

The Marlborough Years

I began my teaching career when I was appointed teacher of Social Science at Marlborough High School. I stayed there for 12 years. Marlborough was in a relatively wealthy part of town and was distinctly academic in its tone. It had a tremendous reputation in the community – academically, in co-curricular sports and clubs, and for the safe environment it created for its students. It was named after John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), a famous British general who defeated the French army in four separate battles. (1702-1709) Marlborough H.S. was something of a symbol of Canada's rich history. Opened in 1958, Marlborough was a powerhouse in everything.

Given the relative affluence of Marlborough's catchment area, families had positive but mechanistic views of education. By this I mean that parents and families valued learning, but not for deeply philosophical reasons. They tended to see education as a path to a better job, higher status and more income. Because of the optimism about the future that would surely unfold, the student body was largely hard-working, co-operative, and content.

The daily grind

Among the first things you will notice in your newly-minted teaching career is the sheer number of questions and decisions you will face in a single day. "May I please go to the bathroom?" "Can we have an extra day to prepare for Tuesday's debate?" "Can we watch the video clip one more time before we start to compose our closing statement?"

Some of the questions can be quite complicated when you try to give instantaneous answers. I well remember a Grade 12 Sociology class in which about half of the students appeared anxious to do me serious bodily harm because of a decision I had made!

I always allowed my Senior classes (Grades 11-12) to have input on the timing of scheduled major tests. We had decided on a particular day and then, the Chemistry teacher ordered a test for her class to be held the day before mine. There were about 12 students who took both courses. They lobbied me intensely to delay my test, knowing that the Chemistry teacher was inflexible on such matters.

Then a snow day wiped out a day of review time. I could see that the students were in a tough position. The lobbying continued, and eventually I caved in. We would delay the test by not one, but two days, to accommodate the 12 students in the two classes.

I thought I would be treated like a hero. It was only in exceptional circumstances that I would allow a test date to be moved once we had all agreed on its timing. But instead of appreciation for my decision, I was treated with some disrespect. What could I say to the class members who had prepared for the original test date, despite the congestion in the timetable? How could I have pitted one half of the class against the other? I never made this sort of error again.

A colleague once told me that he got so tired of making such decisions that when his partner would ask him at home what type of dressing he wanted on his salad, he would answer: "You decide for me."

Successful teachers become experts in multi-tasking. There is a wide range of student abilities and learning styles in the typical secondary school classroom, and the teacher is expected to provide learning strategies that will address this range of variability. Here are some examples of the small things that teachers deal with on a daily basis.

Compliments, compliments

It occurred at an annual graduation ceremony. I was "working the gym," or meeting families and former students, offering congratulations and good wishes for the future. I was speaking to a woman in her mid-20s, named Tina. I had taught her when she was a student at Marlborough. Tina was visiting the school to see her younger sister graduate.

Tina told me that she had recently graduated from university with a B.A. in Sociology. Making polite conversation, I asked her why she had chosen to major in that subject over others. "Oh Mr. Bain," she responded, "it was your wonderful classes here at Marlborough High School." I was naturally pleased by what she said, but I was also a bit mystified. My academic strength is not in the field of Sociology, so it wasn't my academic credentials that captured Tina's enthusiasm. I didn't really remember delivering particularly top-notch classes in Sociology as opposed to, say, History or Economics.

Whatever it was, I decided to wallow in her compliment. I would eventually learn that we should all make positive efforts to replay in our mind examples of nice things that students have said or done in communicating their respect for us. The fact is that teachers receive far more insults than compliments from their students. But that's precisely why we have to make a positive effort to remember the compliments we receive!

Muhammad Ali

No, the world's most famous professional boxer was not one of my students.

But sometimes when a student was not particularly responsive to mild criticism from me for a minor offence, I would say: "You forget that I went 15 rounds with Muhammad Ali." I would make slow motion punches in the air, imitating Ali ducking and weaving. This usually worked well, bringing a grin to those who were in my sights.

