



# The Novice Teacher: Armed and Dangerous

## A Cautionary Tale

As professors whose primary experience at the college level has been in teacher education programs, we have had the opportunity to teach and learn with hundreds of prospective teachers. Many leave their training with an almost palpable zeal for change. Unfortunately, enthusiasm, strong teaching skills, and even a love for students and learning are not enough. Making change, any change, is slow, sometimes painful, and exponentially more difficult as the number of people one wants to include in the change process increases—which is why we begin this book with a cautionary tale about the peril of banking on achieving too much too soon.

## Susan Jackson

One of our best students, a young woman we'll call Susan Jackson, was as excited about teaching as anyone we can remember. Susan was a crackerjack student. She was dynamic, engaging, and highly inquisitive. She was interested not only in how things worked in educational settings but also in why the pieces fit together the way they did. Her curiosity was contagious. In fact, of all the students we have known, Susan stood out in terms of both her intellectual curiosity and her enthusiasm—enviable traits for a teacher charged with actively engaging students in learning. Susan also was among the very strongest students we had in terms of her ability to grasp theoretical issues, articulate her arguments, and integrate theory with practice. Finally, she had excellent writing and verbal communication skills, and by the time she graduated, Susan had accumulated a solid repertoire of very creative ideas about how to help students develop these important skills. In short, Susan represented the best our system has to offer, and in many ways she seemed like a perfect candidate for becoming a strong change agent as well.

Susan's story is a common one. Armed, ready, and excited for constructivist teaching, she found herself surrounded by teachers who simply did not see things her way and students unprepared to play along—but we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's start at the beginning with Susan's culminating college experience of working in a ninth-grade English classroom. Here is what Susan had to say about what her "dream school" would look like shortly before her culminating project began.

## Susan's Ideal World

*In my ideal world, I will graduate and get a well-paying, teaching job at a progressive school where the students and teachers are self-motivated—where teachers, administrators, and students work together to create exciting, fascinating, fun learning experiences. The best part of working in my dream school, though, is that it is filled with problem solving yes-sayers rather than griping nay-sayers. When an exciting or unusual opportunity for teaming presents itself, the members of my school community will get together and say, “We really must find a way to make this happen,” rather than, “Oh, we couldn’t possibly do that because . . .” In addition, I want to be in a school just to be in a school. I want to sit at a lunch table with good teachers who care about their students and just listen to what they have to say. I want to be in a place where I can ask more than one teacher, “This is what happened to me today. What would you do in this situation?” I want to see for myself what it is like to have 5 special-needs students in a class of 20. I want to hear the kinds of things that teachers gripe about in low voices during free periods in the day.*

## Susan's Experience at the High School

As Susan would later discover, high school freshmen, classrooms, and schools are often significantly shy of her dream. Nevertheless, Susan had the good fortune of working with a teacher who was open to new ideas, ready for some experimentation, and willing to follow her lead for at least one major project. The excerpt below comes from Susan's self-evaluation of her culminating experience.

*One of the first questions I asked Marcia (the cooperating teacher) was, “How much freedom do we have in terms of what the students can explore, how they go about doing it, and how they show us what they have learned?” She explained that the school had already decided that all 9th grade students would do a unit on Greek mythology. She said that this had been the case for several years. She explained the ways in which she had taught the topic in the past but said that she was willing to try a new approach. From what I gathered, her approach in the past was fairly “traditional.” As I understood it, she had the class begin with the Greek story of the creation of the earth, which the whole class read and discussed together. She then had them move into the hero stories and then moved on to several of the other well-known myths. She said that in the past she gave weekly quizzes on vocabulary and content and ended the unit with a comprehensive exam. In other words, Marcia's approach in the past had been to try to expose each student to several (and all the same) of the Greek myths and to discuss some of the broad themes like the role of the hero in Greek mythology.*

*The approach I advocated was a bit different. The model I used was basically the model used in many of my college classes. I suggested that each student either alone or with a partner, pick a myth, a mythological character, or some other aspect of Greek culture and create an original exhibition to present to the class. Using this approach, each student would have the opportunity to become an expert on some aspect of Greek*

*culture or mythology and, because they had to present to the entire class, all of the students would be exposed to every topic. Marcia said that she liked the idea of projects, although she also said that she had never given the students total freedom in choosing the topics, and she was interested to see how well they would handle it.*

