

March 16, 2015



Ms. Maria Kioussis
Beal City High School
3117 Elias Street
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858

Dear Maria:

Thank you for welcoming me to 4th Hour (English 9) at BCHS. Upon arrival, I had the opportunity to witness a small grade dispute that took place moments before class was scheduled to start. The young man in question was clearly frustrated that a high score on a recent vocabulary test had not increased his overall grade. In spite of his demeanor, however, you remained calm and respectful, and you wisely told him that you would be happy to talk his grade, if he would return during lunch, to which he agreed. I commended you for this exchange because you took control of the situation in a respectful way. You are more than willing to talk with any student about grades; however, the conversation needs to take place when you have the time to research the situation and when the conversation won't disrupt a class.

As you know, your students are in the middle of studying *Romeo and Juliet*, and class began with students working on "Shakesbook" pages, which are Facebook-inspired social media pages generated for all the major and minor characters. Every page includes a profile picture, basic profile information, a list of "friends," and several wall posts that feature, for example, a BuzzFeed article, a song post, or a major event relevant for the character in question. During my observation, students continued their Shakesbook pages by making at least two posts on another character's wall, and many students selected Elizabethan insults, such as "Thou art a reeky, spur-galled pignut" or "Thou art a mewling, toad-spotted barnacle!"

Next came a friendly vocabulary competition. To begin, students divided into three groups and were next reminded that context clues typically take three forms: definitions, synonyms, and antonyms. Next, a spokesperson from each group defined one of the three forms, and you proposed that students can apply these clues as both readers and writers—good point! The vocabulary words were erratic, vapid, caste, autonomy, placid, atrophy, illicit, apoplectic, guile, and partisan, and the competition demonstrated that students are making good progress in learning them.

During the observation, I noticed classroom artifacts demonstrating the breadth of your student teaching experience. A copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was on your desk, and so were guidelines for a formal writing assignment (along with instructions for revision strategies). I also noticed student art depicting Atticus Finch, Walter Cunningham, and Miss Maudie, as well as a bulletin board labeled "Privilege and Power" with these subheadings: Educational Privilege, Gender Privilege, Age Privilege, Economic Privilege, and Race Privilege. Having worked with you in ENG 319 – Composition Methods, I know you have a specialization in social justice pedagogies, which surely informed your units on *Huck Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

After class, I commended you for a class well done. You planned an interactive and well-paced series of activities that engaged students, promoted learning, and demonstrated CCSS alignment. Throughout the class, you came across as professional, prepared, and confident—a great combination of teacherly attributes that helps to explain why your class management is so strong and your student teaching experience is going so well.

I look forward to seeing you again in April. Until then, keep up the good work and let me know if you have questions and concerns.

Sincerely,


Elizabeth Brockman, PhD

April 21, 2015

Ms. Maria Kioussis
Beal City High School
3117 Elias Street
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858



Dear Maria:

Thank you for welcoming me for a planned visit to English 10 (4th Hour) at Beal City High School. Upon arrival, I spoke with your host teacher who reported that you are, hands-down, one of the best student teachers she has ever supervised over the past twenty years. She offers her strongest and most heartfelt recommendation as you begin the job search process, and so do I. In short, I know that ANY school district would be lucky to have you on staff, and I truly wish that you could have been the English teacher for my own children—the highest compliment that a professor/parent can give.

As you know, a new writing assignment was the primary focus of the class I observed. The assignment is entitled the "Confronting Privilege Essay" (CPE), and it serves as a capstone assignment to a study of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKAM). For the assignment, you have wisely required that students NOT write a five-paragraph essay (a worn-out school genre); instead, they'll write a researched essay using an organizational pattern often attributed to Aristotle: An introduction, background information, plan or proposal, and conclusion.

- To complete the assignment, students are invited to select a specific example of privilege in TKAM (gender, economic, age, education, and/or racial privilege) and then connect it to modern-day society via published, current events. In keeping with writing principles you learned in your content methods courses at CMU, you have embedded an automatic "So What?" into the assignment guidelines, but you also ask that students "write about a pebble" by narrowing the focus to a specific privilege—another strategy designed to foster student success. For example, a student interested in racial privilege might narrow his/her focus to racial privilege in the justice system, based upon Tom Robinson's treatment in the court or prison.
- In the introduction of the essay, students will provide the "THEY SAY" for their topic (by providing a specific example of privilege in TKAM) and then an "I SAY" (the degree to which students believe the privilege still exists today). In keeping with Graff & Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say* templates, I hope you remember that students don't necessarily need to take a yes/no or black/white stance for their thesis statements. They can agree or disagree "with a difference." This approach is still "taking stand," as the saying goes, but the stand is more complex and nuanced.
- In the background section of the paper, students will cite reliable sources that connect the privilege in TKAM to society today. Though it wasn't mentioned in class, one excellent source for this section might be a recent state of the union address or even social satire (articles from *The Onion* or episodes from the *John Daly Show*). Regardless of the sources students choose, I encourage you to teach them how to write quotation sandwiches or use embedded voice markers—both strategies encouraged by Graff and Birkenstein.
- The most difficult part of the paper is the proposal or plan for change. Here, you wisely encouraged students to offer small steps that individual can do to make a difference.

It has been my pleasure to work with you over the past few years. I wish you the best of luck as you complete student teaching, attend graduate ceremonies, and begin the job search. Reach for the stars, Maria, because they are well within your reach!

Sincerely,


Elizabeth Brockman, PhD