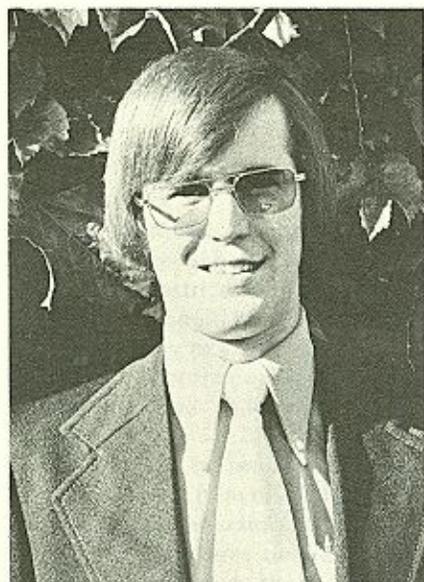


Experienced educators sometimes forget how a first-year teacher feels in trying to cope with new and complex responsibilities. For Mr. Peterson, keeping communications open proved a major key to learning — for his students, and for himself.

heterogenous classroom ahead: enter at own risk

by Richard D. Peterson



Mr. Peterson has been teaching social studies at Horton Watkins High School, Ladue, Missouri, since the fall of 1972. He had received his B.S. degree from Kansas State University earlier that spring. Currently, Mr. Peterson is also enrolled in the University of Missouri's graduate program in Learning Disabilities; he has been able to use a number of his skills with students in a special world history course who have reading difficulties and other problems. Mr. Peterson's enthusiasm and patience have particularly enhanced his teaching effectiveness in working with these students.

As I looked out at my last hour class that first September afternoon, I wondered what the year ahead would hold for us. They were twenty-three experienced students—admittedly only sophomores in high school. Nevertheless they were professionals in their field. What did I have to offer? I was their World History teacher in my first year of “professional growth,” which I soon learned to be the educational jargon for heroic action in combat conditions. I knew that I was full of drive and energy; I was ready to supply the motivational push these students might need at critical times. Little did I realize then just how much motivational TNT would be needed in that one class alone during the course of the year.

But why should I be shaky? The first five periods of the day had gone well enough. My other students seemed to have a large potential for growth to be tapped in the days and weeks ahead. The other teachers in the department were full of support, as was our administration. No, I decided, I could not get first-day jitters when I almost had the first day behind me. So with a ringing of the bell and a renewed determination, I gathered my strength for the last introduction of that first introduction day in my career.

From my first word I knew that sixth hour was different. There had been more commotion while they had entered the room, I recalled, and now I saw that their attention to my exciting, warm, humanistically personal presentation left something to be desired; there seemed to be activity in every part of the room. I had to gain and keep the attention of twenty-three unique human personalities. Each had his own hopes and fears, dreams and expectations, strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. I had never been so totally confronted with the exciting challenge of human creation. The year ahead would be one of discovery as I grew in appreciation for those twenty-three individuals whose lives came together one hour a day in that World History class.

To allow the reader vicariously to experience the rich diversity of my sixth hour class, I would like to talk of the individuals as I now know them. It is important to stress the fact that I knew none of these facts—or at least very few of them—on that first day. These composite pictures are the result of a year's reading, discussion, and most importantly, observation and interaction with these unique human beings. Wouldn't it be marvelous if a teacher could come to such knowledge on the first day of school so the whole year could be geared with special needs in mind? It may be a wild dream, but it is a worthy goal for each teacher to pursue. But

out of the dream and back to reality; let me call the roll before they all jump out the window! If ever there was a class that deserved the title: "heterogeneous," it was this one. See if you don't agree.

First on the roll list—but generally last in the door after the bell—was Bob Anderson.* His socially acceptable longish blond hair and worn blue jeans were only a facade covering a great insecurity. Bob had many things in his mind; his whole year was a time for sorting things out. In the process of sorting, he often dreamed on through history. When he came back to reality, he had only a partial concern about the work he had missed. He wanted to keep up with his work, but he could never keep his mind on the job at hand. This was not new to his sophomore year, for since kindergarten he had dreamed, and many of his academic skills were behind that of his peer group.