*For my first lesson, I introduced myself, told them a bit about my philosophy of learning, and explained to the class that I needed their help. I needed to know what they thought were the qualities of a good teacher. We spent the rest of the period generating this list. For their homework assignment, Marcia asked the students to pick the two or three qualities they thought were most important and to explain why these qualities were at the top of their personal lists. In addition, I asked the students to write me a short letter that began, "Dear Miss Jackson, one thing I liked about today's class was that . . . and one thing I did not like or did not understand about today's class was that . . ." The letters were a wonderful way to begin to get to know the students. I could also begin to identify which students were willing to take some time to think about the question and which students just wrote something down to get it over with.*

*The next step in this process was to try to determine what the students already knew about the Greeks and Greek mythology. In addition, I wanted the students to begin thinking about ways they could demonstrate their understanding of a topic other than by taking a test or writing an essay. We spent the last half of the class talking about what authentic assessment means. We generated another list, similar to the good teacher list, and I gave each student a copy. Following these discussions I struggled with the following questions:*

*How do I get them to understand what a great project looks like?*

*What would be a good way to have students tell me what they are thinking of exploring for their exhibitions?*

*How will I know if my expectations are clear?*

*How can I make sure that the students are actually doing something productive and moving forward, and not just goofing off in the library?*

*I came up with the idea of an update sheet. I asked the students to fill out an update sheet during the last few minutes of each class period. I intended to look over the sheets at the end of each day to try to assess where each student was in the process and to help me pinpoint students who might need my help finding resources. Approximately two weeks into the project, I asked the students to fill out a final contract telling me exactly what they had planned to do for their exhibitions. I also gave the students a document that explained the criteria (which they helped develop) on which they would be evaluated. Attached to the evaluation sheet was a calendar which showed the students which days they were scheduled to present.*

*Overall, the presentations went well. Many of the students' exhibitions were exceptional. Some of the students made video- and audiotapes. Others wrote and performed original monologues in costume. One student made an incredibly lifelike clay sculpture of Hercules slaying the Hydra. After the student's presentation, the principal asked if he could display the statue in the center of the front hall. Two students even researched the eating habits of the ancient Greeks and cooked an ancient Greek feast for the entire class. While we ate, our chefs used a map they had created to explain the ancient Greeks' trade routes and the origins of the products they bartered.*

## Preparing for the Real World

Susan's experience was, in many ways, both transformative and validating. She had learned about constructivist approaches in her college classes and had a positive and successful experience trying them out. As she prepared for her first full-time teaching job in the Northeast, where she was hired as a member of a middle school team specifically to nudge some of the older teachers toward more progressive practice, the following questions that she created as part of her culminating college experience guided her:

- *How can I facilitate students' learning in such a way that I provide opportunities for them to discover, create, and apply knowledge for themselves while working within a public school setting?*
- *How can I get students to push themselves beyond what they dreamed they were capable of?*
- *How can I get them to want to truly understand what they learn and to demonstrate that understanding in a meaningful and creative way, rather than just memorizing information and spitting it back out on a test?*
- *How do I get students to understand that learning for learning's sake is cool and fun, and hard, and much more worthwhile than memorizing information for a grade and then forgetting it?*

## The Reality and the Poem

These are tough questions, but Susan, buoyed by her successful culminating experience, a long summer break, and the confidence of a much more experienced teacher, felt ready to tackle them head-on. What she found when she arrived was anything but what she expected.

By October of her first year of teaching, six short weeks into the semester, Susan sent us the following poem.

### *I Hate—A Poem by a First-Year Teacher*

*I hate preparing lessons.*

*I hate that feeling of panic of "what am I going to do tomorrow?"*

*I hate vomiting in the morning.*

*I hate kids who try to slime out of doing things like Steve and Billy do.*

*I hate getting up at five o'clock (or four-forty-five, or four-thirty).*

*I hate it when Pamela reminds me of Stacy Jefferson, the girl who made my life hell in seventh grade.*

*I hate it when Elizabeth Milios yells at a kid who is crying because he is having problems with his ex-girlfriend.*

## The Novice Teacher: Armed and Dangerous

5

*I hate it when Cindy Tuppan looks at me with that bitchy smirk and I know she would secretly love to see me fail.*

*I hate territorial teachers.*

*I hate feeling incompetent.*

*I hate crying when I feel like this.*

*I hate not having any friends here.*

*I hate feeling lost.*

*I hate it when a 14-year-old can make me feel exactly the way I felt when I was 14 years old.*

*I hate it when kids talk when I am trying to tell them something.*

*I hate it more when kids who were talking ask me, "Now what are we supposed to do?"*

