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Have Brain, Will Think

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ENG 305A

Essay 1 final

Have Brain, Will Think

Teachers are integral cogs in the education machine. They can provide a positive or negative experience in their classrooms, as well as inspire or discourage students. My junior high/high school is very small; each grade consists of 30-37 people; therefore, we have teachers multiple times. The teacher that stands out the most, and I daresay the best teacher I had, not only taught seventh grade ELA, English 12, and A.P. Literature, but also fostered my love of writing while enhancing my skills.

Kathryn Brown always walks into class with a purpose and a positive personality, no matter what personal or work-related events might be happening. She has a passion for what she does and frequently forgets about the bell as she is so excited and absorbed by what she is teaching. For as long as I have known her, she has operated in this fashion. As my seventh grade English teacher, Mrs. Brown made undesirable tasks entertaining learning experiences, to the point I forgot I was learning. She made games out of lessons, such as tree diagrams. On writing tasks she always responded with feedback giving "two stars and a wish," meaning she would highlight two things students did very well in their writing and one thing that needed more attention or to be improved upon. Mrs. Brown even went so far as grading with a green pen so we would not feel discouraged or overwhelmed by edits made in red ink. Despite the comforting means through which she gave her feedback, it was always constructive and helped us to become better writers. Not only did she design every activity, writing or otherwise, but she also participated. When we were assigned to read or work in groups, she would put herself on our level and sit at a student desk and read or would involve herself in the group discussions. No

matter what the topic, she made it engaging and made it seem like all of our questions, concerns, opinions, and paper topics were brilliant and well-articulated.

In February of my seventh grade year, Mrs. Brown was involved in a near fatal car accident and was rushed to Fletcher Allen Hospital in Vermont. Admittedly, my class was devastated and not expecting her return, yet a few months after her accident, she returned with scars, bruises, and many healing injuries but with an intact and positive spirit. Her return truly inspired us to work harder to make her proud and prove that one can do anything he or she wants with persistence, hard work, and hope. She made uninterested seventh graders excited to walk into her room, free write about any topic given, and then share what we wrote about because she made our topics, and ourselves, feel important.

When I was able to have Mrs. Brown again for A.P. Literature in my senior year I was more than ecstatic. The entire English department at my high school is fantastic; yet, it had been years since I had been in her class and due to her extended absence in seventh grade, I was eager to see what she had in store. Reality did not fall short of expectations. While she continued to grade in green ink and give two stars and a wish, the tasks were much, much harder, provoking deep thinking. After welcoming her Advanced Placement seniors, we immediately got to work. My class had not changed much in five years, so she faced a reluctant and challenging class. She again made every book we read seem exciting, even to those who adamantly disliked the literary canon. For example, while reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, my class was putting up more resistance than ever. So instead of teasing a bland class discussion out of us, she held a mock trial for both Victor Frankenstein and his creature. The subsequent writing activity was to write a paper with one's personal verdict and explanation as to how the particular verdict was reached. It helped us understand *Frankenstein* on a deeper level while enhancing our writing skills. It was

activities like these that made A.P. Literature seem easier and made a class of reluctant seniors more attentive to the literature and writing.

After our grueling A.P. test preparation, weekly in-class timed essays, and the test itself, Mrs. Brown signed the A.P. class out and walked us down the road to the local shop and bought us all ice cream. While her gesture was kind and appreciated, it was the return trip that was the most memorable. We had to be back in the building by a certain time. However, the ice cream endeavor took a smidgen longer than expected. Our first thought was to run the half mile back; the second was to hop two fences and sprint through the playground. The latter won. As the class climbed and cleared the fence, so did our teacher, laughing the entire way. We knew Mrs. Brown would do anything to help us, but never did we think she would climb fences for us. Not only did she teach us literature and writing, but she allowed us to have fun while doing it. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, we did well on the A. P. exam, a true testament to her teaching abilities.