Way across the room from Bob and a world from him in social groups was Pat Burch. Pat had a very pleasant personality and was very handy with audiovisual equipment. He had better-than-average abilities but had a motor and visual coordination problem that made his handwriting almost indecipherable. His ideas were generally "right," and he produced intelligent, well-thought-out answers to essay questions. But the written product was something to behold. He found his social happiness with the school's athletic group, but he most definitely was not a Big Man on Campus type.

Coming in the door late as usual was Jane Brown, a physically mature, socially active non-student. It wasn't that she couldn't do the work, but rather that she never settled down long enough to give herself a chance. Her parents were often flying around the country for different social activities, and Jane often accompanied them. Her immaturity was shown clearly one day when the principal observed the class. Everyone else was on best behavior and actively involved in the day's discussion. I was so proud of them. But Jane started a private laughing spell over some of the weekend's highlights. It got so bad that she even embarrassed her not-so-easily embarrassed classmates. To be honest, there were days when I hoped her "tardy" *would* turn out to be an absence.

On the same side of the room with Jane was Myron Bartholomew, a very bright boy who lacked motivation for his schoolwork. He played the drums in a rock group on weekends and often serenaded us during class. But Myron loved maps and did special work for me on a map unit. Truly, with a map and his drums Myron was very satisfied and happy.

Valerie Davis was next in the roll book. Her hand was probably already up to go to the bathroom so she could get her daily smoke. Valerie had a nice enough personality but seemed fairly low in ability. In her sophomore year she was reading on the fourth grade level. I started her on independent units early in the year, but she never wanted to work away from the classroom. A minority group member who went to our school because her father was on the staff, Valerie was extremely conscious of social groups and desperately wanted to belong at the high school. She did fairly well with her independent work, but I'll never forget her hand up in the air during class discussion. If she needed help

and I neglected her too long in order to finish a point with the whole class, she would ring out, "Mr. Petel!" Needless to say, the class discussion waited as I attempted to answer her question. The other minority student in the class was Quinton Fairbanks, who transferred into our district shortly after the year began. Quinton was very active in extracurricular activities: football, band, rock groups, and church groups, so much so that he generally came to class completely exhausted, especially since he had gym fifth hour. Quinton needed to catch up on his work, but I felt successful on the day when he just could stay awake all hour.

After Quinton (whether awake or asleep) came Kate Goering, a senior who was completing a missed requirement in World History in order to graduate in June. She was a very quiet and extremely intelligent girl who was significantly more mature than the other class members. She interacted with them hardly at all. I noticed as the year progressed that she was a loner throughout the day. Kate and I got along well and it was my continual goal to bring her out more. Through it all she was fairly contented in her corner of the room.

In another corner sat an unhappy and confused young lady. Cindy Gates was of average ability and only a little behind socially from the other students. She soon fell behind in her work and then aggravated the problem with poor attendance. She wanted to make it in the worst way, but she could not seem to develop the study habits to succeed in high school. Just when it seemed that she was finding some success, she was out of school for a long time. Then she officially withdrew from school. After much checking with parents who did not know where she was, I discovered via the school grapevine that she had been married and was now working. This came as news to her mother, who told us that if we got in touch with Cindy, to have her call home.

Katherine Groll was generally in class every day but she, too, fell behind in her work. She had extreme difficulty in conceptualizing and was working on a reading level far below the sophomore level. At first I interpreted her lack of response as indicating a lack of preparation. Her later belligerence at being pursued on some points was really a cover for what I thought was a fundamental inability to succeed with the course work. Once I figured out—with the counselor's able assistance—what Katherine was telling me, I was able to devise an independent program more attuned to her needs and abilities.

