tales of tommy terrance

By Lee Rice

The summation of my experience as an education minor is in the form of short anecdotes about fictional characters Tommy, a 7th grader who is struggling to get his act together, and Miss Reeves, his English teacher who has hers under control. She exemplifies every insight I have gained through the minor, and their interactions highlight the insights' implications.

I was inspired to write short these stories after EDUC 4940, Crossing Boarders in Education. We learned throughout the semester that one's life story is a narrative that sheds light on his or her character. We mainly discussed this aspect in respect to refugees from Myanmar. I believe that stories, of all kinds, are creative ways of relaying information in a manner that is both engaging and informative—and in this case, a little creative.

I decided to pursue the education minor in the fall of 2014. I was excited to see what opportunities were available to pursue my newfound passion for interacting with kids that surfaced that previous summer. 5 education classes, 3 fieldwork experiences, and 1 teaching assistant position later, I found that the education minor brilliantly seeks to familiarize people with the fundamentals of teaching, which can be useful to a student from any major, background, or grade. Please enjoy, and a special thank you to Professor Perry and Dr. Duff for all your help these past 2 years.
let’s get cre·a·tive

Tommy looked down at his untied left shoe. It was always the left one. He picked up his pencil that had rolled off his desk, and then glanced up at the clock. Five minutes left. His pencil continued to swirl across the page, making brilliant divots of light and shadow, but no correct definitions of words from The Giver were anywhere to be found. Admittedly, he didn’t know ten out of these twelve words on the vocabulary quiz, or rather, he couldn’t formulate the definitions into sentences. He looked back at the clock. Four minutes.

_Is it hot in this classroom or is it just me? Maybe my tie is on too tight. My glasses are so foggy. I think I have two different color socks on. Dang it, and my left shoelace is still untied._

Tommy sheepishly got up to hand in the test. He slowly moseyed up to the front of his classroom, abused vocabulary quiz in hand. He watched Miss Reeves put her coffee down, hang her coat on the back of her chair, and—_nope, no more time for waiting._

“MISS REEVES,” blurted Tommy.

Tommy could already sense his redness in the face, his hands went clammy, and his breathing uneven as he impatiently waited Miss Reeves to acknowledge his presence.

Miss Reeves look up from her laptop, “Thomas Terrance, are we finished with our quiz?”

Tommy cautiously put his paper in front of her and stepped back about 2 feet too many.

“I just wanted—”

“Before you say anything,” she kindly interrupted as she looked over his work, _“when were you going to tell me you were an artist?”_ Miss Reeves was dazzled: only one word was correctly defined, but his entire quiz was doused in brilliant pencil sketches. Those twenty minutes weren’t exactly wasted; Tommy used them to practice drawing. He had been sketching since he first picked up a Crayola at age two. It’s how he lets loose and gets his imagination flowing. Miss Reeves continued,

“Gosh...you’re so talented!”

Tommy stepped forward and examined his own work.

“Oh, wow...thanks Miss Reeves...I mean...I’m sorry I was so distracted...”

Tommy got flustered all of the sudden, once again, and looked down at his shoes. Miss Reeves put down the paper and could sense Tommy’s distress. She could _always_ sense his distress. For just twenty-six years old, Miss Reeves was an incredible teacher.
"Alright, Thomas. Let's get creative here. Since you don't want to write out these definitions...how about you draw them out? Draw me a nice, little picture...maybe include some description." She pointed to his sketch of a dog in the left hand corner, looked up at Tommy, and smiled, "how does that sound?"

Miss Reeves probably knew this was not going to be a long-term solution, but from her studies, she had learned that it is important to acknowledge that each student learns in a different way, and differentiation helps each student value the learning material at hand. Students can get discouraged when they cannot easily grasp certain concepts, so sometimes teachers just need to get creative in their approaches.

"That would be awesome! I was never any good at this...I'm sorry." As Tommy said this, his hand gravitated toward the pens on her desk.