Then one day in class, a student asked out loud, "Mr. Bain, did you really go 15 rounds with Muhammad Ali?" In his prime, Ali stood 191 cm in height, and weighed 105 kg. My figures are 170 cm and 60 kg. It was hard to think of us in the ring going at each other. So I fessed up. It wasn't really true. One girl slapped her seatmate's arm. "Told you," she said triumphantly.

Many teachers have their own catchphrases and idiosyncrasies. It's not surprising that students generally go along with them. That's why my Ali story hung together for so long. Not all students can recognize irony or satire.

Map of World War I Nations

It was a wet and windy day in November, just the sort of weather prevalent in November 1918 as World War I came to an end. The students in my class were working on an outline map of Europe to understand the two-alliance system. The countries of the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) were to be coloured blue. Triple Alliance countries (Germany, Italy, and Austro-Hungary) were to be coloured red. The rest of the countries were to be coloured in a shade of grey. All countries should be labelled. The information needed came from a coloured map in their textbook.

I was going around the classroom, dealing with individuals and their problems as they arose. I came across one student whose map was just about complete. The countries were properly coloured and labelled. The alliance systems were properly identified. Scandinavia sat at the lower end of this map. Poland faced west as it looked in the direction of Russia. The map demonstrated good artistic skills. But it was upside down!

I had never to this point considered how a student with a perceptual difficulty would find the task amazingly complex. He could not perform the first basic requirement of the activity: "Properly orient your copy of the outline map in a north-south configuration."

Teachers have to attend to the smallest of unforeseen obstacles.

Chapter 3 - Mike's Story

Mike was in my Grade 10 Canadian History course when I came to Marlborough. Small of stature but mentally agile, his take on things was never in doubt. It seemed that his personal goal in life was to have as much fun as he could without actually committing himself to any of the work necessary to build a personal inventory of skills and create a better society.

Mike required constant supervision from the teacher (me) to ensure completion and submission of assignments, to attend classes regularly and generally to accept responsibility for his own maturation and learning. He'd rather not do any of those things (*thank you very much*) and squeaked by with 55% in History. If any extra effort were required in his courses, he told me that the focus would be on Math and Science classes. He reckoned these were more important than my History class. (Incidentally, after some probing from me, he admitted that he told his Science and Math teachers that any extra effort on his part would go into History class, because it wasn't boring like the classes over which they presided.)

Mike was the perfect example of the student whose primary goal was to neutralize the teacher's role in his life. Don't attract attention to yourself by bad behaviour but reserve the right to interfere in disputes between class members. In class discussions, he was an expert at shooting down the opinions of other students but never quite seemed to put forward to the class members any solutions of his own.

I had a number of run-ins with Mike as the school year advanced. We disagreed about the usual things – attendance, lateness to class, missing assignments, etc. It was rather meagre gruel, the sort of stuff that teachers and students fight about on a regular basis. But it irked me that a single individual could affect the smooth operation of a whole class just by being impervious to any directions provided by the teacher (me).

At that time, I drove an MGB sports car. Built in the years when British manufacturing was highly revered, it was a snazzy two-seater with a convertible top and was great fun to drive. It was destined to be a high-mileage car as my wife and I had a daily round-trip commute of about 115 km from our home in the country. One winter, it began to develop a low moaning sound when first started up but which stopped after a short distance as the engine warmed. Adding two plus two and getting an answer of six, I suddenly developed the idea that I had a main engine bearing about to expire. This would be a major job to repair with a high bill due when the work was done.

One day in winter, I dropped off the car for an oil change in the school's auto shop (many secondary schools offered such services. You buy your auto parts and the students will install them, under the supervision of the teacher, whom I'll call Mr. Shop Teacher). At the end of the school day, I cleared up a few loose ends then wandered to the auto shop to pick up the car. But the lights were all out, the door locked and there was no one to take any questions I might have.