*I hate Fridays because that means Monday is only three days away.*

*I hate Sundays because that means Monday is tomorrow.*

What happened? Could this be the same Susan Jackson who left our program so confident, determined, and excited about teaching? By November things had not improved. Another letter, this one more urgent, followed:

*Last Monday was definitely the lowest point in my life. We had a great in-service. We had to sit at tables with our teammates and the workshop leader told us all about the kinds of things that he has done with interdisciplinary units, and he showed us how to start with a topic that middle school kids are interested in and then make a web of related topics, etc. Things were going well, overall. After lunch, we met with him as grade-level teachers for about an hour and he asked us to voice concerns that we had with our particular students. It was then that I realized how little faith the teachers at this school have in the students at our school. They truly don't believe that the kids have any desire to learn. They really believe that the kids have to be bribed to do anything.*

*So after we met with the workshop leader, we were supposed to go upstairs as a team and brainstorm ideas about ways we might be able to do an interdisciplinary unit ourselves. So . . . I got upstairs and John (the social studies teacher who only lectures and teaches straight out of the social studies textbook) was sitting at his desk, and I said, "So do you want to meet in here?" At the same moment, Cindy Tuppan (a science teacher) walked in and John said, "Yeah—whatever. Do we even need to meet? What's the point? I'll tell you what we could do. We could just sit here and pretend to be meeting in case Mr. Schwartz (the principal) walks by—or we could just leave." I had no idea what to say.*

*Then Cindy said, "Well, I can't do this. I can't teach like this. I'm a science teacher. I can't teach a unit on freedom" (the topic we had been webbing in the in-service as an example). "There is absolutely no place for science in anything we were talking about down there. I can't teach like that."*

*And I lost it.*

*I felt all the frustration come up from the pit of my stomach, and I said something like, "Well Cindy I know how you feel . . . (and the tears started flowing). I feel so*

## 6 CREATING AND SUSTAINING THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CLASSROOM

*frustrated every day because that was the way I learned to teach. I wasn't trained to teach from a textbook. Everyday I feel so %@#! frustrated . . ." (I'm not sure if that was where I said %@)#!, but I said it) "because I feel like I was hired to teach here because I do know how to teach like that, but nobody else in this place, or at least on this team, teaches like that or even wants to teach like that and I hate it!"*

*At some point during this outburst, Elizabeth Milios walked in and said, "Well then, maybe you're in the wrong place! But don't you start blaming the team. It is not the team's fault. There are plenty of people in this school who would love to be on this team." Then Cindy pipes in with this: "Your insecurities and your inability are not my problem. You are not my problem. I don't care about your problems. I don't care about you!"*

*Ahh, yes, teaming at its finest.*

*At some point I told Elizabeth not to yell at me like I was one of her students, I did stop crying, but literally I felt like someone had dropped a barbell on my stomach. The rest of the day is a fog. We had to go down to the library to wrap things up. Everything in my whole being wanted to run away from that place. At the end of the in-service, one of the other new teachers, Reggie, looked at me and said, "Are you all right?" I looked at him and shook my head no, but I couldn't speak.*

*He said, "Come to my room." I followed him out of the library and the tears just started pouring out of my eyes. We got to his room and I started sobbing and I kept saying, "I can't do this. I can't do this. I thought I could but I can't. I have to resign. This is killing me. I can't do this."*

*Reggie just sat there on his knees and listened to me and he kept saying, "Don't quit. Don't quit. I'll help you. We'll do it together, whatever it takes. I swear I'll help you. You are meant to be a teacher."*

## What Will Happen? What Did Happen?

Three months after beginning what promised to be a stellar teaching career, Susan Jackson found herself crying on the floor of an eighth-grade public classroom, at a crossroads. Should she forge ahead or quit? Was the enthusiasm and energy, her love for teaching, knocked out of her so early in the game? What went wrong?

We share this story not to discourage current or future teachers but to generate thinking and to raise questions by all involved in the teaching profession. Was Susan's teacher preparation program inadequate? Were her goals too lofty? Were the teachers in Susan's school woefully uninformed or inflexible? Was Susan expecting too much? How typical is Susan experience?

We will return to Susan's story later, but before we do, we need to examine the foundation upon which Susan's teaching was built. Where did she get all those crazy ideas about active student involvement, about inquiry-based learning and problem solving, about student-designed curriculum, and about student-driven assessment? Where did these ideas come from? Are they new? Progressive? Or are these ideas old, maybe even very old?