"But drawing is something you're good at, and it can even help you become better at nailing these vocab words."

Miss Reeves and Tommy deal: on every vocab quiz, Tommy could pick three words in which he could draw out the definitions for instead of write. Let's just say, his quiz average

[From EDUC 4040, I learned that it is important to acknowledge that each student learns in a different way; differentiation of instructional method with respect to a student's learning style will help them value the learning material at hand. I spent the semester figuring out distinctive ways to help each student see that making a movie during the afterschool program was going to teach them life skills (i.e. working with peers effectively and powering through obstacles). Some were creative thinkers, like my student Eva, others were more methodical, like Albert and Micah, so I needed to approach similar tasks in different ways to make sure each member of the group was equally engaged.]
Buzz’ing around

Today was not Tommy’s day, and truthfully, yesterday wasn’t either. It had been five weeks since Tommy Terrance started at Greens Preparatory, and he had made a total of two solid friends: Dave, the bus driver, and his English teacher. He didn’t understand how all the other kids were coming to school everyday at the top of their game; boys shirts always pressed and a girl’s hair never out of place while they maintained straight-A report card and perfect attendance at afternoon soccer practice. Tommy had missed the tryouts in late August, but that didn’t matter—you can’t play soccer if you’re still new to shoe tying...can you?

Tommy rode the bus every morning from his house to the campus. The moment he shut his door behind him, he just could wait until 3:22 pm, to open the door again. He had too much anxiety and owned too many ties for a twelve-year-old boy. Dumb prep school uniforms.

Third period English today. Miss Reeves had planned a jam-packed seventy-five minutes of Shakespeare, hoping that the students would appreciate a somewhat nuanced version of theater.

“Everyone take your seats,” she ordered, as the class began to file in.

“MISS REEVE,” remarked Buzz Blasky, undoubtedly the most rambunctious member of Greens Prep’s seventh grade, “WHAT are we doing today? I forgot to do the reading from Midsummer Night Sleep yesterday, so...sorry in advance.”

“Buzz,” she murmured, “it’s Miss Reeves, and the play we are reading is actually called ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream!’” She softly smiled at Buzz, and he quickly got the hint to tone it down.

She warmly announced the class they were going to be split in half, each given the task of filming one of the scenes from last night’s reading. She had dug up some old video cameras from the school’s tech lab, and “borrowed” some costume attire from the drama department. Performance and recitation is key to interpret Shakespeare, plus, Miss Reeves just wanted to get a kick out of the end results of this project.

Buzz, Lana, Kurt, Sami, and Tommy were the members of group 1 to perform the scene in which enraged Lysander and Demetrius seek to battle it out for fair Helena’s love.

“I’m obviously Lysander,” Buzz immediately asserted once the group was huddled up in the right corner of the classroom, “that name is just SO cool. Tommy, I want you to be Demetrius, and Sami, I guess you can be Helena. Everyone else needs to help dress us and stage us. The actors always get special treatment.”

Miss Reeves noticeably had a close eye on this group. When she overheard ‘Dictator Buzz,’ she knew she was going to have to swoop in at some point, especially to save little Tommy from probable stage fright. From her own studies, she learned that
teachers need to be aware of social dynamics within a classroom to ensure each student feels like he or she belongs; they will inherently strive to be more vigilant as a learner. This is particularly necessary when it comes to group work.

"Hey, group 1!"
"Hi Miss Reeves..." the group responded.
"Tommy...so you're going to be Demetrius, I hear?"