The experience Mrs. Brown creates in her room is truly unforgettable. She has the rare quality of making students care, not only about English, but reminding them that creativity, imagination, and individuality are important too. She also reinforces the idea that students' opinions matter, all of which are important in meaningful and effective writing. Rather than talking at students, Mrs. Brown talks to and with students. While maintaining her teacher position and boundary, she has a maternal disposition. She is a teacher one can go to with personal matters and know her advice is coming from her heart and what is said will not escape the Shakespeare Room. Personally, she made me a more attentive student, a more vocal student, and, I would like to think, a better person. She wholeheartedly gives herself to what her students need, even when exhausted, frustrated, or ill. I truly owe her for fostering my love of English, for

building my skills in English as a whole, and for helping develop my ability to write in writing in particular.

Clearly, Mrs. Brown has a focus on literature in A.P. Literature, but she did not let writing fall to the wayside. The biggest writing question Mrs. Brown prompts her students to answer is “SO WHAT?” She is notorious for writing “SO WHAT” throughout essays, demanding a clear answer. Without her guidance and persistence, I would not be able to begin to write a passable thesis. She does not just expect students to regurgitate information for a bland prompt; she twists the prompt to make it more interesting to the reluctant writers. Although her A.P. Literature students often struggle with the literature and writing required, she somehow eliminates confusion by the tasks assigned. We were not only expected to write prompted essays for each poem or novel, but she would also assign different writing tasks to work on different styles and purposes of writing. Mrs. Brown also focused on the finer details, such as transitions and punctuation. She focused on all aspects of writing to ensure the class was able to produce a coherent paper with insight, evidence, fluency, and meaning. When she realized I had a passion for writing, she took special note and helped build my skills. She taught me how to weave my voice into my writing, as well as provide new, exciting ideas to an old, lackluster prompt. If not for her, I would not have the love of writing I do, nor would I have the writing skills I do.

Not only is Mrs. Brown a good ELA and writing teacher, she is also an all-around good person. In conjunction with her teaching responsibilities, she is the senior class advisor and thus is in charge of arranging and preparing for graduation, Class Day, the senior rafting trip, the senior play, and the Pin Ceremony. Furthermore, she is the Drama Club advisor, Recycling Club advisor, and aids those students who choose to participate in Poetry Out Loud and the regional spelling bee. Needless to say, she spends a great deal of time at school. She is willing to come in

early, stay late, and give up her lunch and free periods to help any and all students who may need some assistance.

Going above and beyond seems to be part of Kathryn Brown's nature. On top of all of that, she has put forth great effort in making a change in education as a whole. Her growing frustration with standardized curriculums and standardized tests prompted her to take action. In May 2013, she created a community Have Brain, Will Think! This community supports innovation, creativity, and individuality while disputing and working to combat the standardization of learning and the over-reliance on standardized testing. Mrs. Brown has spoken at several educational forums, participated in numerous rallies in support of public education, did a live on-air panel discussion with the John King, the then commissioner of education, and testified in Albany with the Regents Reform Agenda. She has written an untold number of letters to the governor, the Board of Regents, and the elected officials across the country. Her first letter can even be viewed on Youtube. Her goal is to "help express how important it is for children to think in a wide variety of ways, while making a stand against the over-reliance on standardized test scores. Teachers need students; students need teachers. We are not and cannot become data-driven quantitative results. We must maintain our ability to laugh, to play, to work, to challenge" (Brown).

Despite all of these responsibilities, Mrs. Brown still finds time to stay in touch with alumni and aid those who have graduated who are still in search of her green pen for editing and assistance. Although I have graduated, Mrs. Brown is always there as support, even when I repeatedly ask to use her in papers or for subject-verb agreement worksheets. Personally, she has supported my decision to pursue English education whole-heartedly even when I doubted myself. She has been there as a teacher, a mentor, a sounding block, and now a friend.

Reflecting on my school experience, I could not say I ever had a terrible teacher. I can, however, say I have had a few amazing teachers and leading that group is Kathryn Brown. She inspires her students by creating a positive experience and atmosphere for them to grow and learn. When I become a teacher, I can only aspire to be half of the teacher and person she is.