Mr. Shop Teacher was a member of the “3:30 Track Team”. This was a sarcastic name given by teachers who were active in co-curriculars, to teachers who were first out the door when the bell rang at the end of the scheduled day. When I arrived, Mr. Shop Teacher was nowhere around. I eventually tracked down a custodian who let me into the shop and opened the vehicle door so I could back the car out of the building.

The car and I were at the back of the school. No one else was around ... except Mike, who was standing there sucking down an illegal cigarette. When he saw me backing the car out of the auto shop, he carefully rested his smoke on a tree branch and began to make snowballs (it was January) and hurl them at me. I was incensed and just lost it. I got out of the car and ran directly towards him. I'm not sure what I intended to do, but whatever it was, it was a bad idea. At that moment, all the lights in the shop suddenly came back on. Mr. Shop Teacher had had to return for one more item. He saw us out there and gave us a cheery wave, to which we responded with a wave of our own. I don't think he knew that Mike and I were just about to have a screaming match, or worse, outside the doors of his shop. In the end, Mike and I went our separate ways, our dignity intact.

But here's the funny thing: Mike's behaviour improved in my class. Perhaps he had found some respect for me after the incident. Maybe there was some other factor at work. I'll never know, but it was a valuable lesson. When we lose our temper, we can all be dangerous. It's extremely wise of teachers to resist provocation, retain a calm demeanour, and not let their emotions get the better of them.

And the car? Well, it turned out to be a bent exhaust pipe. In the previous fall, I'd gotten the car stuck on a rock along a camp road. The pipe had bent and just made contact with the engine block. When the engine was cold, the pipe and block rumbled from vibration. When the engine and pipe were warm, the pipe moved slightly away from the block, and there was no rumble.

The moral of this story? Always remain calm and keep low-slung sports cars off rough camp roads!

Chapter 4 - Peter and George's story

Peter and George were members of my Grade 9 Canadian History class. They had come from different feeder schools but very quickly became close friends at Marlborough. Average students, they were reasonably hard working. They would never be outstanding students but they could always be relied on to complete their work on time.

Their Grade 9 year progressed. In June, they were both given credit for my class, after meeting all the requirements of the course. At year-end I wished them both well.

When the information surrounding the new school year began to come out in mid-August, I looked at my student print outs, observing that George was in my Grade 10 History class but Peter was not. I thought no more about it. When school began in September, I had my normal interactions with George, but made no contact with Peter. Whenever Peter and I encountered each other in the hallways, he chose to look the other way.

On the first Friday of the new school year, I ran into the two of them as I made a quick trip to the cafeteria. We acknowledged each other. George seemed his normal lively self, but Peter was downcast. We caught up on our "How are you's?" Then Peter struck straight for the heart of the matter: "I see I'm not in your Grade 10 class," he observed. I nodded, trying to figure out which way the conversation was going to go. "Yes, that's true," I responded, stating the self-evident. Then Peter let me have it. He literally shouted out his response even though we were standing close to each other. "Yes, but you decided to take George," unloading his feelings of genuine pain and anger.

"Oh Peter," I countered, "that has nothing to do with me. The computers assign the students to individual classes. It wasn't me or any other human who made that decision." His face suddenly went from anger to joy as he understood that I had not excluded him from my class. I taught both Peter and George in later years, sometimes in the same class and other times separately. I had good relations with both.

Good teachers know that the decisions they make can have a great impact on the lives of students. In Peter and George's case, of course, it was a computer that was responsible for a key decision.

Again, in retrospect, I am glad I remained calm. It's not a good idea for teachers to get too sticky about how students address them. Yes, Peter did shout at me. But when one sees it from his perceived point of view, a lapse like this can be excused.

Chapter 5 - Eadie's Story

The first time I noticed Eadie, I was surprised at how aggressive she looked. She was quite short but she had broad shoulders, a stocky build, and a general air of hostility about her. She sat front row centre in my grade nine Canadian history class. At times, she would deliver a commentary on what was going on in class. "Hey, John's not doing anything. Shouldn't he be summarizing the events described in chapter seven?" Or, "Janice has created a lovely map of the Battle of Passchendaele. She's very artistic."