Tommy looked up at Miss Reeves with fear in his eyes and replied turning to Buzz, "I-uh-actually, Buzz, I kinda wanted to do the more behind the scenes stuff, like film you guys...Kurt, you wanna act for me?"
Kurt fist pumped in the air "Totally!"
Miss Reeves turned to Sami next, "And you're okay with acting?"
"Yes!" Sami exclaimed, "Lana can pick out our costumes. She loves that stuff."
"Yeah! Miss Reeves," Lana chimed in, "can I be costume designer?"
"Of course! There's a job for everyone, so it looks like you guys are set...now get to it!"
Miss Reeves started to walk away slowly as group 1 assembled, each with a purpose as they began to talk out their performance. She turned back to lock eyes with Tommy, as they exchanged a silent "thumbs up."

[From both my fieldwork in EDUC 4040 and EDUC 4940, I found that I needed to become aware of social dynamics within a classroom to ensure each student feels like he or she belongs; they will inherently strive to be more vigilant as a learner. This particularly applies to group work—shyer students need that extra push to be more assertive, and the more outgoing students occasionally need to be put in line to ensure that each member participates and gets a voice. Students are motivated when they feel as though they have contributed something valuable, and have can come to class with a purpose. Say Nay and Tin Cho were both a little reserved but were extremely creative and forward thinking, so I always had to remind them that we were relying on them to share their ideas, which they thoroughly appreciated.]
Tommy rode the bus every morning from his house to the Greens Prep. The moment he shut the door behind him, the distaste for school gradually began to sink in. It didn't stop until he came home in the afternoon, at exactly 3 22, to open his front door again. He had too much anxiety and owned too many ties for a 14-year-old boy Dumb prep school uniforms.

"Hey, Thomas!"
"What's up, Dave?"
"How are we today?" Dave knew Tommy wasn't excited. It was written all over his freckled face every morning. Tommy looked back at his house, and paused before answering,
"Fine I guess. It's Monday.. "

Half way through his day of classes and one pitiful round of pick up basketball, in which he spend most of his time on the sidelines, Tommy couldn't wait to arrive early to fourth period English. Tommy walked into the classroom, darted over to his usual seat, and plopped down with his backpack. Miss Reeves casually looked up from her salad.
"Hey there, Thomas."
"Miss Reeves...today is so long "
"Monday is a rough one for most of us...how was your weekend?"
"Good, but—" Tommy's voiced trailed off as he looked up at Miss Reeves projected laptop background on the whiteboard. He studied it more meticulously than any of his vocabulary words.
"Oh..." Miss Reeves realized, acknowledging Tommy's recent fascination, "what do you think? Cool, right? You think you could draw something like it?"
The screen saver was some sort of abstract, graphic design image, blue and white that she had found on Pinterest
"Probably...I like it. I do like drawing animals."
"What do you mean?"
"Well, it's a duck isn't it?"
Miss Reeves turned around fully to face the projected screen.
"Wow...I think it is a duck...and for the past 2 months, I thought it was just some random, interesting blob on a white background.
Miss Reeves automatically had to remind herself that despite Tommy's subpar efforts thus far in school, every student has potential, and by obliging to help
students reach this potential, teachers need to consider themselves as lifetime learners. Even Tommy Terrance could teach her a thing or two.

"You're pretty observant, aren't you?"

"Well..." Tommy sighed, "I'm just curious. You never realize that duck before?"

Miss Reeves laughed candidly, and turned back to face her student.

"No, Thomas," she smiled and continued, "so, thanks for pointing that out."

[As a student in EDUC 2610, The Art of Teaching, and as a teaching assistant for the class a year later, I found that every student has potential, and by obligating to help students reach this potential, teachers need to consider themselves as lifetime learners. I conducted my fieldwork for the class at the Johnson Museum, doing art projects with young students and helping them interpret pieces in the collection. Sometimes, they would have insight on a work of art that I myself had never even thought of. I was constantly learning new things from kids who had not had experience with art, just a fresh perspective. Additionally as a TA, I learned new things from my students' papers, reflection journals, and final presentations; specifically in regards to academic subjects I was not familiar with such as plant and animal science. I always acknowledged the students I learned from, and this helped them become more motivated to learn.]

The End :}