conclusions regarding A and C . This is not true for all 9 graders, but for this group in particular; they wanted to know where it was on the book, and that was it. I have to draw these kids out slowly, help them use their minds slowly. Not throw them in the deep end, like I did at first.

I think this is one of the biggest things I learned this week: Baby steps, just in case.

I learned that I can be stern and serious, and that it hurts me to do it; but if I know I have to do it only for a week or two, it is a small price to pay if it helps the class listen to and respect me. And this is probably the best thing I have learned so far.

What they teach us at VIU is a guideline. I find that I teach much better if the students are actually listening and behaving well, and that I respect them and deserve their respect -- I DESERVE to have their attention, and by golly, I will get it, otherwise they will have to leave the classroom. We don't learn that at VIU, really.

I had some fantastic teachers back in Brazil, who had the freedom to be absolute nuts... the math teacher was a nut, the science teacher was a nut, the physics teacher, the chemistry teacher... but they COULD be, because the students behaved extremely well; their chairs were bolted to the ground and they had to pay attention, or they were removed from the classroom. THAT is what I want. Not the part with "kids behaving like robots"... *I want to be a nut!* I want to be able to get *so excited* about my subject matter, that most of the students get excited too, and want to learn things, and worry when they missed a day.

But I can only get excited and be a complete science nut if the students have a degree of respect for me, and will actually behave like students. So, I have learned that being

stern from the get-go is extremely necessary. I can always soften the grip later on, but I HAVE to hit the floor stern. Having a class that behaves well and listens is not bad – it will give ME the freedom to teach exactly how I want to teach! I will be able to be excited about my subject, just like my favourite teachers were. Isn't that what I am actually aiming for?

We're all trying to become one great teacher from our past, or save the children from one bad teacher from our past... in my case, I have many, many teachers to copy from. I am very lucky in that sense; my teachers, who were paid very little, taught truly for the love of teaching. They were quirky, incredible, lively performers. And that is the kind of teacher I want to be.

I also learned a whole lot about the students, and not only their names -- thanks to the journals, personal observation from afar, and just walking around and talking to them.

By the end of the week, I knew that JJ was much, much smarter than he lets on, and is most likely extremely bored by the class; one of his journal entries was unbelievable, all about the evaporation of chemicals and how they have different boiling points, truly well written, and spontaneous!

I found out that Jessie may dislike women in general, but he doesn't mind me, and is willing to joke around with me, and also compromise and work when needed. He seemed to like me more after the referral, and we got to a good understanding.

I found out that Richard is not very keen in science, but that he has a soft heart and wants to learn, and makes beautiful, huge origami flowers (I got one as a gift on my last day!).

I found that Sara loves science, and that she liked having me around. Nolan is a jokester, but he will do what I ask (if I ask it twice). Skylar and Cameron sit at the front, but most of the stuff goes over their heads; that is OK, as they really try hard. I also found out that the boys on the back are pretty smart, that they care about soccer

but also about taking great notes, and they can do much better with help from the teacher (particularly the two ESL students).

And Tamara, the girl who sits in the front and makes faces at me actually hates everybody... but it doesn't give her the right to be disrespectful towards the teacher, so we will have to fix that during next practicum. I have to fix a whole lot, actually: more directions, and clearer ones; better classroom management, and maintain the hard approach for a while until the class is doing what I ask.

By the end of this practicum, the class had finally accepted me as a *teacher*, it took them about seven days to do so. Not bad, really, for this particular group of kids.

Mr. Orton agreed things had changed, and that I will be coming back to the same group during my final practicum, which is great news, as I really like the little buggers.

They have been the best little teachers I could have asked for!