

## Challenging and supporting students bureaucratically classified as Long-term English Learners: The Elective Psychology Course\*

- *What is going on in this vignette?*
- *How do students initially react to new expectations, challenge, and support?*
- *How does the teacher react to students' initial unenthusiastic responses?*

Stacia Crescenzi's Psychology Elective class at Lanier High School in Austin, TX is the result of a deliberate plan by the school leadership to transform the failure of many students, most of them carrying the denomination English Learners all their school lives. Her part of the plan is to reimagine and redesign a simplified and unenticing, non-credit bearing requirement, Remedial Writing, into a compelling, relevant, elective course. From having observed students outside of class and school, she knows they engage in critical dialogic interactions with friends and others about important matters in their lives. Now she wants to bring those skills and enthusiasm into their studies, she wants the students to use the resources they developed at home and their communities to engage in deep interactions, reading and writing around relevant social and academic topics. Students in her class were actively and personally recruited to enroll. Ms. Crescenzi herself talked to each student that had to enroll in the Remedial Writing course to instead enroll in her elective. Because passing the writing test is a requirement for graduation in Texas, students were reluctant to agree to her invitations. She assured, them, however, that if they took the Psychology Elective, they would not need to take the remedial class.

Ms. Crescenzi, one of the school Assistant Principals had participated in a QTEL Leadership Institute in San Francisco the prior summer alongside 8 other educational leaders from Lanier High School in Austin Independent School District. Mr. Oropez, the high school principal, had convened them, and he made sure that after each intensive day of work at the institute, they all met and discussed the implications of activities and readings that were part of the professional development. They had all stayed in a small hotel near the Presidio, where the professional development took place. While the summer institute offered discounted rates at downtown hotels in the city, and transportation to and from the hotel, they chose another option. It was quite a sight to see the Austin team walking up and down hills from hotel to Presidio and back, discussing and delineating an action plan to take back to their school. During the day, they enriched their experiences interacting with other colleagues from around the country.

---

\* Prepared by Aida Walqui from work in Austin, Texas

One idea that had fascinated them was what I called the educational process of “turning stigma into prestige.” Drawing from examples of sociolinguistic educational processes around the world, we discussed at length the potential of turning discriminatory practices into real, valuable opportunities, and the dangers of doing so without considering unintended consequences. The Austin team deliberated and planned how to do it for the next few years.

During lunch time, and at the end of the day, Stacia and I started planning a radically different curriculum for her class. Having been a psychology major, she knew of many interesting cases related to brain injury and the consequences they had. She decided to start there, the theme would be relevant to her students, and they could naturally use their critical skills, while developing new ones, as they worked through the practices proposed. We developed a jigsaw project with four highly interesting cases, including the very well-known in Austin of the mass murder committed by Charles Whitman from the University of Texas, Austin tower.

I visited the first week of her class to see how things were going. There were many pleasant surprises and a lot of “ahas” for us. Students were first prepared by discussing experiences they knew about in accidents and their corollaries; becoming familiar with the structure of the brain and the function of each lobe as well as possible consequences if a part of the brain was injured. Then, in expert groups, each team studied a case (4 cases in total), discussed them, related them to what they learned about the brain, and took notes to share after two lessons, in groups of four that represented the different readings.

The following transcript, from the sharing that took place on day 4 after a new group of four students shares notes on the different cases, they each read with prior groups. For each case students had to elaborate on the case, why it became famous, what kind of brain injury the person had, and the impact of that injury on their feelings and behavior. With the transcript I intend to offer some concrete data so that you can then discuss typical reactions students may have to innovative curriculum, and brainstorm appropriate responses teachers may offer students. In the transcript T is Ms. Crescenzi, and students have been given numbers.

- S2: His story was the beginning, it was the beginning
- S13: Why is this person famous?
- S2: The story was the beginning
- S4: of the story, of the story of the biological basis of behavior
- S12: What they told me
- S13: Oh., Are you serious? Hold on, this doesn't sound right.
- S4: His story was the beginning **of the study** of the biological basis of behavior. Okay biological basis of behavior.

- S4: Ok, what happened to this person that caused brain impairment?
- S12: A stumping rod may have penetrated Phineas Gage skull
- S13: Did you put that he got that little thing through his head, right?
- S12: Yeah
- S13: Awesome
- S4: The rod. The rod may have penetrated
- S13: Do you have to use a big word like rod? I'm just gonna put 'went through'
- S2: Put p then a dot
- S4: The mid line
- S13: There's a name for that word... She said
- S4: And damaging both frontal lobe, frontal lobe according to
- S13: What were the areas of the brain that were damaged? ... I keep spelling lube.
- S12: What was the third question?
- S13: Hold on, we go to let her catch up. (1:25:25)
- S2: I'm only on number two
- T: Ah ah ah, no
- S13: No, have to read it to them
- T: Yes.
- S13: Aw.
- T: He can read it and he can spell things. And he's very good at this.
- S2: Why can't I just copy it?
- T: It doesn't help you practice the language. Doesn't help him practice the language. I want you to be able to use these academic terms.
- S2: But I know English. (1:25:50)
- T: Yes, but **psychological** English.
- S13: But we don't speak English very well.
- T: Ah, Ken begin
- S4: It's not his story though, it's his.
- T: Ah, then Julio you need to do it.
- S12: Okay.

S2: The rod

S12: The rod may have penetrated Phineas Gage's skull

T: Right. The rod penetrated his skull. **(1:26:14)**

S2: The rod. Okay. Okay and then what else?

S12: His personality changed and he became mad easily.

S2: I don't like this.

T: It's O.K.

S2: Ah! He became mad easily...

S12: Because his personality changed and, and he became mad easily.

S12: He became mad easily.

S2: He became

S12: Mad

S13: Easily

T: Good. Who's gonna go next?

S2: I'll go next so I can finish

T: Ok, not a problem

After students were invited and supported to do a lot of hard work that focused on extended writing, based on engaged readings and interactions, all the students in the class passed the writing test. In the process they enjoyed "becoming intellectuals" as one student in the class put it.