

# DIVERSIFIED STAFFING: A GOOD TRY

LOUISE BOEDEKER\*

"IT WAS a great feeling to walk into an education course and see William A—. He is one of the few students at Hunter that a majority of students like and respect."

This comment was made by a student registered for one of two courses that I taught in which I employed two former student teachers as co-teachers. Both of these people performed superbly in student teaching. I was their college supervisor and grew to like and respect them both. Neither, however, had been offered a position to teach secondary social studies after graduation.

I decided to hire them to teach with me for a number of reasons. I consider them to be good role models both as persons and learners. Having more teachers per class, I believed, might increase feedback from, and communication with, students. I was relatively unfamiliar with the New York City teaching bureaucracy, and I hoped that they could help me. I wanted to keep Mary and William actively involved in teaching. I wanted to make a case for diversified staffing within the education department at Hunter College. I could financially afford to share my salary for one semester, and I specifically wanted to share it with these two student teachers, since status among the students is often associated with work that is paid for.

Each of these individuals is a valuable role model. William is one of the most

versatile people I know. He is equally at ease rapping in the cafeteria as he is in discussing the Puerto Rican Studies Department with the president of the college. Until the age of 13 he did not know how to read. The ability to read was not valued by William's peers, many of whom now are actually dead; often the effects of drugs, alcohol, and crime. Once William realized that life did not have to be capricious or determined by fate, he has been eagerly assimilating knowledge to gain power over his own destiny.

He exudes kindness. There is a group at Hunter that he calls "My Army." Whether helping to organize a paper, suggesting how to cut through red tape, or advising about personal problems, William attends to others' needs. I once asked him how he could be so generous with his time. He replied, "I'm trying to be a good ancestor. It's up to us to fashion a world fit for further generations. We're part of history and we could develop a glorious tradition."

This is not to imply that William is a pushover—his commitment to the future gives him the forcefulness and bravado to confront situations that others would not only avoid, but would actively flee from. During student teaching he observed a student (several inches taller than he) apparently

\* Louise Boedeker, Assistant Professor, Hunter College, New York City

intimidating other students. He marched over and stated, "I don't know what it is that you have, but *nobody* messes over *anybody* in this school without permission, and *you* don't have it. Before you get to anybody in this school you have to get through me first, and you can't do that no way." William later admitted that he, too, thought that the knife had a rather intimidating blade.

## Presentation of Self

Mary does not come off as electrically as William, but she is equally as committed to learning and acting in community with other people. Somebody commented to me that Mary seemed at peace with herself and was together as a person. I firmly believe that the most important aspect of teaching is the presentation of self, not the subject matter. Mary presents herself as a gentle, compassionate, and scholarly human being.

What initially impressed me about Mary was her behavior the first time I observed her doing student teaching. The class had been shifted from three different rooms because of schoolwide testing. The last room was a science laboratory. Having students sit around lab tables in groups of six is hardly conducive to a guided discovery lesson dependent on total class participation. Some teachers would be frustrated over the room changes or angry with the students for being noisier than usual and consequently would take it out on the students. Mary maintained her good humor and taught a good lesson. After I left, the cooperating teacher angrily indicated that he thought the students' behavior was inexcusable.

Mary is good at analyzing situations. We used to discuss class sessions immediately after they were over. Especially on those days when the class "bombed," Mary's ability to identify the salient issues was invaluable.

Several outcomes of this experiment were intended and realized. As expected, many students were pleased to have an extra teacher in each class. William held "office hours" in the student cafeteria in order to read student experience logs, to give suggestions for solving problems, to advise students

about licensing procedures, and generally to encourage the students. He wrote extensive comments in student logs and sometimes added illustrations—smiles, drawings of glasses, etc., which several students enjoyed and appreciated. His versatility in languages as well as in relating to other people served him well.

During the three-hour course that Mary and I taught she would speak with students with whom I might not have had an opportunity to communicate. She also communicated with students by mail or phone if special events arose. In terms of their relationship with me, I looked to William for honest and frank reactions about plans and class presentations and to Mary for personal support and reactions to class presentations.

Both Mary and William would get together with me to discuss how the class sessions went, strategies for improvement, future plans, and problems of specific students. Even when differences in perception developed, the arrangement promoted liveliness in the learning climate. For example, William saw me in the cafeteria and said, "Tell me about the disaster." He was referring to my methods class. After we discussed it I decided that my objectives differed from his so we agreed to disagree with respect to that class meeting.

Whenever it was necessary for me to be out of town, William and Mary would teach the respective classes. This gave more continuity than might otherwise have occurred. Also, both made suggestions for evaluation procedures as a result of their teaching experiences. Mary felt that the real test of how well the students were learning social studies methods was their ability to apply their learnings within the student teaching situation.

There were several unintended and unexpected negative developments. The students in both courses were participants in a new educational program called the Professional Semester. The purpose of the program is to have the great bulk of the education courses all at once. While students are doing student teaching, theories and methodology can be applied to a practical, immediate, existential situation. Theoretically, such prob-

lems as redundancy and irrelevance should be minimized. However, many students were hostile to the program because they were not given a choice about participation. Many also felt that too much was expected of them.

This hostile climate, plus my lack of expertise in planning with Mary and William, resulted in a less constructive response to the two courses than I had anticipated. Very frankly, blunt negative feedback, which I had set the stage for, was almost paralyzing when my morale was low. Because of inadequate defining of roles, there were "snap decisions" about assignments and procedures which were later regretted.

Although this was one of my less successful teaching experiences, I definitely do not regret having hired Mary and William to work with me. They are important people and their presence was appreciated by me as well as by many of the students. It is interesting to note that one class, which had heard that I was paying William and Mary for their work, was astounded that I would share my salary voluntarily. When I affirmed that this was the case, they vigorously clapped. Mary and William were more than teaching assistants, they were people experientially close to the students who helped to plan, present, and evaluate class sessions and student performance. It is a role that a number of excellent qualified students could play if the college could open itself to more diversified staffing.

### Further Plans

Reflecting on past experience helps me avoid repeating the same mistakes and also reminds me to continue using successful procedures. I will not be able to hire William and Mary or their counterparts for another semester, and it is very unlikely that the college can either. Nevertheless, practices

emerged that I may employ to increase communication with students and increase the number of positive role models. Next semester I am going to solicit two-hour, voluntary commitments from previous students, cooperating teachers in the public schools, college staff members, parents, and students, to engage in the professional and personal socialization of student teachers. The purpose is to expand the pool of human resources available to student teachers for problem resolution and personal and academic stimulation. Lists of phone numbers and/or locations of meetings will be made available and individual students can arrange meetings on the basis of need. Hopefully, the students who have this reservoir of potential help available to them will aid other students in subsequent semesters.

For my own benefit I will employ several commonly accepted ways of increasing interaction with, and feedback from, students. I will schedule some office hours in the student cafeteria on the premise that some students would be more likely to be there anyway, and might use the opportunity to talk with me in a less formal setting than my office. Post-class reaction forms to evaluate cognitive and affective experiences will also be used frequently. I also plan to submit a proposal to the education division at Hunter to provide diversified staffing at lower costs than those presently contracted, since it is my firm belief that two teachers in the classroom increase the possibility of student learning.

I have tried to describe an experiment that I performed. I do hope that the reading of this article stimulates some readers to try a form of differentiated staffing that they feel is in keeping with their own personality and competence level, or to attempt other experiments with the aim of humanizing teaching. I believe that this will also maximize meaningful learning.

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