Richard Hart was at the other end of the academic spectrum from Katherine. He was very motivated in social studies, with a special interest in politics. He has a very probing mind, but tended to neglect the reading assignments, for he was often able to cover lack of preparation with his good questions. Richard had to be encouraged to make real use of his talents and not just coast along.

James Jenkins was a source of constant amazement to me. He was a very quiet, tall boy—one grade ahead of the rest of the class. In his first year of high school he had dropped out, declaring that he had had all the school he needed. After having failed to find a decent job, James was back doing his best to get a high school diploma. He had average scholastic ability, but was behind in his basic skills as a result of a poor attendance pattern. The previous year he had flunked World History twice with one of the most student-oriented teachers

in the department. He never quite got on the beam, but he was determined to stick it out in the hope of finding something better for himself.

Peter King was a very able mechanic who hoped to turn his part-time work into a full occupation upon graduation. He could not see the point of some history; however, he always gave his good effort to think things through—even if he hadn't done the reading the night before at home. He knew that he wanted a diploma to enable him to enter a technical program for mechanics, so he gritted his teeth through this "necessary evil."

"From one extreme to another" would obviously be an accurate description of this sixth hour class. From Peter to Lee Knopf was definitely a set of extremes, for Lee was a highly motivated pupil who really loved history class. She worked hard at it and studied long hours at night even though handicapped by very poor eyesight that necessitated thick eyeglasses. Socially, Lee was somewhat an outcast; she had only one close friend in the class. She had to be encouraged to offer responses in class, for she was often embarrassed by giving right answers when few other students had prepared. Lee found company—at least in the preparation department—with Ed Knight. He was a quiet boy with a very alert mind. His family was from Europe, and he spoke with a noticeable accent. Ed was one of the pillars of that class, for he was generally prepared, and, in addition to answering my questions, he could always come up with some of his own to keep us on our toes. As the year progressed, Lee and Ed turned out to be two of my best students in any class. Needless to say, they often became bored with the repetition needed by other students in the class. They each worked on extra projects that kept them motivated and active even on the "slow" days.

Martha Lawton was an attractive girl more socially mature than the rest of the class. She was very active in vocal music and planned to graduate early from high school so she could start a special program at a local college. She was interested in maintaining a high academic average so she would not jeopardize her admittance into the special program. Her motivation level was one of the highest in the class, but she also tended to be a moody person. So even though she wanted to do the work, she was often distracted from that goal and needed a friendly smile to perk her up. Martha's only friend in the class, Caroline Morton, was a very different person, little motivated by school work. Often distracted, she seemed never able to keep her mind on the things at hand. Following attendance difficulty in our school, she transferred to another high school. But before long she was back with us again, this whole confusing procedure only getting her more behind and out of touch with the reality of the classroom. It was hard to figure out what was happening with Martha; moreover I do not believe she knew what was happening. Somehow, when I looked toward her in the classroom, I always saw a question mark.

From a question mark to an exclamation point, the gradebook list continued to generally happy and always highly motivated Chris MacLean. Probably the class's most well-adjusted member, she fit into several social groups. She liked the class and tried to do her best. Her positive en-

thusiasm and real desire to learn always brightened up the class.

If Chris brightened it up, then John Mitchum usually woke it up. He was a hyperactive boy if ever there was one. John was a student of above-average ability, but he never used all he had to work with because of his million-mile-an-hour speed. He had to be one of the most likeable kids in the whole class, but if I said it once, I said it a thousand times: "John, settle down." We were good friends through it all, but in honest retrospect I cannot claim any dramatic breakthrough with him.

Robert Princeton was one of our better sophomore athletes. He was fairly quiet and could be classed as a solid "C" student. I came to know him better as I followed the sophomore basketball team through a somewhat less than spectacular season. I will never forget the first day his hand shot up with an answer. I figured it was another question—which at first he would not even offer. Yet on that one beautiful day Robert had something figured out before anyone else. I know he felt good that day—I surely did!

