

Correlation Street

The mathematical soap opera that is my classroom...

Deduction Seduction

Once there was young man who loved both mathematics and engaging with people. “How about a career in teaching?” he wondered. “I want to give something back; I’d like to share the maths education I’ve been given with others.”

So the man became a mathematics teacher. It took him a while to find his niche; he discovered along the way that sometimes sharing his love of maths with students was not entirely straightforward, especially when they arrived in his classroom loving other things far more than mathematics. But he persisted, he tried a few different schools, and before long he found the right place. He put down roots and committed himself to these colleagues and these students.

He worked hard at his teaching. His lessons were well-prepared, he did plenty of marking, and his reports were thoughtful and concerned. His fellow-teachers saw him as a safe pair of hands, one of the rocks around which the school could be built.

And his students loved him and the mathematics they studied together. They were not all high-fliers – some found mathematics hard, but they sensed the man cared for them all equally, always celebrating the weaker students’ achievements as much as those who took away A grades with little effort.

The man began to be noted in mathematics education circles. His resources were made available to others; they made their way into classrooms around the land. He wrote articles that drew praise from people in the know. He was asked to lead sessions at conferences, and then days at conferences. He began to breathe a different air to his colleagues. Without realising what was happening, the man heard the words, “You are not an ordinary teacher,” whispered into his ear.

He signed up for courses with titles like “Inspirational Leaders for the Mathematics Curriculum in the Twenty-First Century”, courses that required missing many days of teaching time. And whenever he was away on yet one more training day, his students missed him. They were always taken by some supply teacher who knew them not, and as they settled to work on some

worksheet that felt foreign and worthless, they became resentful. “He used to care,” they thought, “But now he cares more about other things.”

A strange change took place; they stopped understanding the man. He’d always prided himself on his explanations, but now his students ceased to experience them as such.

“He used to explain things well, but now it is as if he is – telling us – what the maths is.”

He was saying the same words, in the same order, but the result was different, because his heart was elsewhere.

It took a while for people to say anything, but parents grew unhappier, tutors grew more fearful, and his results got poorer. One day, the man realised what had happened. “I have forgotten my roots,” he thought. “I was once a teacher planted firmly in my own classroom, but now I have lost my earthiness. I have been seduced by the siren call of celebrity. I must start again.”

So the man cancelled all his conferences and training days, he shelved all his articles, and he stopped writing new material for his lessons. He returned to using other people’s resources, as he had when he started out. He walked back into his classroom with a fresh spirit of humility. His students were glad to see him, and they started to understand him again. And although the man did one day go back to writing and speaking, he never again forgot the reason that he went into teaching in the first place – he never again lost his ordinariness.

Correlation Street is a mixture of what happens, what I would like to happen, and what I am glad does not happen in my classroom (or thereabouts).

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