Growing Up
Reflections on the Semester

When I was in first grade, my school held a Career Day. This meant that, in the grand suburban tradition of shamelessly subjecting your children to cute outfits and a barrage of flashbulbs, all the students came to school dressed as what they wanted to be when they grew up. Being in love with my first grade teacher and not knowing what else to do, I came to school dressed as a teacher. It seemed like a reasonable option, and I figured that being a teacher meant becoming a wonderful person like Mrs. Giordano. I honestly do not remember much about the events of the day, but because my mother and father enjoy pointing out the surprising congruence between that day’s choice of costume and my current career path, my mind wanders to this image every now and then. There I was, wearing a red jumper and white stockings (because, of course, this is what all teachers wear), declaring proudly that I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up, though I really was not sure. After that moment, I had no real intention of becoming a teacher. At various points later down the line, I wanted to become a lawyer, an editor, a biologist, and a psychologist. Yet, here I am now, about to become certified to teach and reliving that first grade moment of announcing my grown up plans. It’s amazing how unassumingly witty life is sometimes.

I distinctly remember feeling oddly ambivalent about student teaching just before the semester began. I had spent much of the preceding summer and semester seesawing between feelings of panicked dread on bad days and nervous excitement on good ones. Every time someone would ask me about my plans for post-graduation, I would reply, “Student teaching,” with an air of confidence and security that betrayed the vague uncertainty that lurked in the back of my mind. If that person took interest and questioned further, perhaps asking about the age
group I would be teaching or the kind of school I would be in, I would more often than not leave the conversation with some sort of advice or warning. “You have to start out mean or else they’ll never respect you,” some would say with a knowing look. “Wow, middle school is an awful age,” and its numerous variations often came with tones of pity or respect. Those who had student taught before would say, “It’s really hard,” looking weathered and worn. I tried not to be too intimidated by comments such as these and tried focusing instead on the excitement inherent in trying something new and the optimistic promise that being a teacher of young people should hold. This didn’t last for long, unfortunately, and I quickly found myself apprehensive about the whole experience. As the summer moved along, however, I had fewer of these conversations and got over the apprehension. By the time the fall semester came around, I had sufficiently exhausted my emotional roller coaster. I came into student teaching not knowing what to expect in a surprisingly unemotional way. I knew it would be hard, and I knew it would be rewarding, but I also knew that any expectations I carried into the experience would likely be shattered. As open as I wanted to be to anything that would happen this semester, I was still rocked to the core at many points. I have rarely experienced such frustration and deep, heart-wrenching strain on my abilities, and I have rarely seen so many beautiful things come surprisingly out of my own broken and meager strivings. I have hurt much, and I have learned much; I have regretted much, and I have succeeded much. It has been a semester of stretching, of endurance, and most of all, of learning humility.

The beginning of the semester was the hardest time for me. In many ways, my placement was relatively ideal. My cooperating teacher and I hit it off as soon as we met on the first day of staff development, and our relationship quickly became comfortable and positive, both professionally and personally. The other faculty at the school were welcoming and supportive, and I felt comfortable asking
anyone for advice. The students were fabulous, too, and I was beginning to develop an appreciation for how funny, affectionate, and energetic middle schoolers can be. When I started teaching the first class, however, my confidence and optimism began to break down. I struggled hard to manage the classroom, and I struggled hard to plan and execute decent lessons that lined up with the district’s Core Curriculum. I felt powerless in the classroom and inspiration-less in lesson planning. I would come out of most classes weary from forcing myself to be a disciplinarian and disappointed from seeing students not understand what I was trying to teach them. I would spend hours lesson planning and end up producing flat and boring activities. All of this snowballed and eventually pushed me to near breaking. I saw myself straining and striving, trying so hard and so earnestly to be a good teacher, but even with the best of plans, I saw myself failing. To see that my own well-intentioned and diligent efforts were getting me nowhere was horrifying. I felt weak and helpless. I hated teaching for making me feel that way.

