

On Advice to a Young Teacher

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

You asked for my thoughts about assignments that might work well with your students.

The best thing that happened to me the last decade at the university was they didn't have anybody to teach the sports and society course and I had written a book on sports and kids, so they asked me to teach the course. That got me to look closer at the sports culture and compare it to the school culture. Bottom line, I concluded that the sport culture gets better results than the school culture.

Basically, the sport culture holds its ground. It says to athletes, if you are going to be part of this world you are coming to us; we aren't going to do things your way. If you don't want to do that, have a good life. The school culture, in contrast, goes to students, accommodating, coaxing, trying to ingratiate itself.

For Dee [as I'll call my daughter, who is a junior in high school and the Most Valuable Player on the girls' golf team], school is a lot of "fun" and "team" activities and teachers trying to go over with her (and failing). Dee's teachers are referenced in themselves and forming relationships with students and being liked and admired.

In contrast, Dee's golf coaches are grounded in their sport, not themselves. They are focused on giving her the chance and invitation to play the game of golf the right way. They present a mature, no-nonsense challenge to Dee to match up with that ideal the best she possibly can. If she doesn't choose to do that, they don't take it personally. Teachers take it personally if students don't like their subject or their class.

Unlike teachers, coaches don't see a student's motivation as their responsibility. They aren't going to chase after students with a neat, interesting way to do chip shots (teachers are chasers par excellence). Getting motivated in golf is Dee's job, and coaches judge her level of commitment. She can't excuse her lack of motivation and hard work in golf by declaring that a coach is "boring," which when applied to a teacher is a good way for students to justify sluffing off in a class.

My basic posture is that you ground yourself in your teaching field of English—literature, literary criticism, and nonfiction and creative writing--as it is done by the very best in that domain of concern. Give assignments that are legitimate ways for students to move themselves in that direction. Sober up, cut the smiling face, and give students good work to do and honest feedback regarding the results they achieve if they choose to take on that work.

The sport culture holds up the example of Lydia Ko—a great pro golfer—and says "Be like that." In a similar way, you can show your students a great piece of creative writing and say, "Be that good. Give it your best try and I'll offer instruction, feedback, and advice as you do it. If you don't do it, I'll understand, but as long as you are with me, I'll keep inviting you to do your best with real-deal work and, successful or not, find the self-respect that comes from it."

Students' relationship should be with the subject, not with you. Don't try to be a friend, mentor, student favorite. Limit your connection with students to giving them legitimate learning opportunities and challenges. Figure out what someone at forty who seeks out great books and thinks hard about what he/she experiences in the arts, and writes great things was doing at fifteen or sixteen. Give students a chance to do that and matter-of-factly pass

on your insights around how to go about it and encourage them to go to work to improve themselves. If they don't, that's their call. Don't get in a stew about it.

All to say, you might have a lot to learn from your cross country experience [she coaches that at her high school] that you could apply to classrooms. In the sport and society course I taught at the university, I used an autobiography by the now-retired great skier Bode Miller https://www.amazon.com/Bode-Fast-Good-Have-Fun-ebook/dp/B000FCKGPW/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=bode+miller+autobiography&qid=1599149397&s=books&sr=1-1 I like the subtitle: "Go Fast, Be Good, Have Fun." Good advice to give your students, and yourself.