Teaching Failure

by Peggy Duffy

I'll call her Lucy. I met her two years ago when she took my remedial course in developmental writing. I hesitate to say I taught her because I think Lucy came to my course having already learned all she was capable of learning, at least as far as writing goes. She spoke slowly and haltingly, struggling to string words together in order to articulate her thoughts. At the end of the first class, she shyly handed me a piece of paper. The college asks that students inform the instructor within the first two weeks of class if they have any special needs or disability that may affect their performance in the course. The form Lucy handed me was official documentation of her learning disability.

The following week, Lucy handed in her first essay assignment. In a procession of run-on sentences, followed by a series of fragmented ones, she wrote of her love for children, her job in a day care center, and her goal of becoming a kindergarten teacher. The essay did not come close to being organized or coherent. In her third essay, the writing still no better, Lucy wrote that she wanted to get an associate's degree so she could be a kindergarten aide. I couldn't tell if she'd clarified her goals in recognition of her limitations, or if her limitations

prevented her from distinguishing between the educational requirements for the jobs of teacher and aide.

To get an associate's degree in arts or science at my college, a student must complete two semesters of college composition. Because anyone with a high-school diploma or a G.E.D. can register for classes, all incoming students take placement tests for English and math. Those who do not score high enough are placed in developmental courses to learn the skills necessary for college-level work. At the beginning of the term, Lucy blurted out in frustration that she was taking the developmental-writing course for the third time.

Lucy turned out to be a diligent and conscientious worker who exhibited a genuine fondness for people. I'm sure the children in the day care center loved her as much as she loved them. She also did everything I asked her to do. She attended class regularly and completed all her grammar assignments. She revised and re-revised her essays. She went to the writing center for weekly one-on-one help, taking advantage of her eligibility for free tutoring because of her documented learning disability. But despite all her efforts, and the extra time and attention I gave to her written work, she made the same mistakes repeatedly in her writing. More alarming, she exhibited no capacity for constructing, let alone supporting, an argument, which to my mind is the basic skill necessary for success in college.

Students can be taught to write better. They can be told how to structure their ideas into written arguments and how to support those arguments with facts and examples. However, they cannot be taught how to argue a point if they aren't capable of formulating an argument in the first place. For that, they need a certain degree of mental competence and the ability to reason. Lucy had neither. In less politically correct times, she would have been

labeled mildly retarded. These days, we call her learning disabled, which implies a condition that can be compensated for or even overcome.

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act state that “disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society.” The act also says that “over 20 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible.”

Federal law may mandate equal educational opportunities so every individual can reach his or her full potential, but who defines full potential or evaluates when the criterion of “maximum extent possible” has been met? Lucy was never going to be a kindergarten teacher or complete the requirements for her associate's degree. She didn't even belong in a college classroom. I knew that; the previous two writing instructors who had failed her knew that; perhaps even her parents, whom I never met but who seemed to monitor her activities closely, knew that.

We do students like Lucy a disservice by not allowing them to acknowledge, and adapt to, the reality of their mental limitations. I do not mean to dash students' hopes or squelch their dreams. Many people have overcome learning disabilities. But “mental retardation” is one of the terms used by Congress to define a “child with a disability.” Is it fair to someone like Lucy to encourage dreams that are at best wishful thinking and at worst self-deception?

Lucy cried in my office the last day of class when I told her she had not passed the course. She was rightfully hurt, legitimately angry, and genuinely confused. After all, she'd

done the work. Although as a teacher I had given her all I could, I know that I failed her in more ways than the official grade I entered onto her transcript. Yes, I assured her that I knew how hard she'd worked, and I explained that it takes some students longer than others to learn the course material. But I didn't point out that she was already a productive member of society, doing what she aspired to—working with children. Instead, I sang another false note of hope in a song of utter futility by suggesting that she might pass the course the following semester.

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