Now, what’s funny about all this is the fact that I knew all this already. I’ve known for years and years that I am not perfect and that I cannot solve everything and be everything in and of myself. It is the very foundation of my spiritual reality, and yet, I expected myself to be perfect. I expected my lesson planning to be impeccable and my classroom management skills to be flawless. When I think back on it now, I am slightly amused by my naive perfectionism. This is something that I believe plagues many Swarthmore students, but unlike many, I had yet to have it beaten out of me. Gradually, the revelation finally came. After repeated conversations with my supervisor and loved ones, in which they kept telling me to stop beating myself up, I began to stop beating myself up. Rather than viewing every imperfect lesson as a complete failure (and seeing myself as a failure because of it), I began to look to my mistakes as moments of true learning. Rather than seeing classroom management as something that turned me into an
ugly person, I began to see it as a skill that enabled learning and ultimately communicated seriousness and dedication to students. I began to plan without clear expectations for the events that would actually transpire because, really, middle schoolers are far too interesting to allow that to happen all the time. I began to relinquish control, not of the classroom itself, but of the entire process. I finally was starting to understand that the teacher can only plan so much. The rest of what happens is largely up to everyone else in the room.

As my grip on perfectionism began to slowly relax, I began to actually enjoy myself. Although I was not working with the most relevant or enjoyable curricular material in the world, I began to see some positive aspects in it. Although my seventh graders were still driving me insane, I began to see and deeply appreciate their personalities and individual quirks. I also began to see where I was improving. It was extremely gratifying to be able to say, “Excuse me, class,” and finally see students quieting down. It felt amazing to be able to teach a lesson on dangling modifiers (don’t ask me why it was in the seventh grade curriculum) and hear students tell me that they were understanding it. It was also wonderful to read student writing and to be able to get a glimpse into who they were and the worlds they came from. On an interpersonal level, I was flattered and encouraged by how students responded to me outside of class. By the end of my time there, I had a regular group of four or five students coming to eat lunch with me everyday. Much of the time, they quickly gulped down their lunches and ran to play on the computer, but many other times, they told me about their lives. They told me funny stories from childhood or from over the weekend, and they told me sad stories about their current situations with parents, siblings, and significant others. They talked about school and their social worlds, and they were not afraid to offend. They often spoke with energy that made it seem like they had been waiting forever to speak, and I loved listening to them. Sometimes I would offer a word of
wisdom or two, but I was never sure if it was making much of a difference. At the end of the semester, my cooperating teacher threw a surprise party for me, and I was blown away by how much affection and appreciation he and my students showed me. Some of them gave me gifts, and many of them wrote me letters. One of these letters came from a member of the lunch crew:

I just wanted to say thanks for listening to both me and my friends. We’re all gonna miss you. I am especially grateful for you talking with Marie.* She really needed it and I know she won’t forget it and neither will I. Thanks for being such a great teacher. (*a pseudonym)

Of all the major and minor successes I had this semester, this is one of the ones that meant the most. Being able to move beyond pessimistically scrutinizing my performance to teaching and seeing students for who they were -- and actually connecting with them -- was incredible.

There are still many things I regret from this semester. I regret not being daring enough to go outside of the Core Curriculum or to find ways to make it more applicable to students’ lives. I regret the many times I caved to time pressures and delivered dry, teacher-centered lectures that could have been turned into interactive learning experiences. I also regret the many times I plowed through lessons without regard to whether or not students were really understanding. There are other regrets, of course, but I have learned that thinking of them merely as regrets will result in little more than guilty feelings. As I move onto “real” teaching, I will take these less optimal experiences as areas for change. I hope that the weaknesses I saw in myself as a student teacher will not consume but will rather make me ever better at this craft.

In many ways, I still feel like I did that day in first grade when I told people what I wanted to be when I grew up: both completely certain and completely uncertain. For the time being, I am completely certain that I want to be a teacher. I have learned much this semester about myself, my limits, and my abilities, and I
have also discovered how fun and rewarding teaching can be. Yet, I am also completely uncertain about being a teacher. Will I really like it? Will I stick with it? Will I be good at it when all the safety nets are gone? Am I willing to work through inevitable pains? Unfortunately for my impatient side, it takes more than a semester to answer these questions. I have found that at least for now, however, I am willing to look.