Down in the front of the room from Robert sat Janice Rice. She, too, was fairly quiet and needed lots of positive reinforcement throughout the year. She always worked hard and received a "B" the last quarter of the year. She came away with a sincere sense of accomplishment and success. If every student could have such feelings, education would be doing its job.

John Mitchum's best friend in the classroom was Mike Roler, who could have done "A" work all year long but always had too much fun with John. Mike was basically a fun-loving boy who could easily keep up with this diverse group. He enjoyed life and added a very healthy zest to the class. I prodded him to work closer to his potential level, but never lost any sleep over it. His enjoyment and stable mental attitude were worth all the "A's" in the world.

Another athlete in the class was Jerry Werner, who was kept off the teams for a while because of injury. He was a mature boy and always full of insight. He had a good supply of in-depth questions and answers; furthermore, he was not afraid to speak his mind.

By now the list is long and almost complete, but not without Sue Winters. She never became terribly excited about the deep significance of points under consideration, yet that never really bothered me. She gained a lot from the class, as she was at least forced to think and expand her horizons. In turn, the class, especially the socially maladjusted members, gained from her and her well-adjusted outlook. So as is clearly evident at this point, it takes all kinds to make the world—and this sixth hour World History class!

At this point, many would question—as did many of my fellow teachers—how I ever kept my sanity with this class. I'll have to admit that there were days when I swore that this was the "flunk-out" section for freshmen teachers such as myself, almost as though someone were trying to get me out of the crowded profession. But I stuck it out and persevered by keeping in mind — as difficult as it was at times — that each individual in my class needed something every day. All the students longed for some feeling of accomplishment, success, or satisfaction that would keep them going. If they could not receive this reinforcement from classwork, they

would try to receive it in underground ways of disturbance. I soon learned that it was to my own best interest to attempt to provide good feelings from course work. Each student viewed different things as desired successes or objects of satisfaction, and each responded in unique ways. But through all the diversity, they were restating the classic truism that each individual longs to feel he has worth in the eyes of others. In the final analysis, man as a social animal maintains a feeling of self-esteem only when it is reinforced by those around him.

So every day in a variety of ways I sought to add to the self-esteem of those twenty-three individuals. For those whose weak academic skills made success unlikely in the standard program, I provided alternative work. It was crucial for the success of this substitution to have it accepted as meaningful both by the students who worked on it and by the others in the class. Apart from academic material differentiation, there was a great variety of social needs to be met in sixth hour. It had to be my goal to do the best I could for as many of those individuals as possible each day. I knew that we

couldn't make it with all of them every day. But I still tried my best.

With this goal in mind, I can conclude that the sixth hour class was a moderate success last year. We were able to mold a safe and comfortable environment within which twenty-four very different personalities could work and learn together one hour a day. There were days of confrontation, but in the end we never lost a student. Open lines of communication were kept operative, and the continual growth of a social group went on—with expected ups and downs—the entire year. Many of these students are some of my warmest friends today—a year or more after the first opening day. Through a year of learning and growth for us all, love and a concern for the individual prevailed in the end. After this experience, I'm tempted to believe that those factors can remove the "risk" from any heterogeneous classroom. Why not try it and see?

*Except for the author's, the names of all persons mentioned in this article have been changed.

"There is, of course, much in contemporary education to provoke fury. Among our institutions, few depend so mightily on delusion and contradiction as do the schools—and the universities as well, it must fairly be said. The contrast between what we say and what we do is both insufferable and ludicrous. The playing out of these contradictions on small children is, however, immoral, and must stop. Outrage over the suffering of youngsters at our hands is in these respects justified; but outrage unaccompanied by a viable program of remedies rarely leads to reform."

Theodore R.Sizer

Places for Learning, Places for Joy:

Speculations on American School Reform, pp. vii-viii

(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973)