Eadie could observe what was going on all around the room because she repeatedly made trips to the pencil sharpener, to look out of the window, or simply to stretch. She was one of many students in the class who craved attention, recognition and influence.

In Eadie's case, this meant that she occasionally flew into a rage about some perceived injustice she had encountered. "Hey, there's too much noise in here. How can I get a start on my homework if everyone's talking so loudly?" Of course, when it came to any noise Eadie made, different rules applied.

In October, our class was scheduled to visit the Provincial Legislature. The students generally enjoyed this type of field trip, largely because they were surprised how raucous the Members of the Provincial Parliament can be in their behaviour towards each other.

Shortly before the date of our visit, I was going over the ground rules for the day.

Me: Leave all valuables in the locked bus.

Eadie: I've got a new portable radio. Can I carry it around with me, so it doesn't get stolen?

Me: No, you can't take anything, except for perhaps a small purse, into the Legislature. You will have to leave the radio on the bus.

Eadie: Do you think this will work? I'll attach the radio to a long chain and leave it on the bus. The other end of the chain, I attach to my wrist so that no one can steal it from me.

Me: When you have a sensible suggestion to make Eadie, I'll be happy to hear it.

Eadie bristled at my response to her argumentative question, but she didn't go into one of her meltdowns.

Back in class, the students were trying to create a cabinet of ministers from the various groups elected to Parliament. It is a tricky task because the Premier has to come up with a balance of genders, professions, geographical regions and experience, and other factors.

Suddenly Eadie shouted out. “Hey teacher, do you know what Petro Canada stands for?” I’d heard the joke before (the federal government under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau was trying to buy a foreign oil company and rename it Petro Canada).

“Yes,” I said, “it stands for Pierre Elliot Trudeau Ripping Off Canada.”

There was much hilarity in the class and Eadie didn’t like being the butt of it.

That was it. Eadie had had a surprise. Unable to control the mood and direction of the class, she figured out that she should get aggressive.

She came flying out from her desk and stood in the middle of the class and looked at me. “You always treat me like s***!” she shouted out.

I think she must have felt her position of influence in the class was being threatened. Eventually things calmed down and somehow, miraculously, we avoided a complete and successful mutiny.

For obvious reasons, I had been reading about ways of dealing with unruly classes. The best way to get the cooperation of such classes, one author suggested, was to give the students an increased role in setting and enforcing class rules. I talked to Mr. Butcher, our principal, and I told him I was unhappy with the level of learning in the class and wondered how I was going to improve it. “Have you ever thought of setting up a class meetings schedule,” he asked? I had heard something about this process, but I had never put it into practice. I re-read one of the books and decided to try it.

Each Friday, the students and the teacher would take some time, usually about 20 minutes, to establish and continue specific roles about behaviour expected. The point of all this is that teachers have to be prepared to transfer some powers that traditionally belong to them alone. Otherwise, it won’t work.

I proposed the plan to my class, and they were reasonably interested in trying it. The kind of rules we eventually established were like the following:

Regarding washroom breaks

1. Maximum one boy and one girl out of the class at one time.
2. All students are entitled to 15 minutes out of class each week for washroom breaks.
3. Students are only allowed a total of four breaks in any given week.

And who should we choose to keep track of the washroom breaks? Eadie put up her hand and another student volunteered. So, we voted by secret ballot. As it happened, Eadie didn't win. She wasn't chosen. I thought this might have negative consequences, but it didn't. She had learned that sometimes your reputation in the past holds you back from the future and some of the other students were simply fed up with her.

I tried this approach with a number of difficult classes over the years. I don't think they represent a silver bullet, able to correct all problem behaviours. But it helped to get the students to take responsibility for some of their own learning. And classes became less noisy!

Maybe I owe Eadie a vote of thanks. Without her belligerence, aggressiveness and loudness, I might never have been willing to give this type of classroom project a try. Eadie mellowed and started to contribute to the class meetings schedule. For her, at least, I think the process was a success.