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My Opus, My Legacy

Isn't 'opus' a funny word? Who has ever heard of an opus? Until I ventured into the world of music at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio, I had no clue, either. So, don't feel stupid. An opus is a set of musical compositions usually numbered in order of their issue. Some of these sets of music were the composers' life works. And each and every opus had an important part in this mass collection.

In the late nineteen- nineties, a movie came out titled "Mr. Holland's Opus". Again, that crazy word 'opus' comes before our eyes (now that we know what an opus is, I won't explain that again). In this film, a man, Gene Holland (played by Richard Dreyfuss), goes into teaching after playing clubs and weddings with a band. Apparently, he had attained the license but had never actually expected to use it. It was just something to fall back on. His first day as a teacher was rough. He said to his wife, "I hate that woman [the principal] and I hate teaching, Iris, I hate it!" Then, one day something happened and he loved it. Thirty years later, he didn't want to do anything else. Teaching, the profession that he had earlier hated, was now all he wanted to do.

While watching this movie, I noticed a few similarities between Mr. Holland and myself, a teacher- in- training, and our teaching fears, strengths and weaknesses. I know that teaching will be more difficult than I anticipate. At this moment, I imagine a well equipped, spacious music room filled with bright- eyed students, intensely interested in what I can teach them about music. All of the students in my classroom will understand musical concepts the first time I explain them, allowing us to move along in the lesson at a nice, steady rate.

I realize, of course, that my image of teaching is just a fantasy. Mr. Holland didn't expect 'reality' either. Here are some realities that I will have to face, just as Mr. Holland did. Music programs generally receive less funding for equipment and the like, because

so little emphasis is put on the arts in public education. Not all students will be interested in music. Some would rather not be in school at all, nonetheless in a music class. Each student will have his or her own speed of learning and absorbing ideas. And, in general, most college students don't grasp simple musical concepts at first, so I highly doubt that a classroom full of students, some of which are not even interested in the subject, would be able to grasp theories as quickly as I dream.

What can I do to prepare for the 'real world' of teaching? The education program at Youngstown State University aids in this transition. Through required tutoring and other activities in public schools, education students are able to observe the classroom through enlightened eyes, as a teacher rather than a student. This semester, for example, I have been tutoring at a local elementary school. I was assigned to a wonderful teacher who has been teaching for about thirty years, and her first grade classroom. Though it shouldn't have been, my first experience in the classroom as a teacher-in-training was a bit of a shock to me. A student was lying on a carpet because he needed to settle down; Some of the students needed to be disciplined for actions; And certainly not all of the students grasp what they are taught as well as the others. By tutoring, I have been able to see the 'real side' of teaching. There will be kids who misbehave, can't keep up, and those that get everything quickly. But, each of these students, no matter what they struggle with and what they excel at, has their own unique and special traits that need to be embraced, even if they don't fit into *my* ideal image of a classroom.

The textbook Education Today discusses six features of teaching that can make a teacher's day a bit more complicated, which I had seldom considered before. Multidimensionality refers to the concept that teachers must attend to many things at once, such as students with different learning speeds, administering standardized tests, relating to parents, etc... Simultaneity refers to responding to and observing many things happening with the learners at once. Teachers must watch for progress, questions, misbehavior, and so on all at once. Many things happen in a classroom at one time, some require immediate attention. This is called immediacy. Students' reactions, answers, and questions are unpredictable. Because of this, unpredictability becomes another feature of teaching. When teachers teach, they take center stage and because of this, have to deal with publicness and set a good example and know what they are doing to have a better

chance of leading their class to excellence. History is the manner in which a teacher interacts with his or her class, which can set the class on a different path. Mr. Holland had a bad history when he first started teaching.

When Mr. Holland began teaching, he taught by lecturing and the students didn't respond to him at all. How could they be expected to react to something taught so impersonally? Then, after remembering how he had fallen in love with John Coltrane, it made him think back to his passion and re-realise that music is more than just "notes on a page". "Playing music is supposed to be fun. It's about heart... moving people. Its not just notes on a page". Music is about experiencing something bigger and beyond you, something that cannot even be described in words. Music can only be experienced as it exists within a person. To teach it, one must look beyond conventional lectures and let learners experience it for themselves in their own way. Students must actually be involved in what they are learning to learn to their potential. Seeing this movie that I own with enlightened eyes, I realize that I, like Mr. Holland, am a progressive educator.

The progressive system of education believes in getting students involved in things to make learning more effective and to develop problem- solving skills that can benefit society as a whole. There is simply no other way to teach music other than progressively. One cannot learn about something that is completely encompassing and individual by listening to a lecture from some teacher who acts as if music wasn't their heart and soul magnified. One way that I believe general music students can learn more effectively is by involving them in the musical process. A student could be taught how to play "Mary had a Little Lamb" on the piano while another sings it so that each an experience how *they* are making music and how the instruments they are using, a piano and a voice, work. Students must be involved to learn about and appreciate music.

One final thing I noticed about Mr. Holland in the film was that he struggled with balancing his home and school life. When Mr. Holland started teaching, he expected to have an excess of free time to compose. In fact, he and Iris, referred to teaching as just another 'gig' in the beginning, a daytime job that would allow him to compose whenever he wanted. Teaching was thought of as just another job, not requiring too much extra attention and time. Very quickly, Mr. Holland found out the truth. His vision of teaching was just that—a dream. He had to stay after school for meetings, help students who

needed an extra nudge, and many other things. So, teaching took up more time than he anticipated, leaving less for other priorities, like his family.

I know that I am in the same ‘dream state’ as Mr. Holland was when he began. I envision this fantasy world career where I will go to school every day and teach, with no extra things to take care of. From speaking to friends who are already teaching in the ‘real world’ and by watching this wonderful film, my fantasy bubble has been popped, which is a very good thing. The sooner I face reality, the better prepared I can be for it. There will be lesson plans to prepare daily and other things to do at home. There will be extra rehearsals and practices outside of regular school hours. The college textbook Teaching Today reads, “Each day in the life of a teacher is a busy one. You simply cannot arrive at school and start teaching. . . . You will have papers to grade, reports to complete, records to keep, faculty and committee meetings to attend, and special problems to address.” The free time that I have so looked forward to won’t be as spectacularly long as I had imagined, but that is okay. I can prepare for that now rather than to be thrown into an environment I hadn’t anticipated.

After viewing this film again as a teacher- in- training, I appreciate it so much more for now I can see realities in it that I never knew I would have to face. I imagined teaching as an Elysium experience where things would never go off schedule, each student would act as a model student, and free time would be as vast as the ocean. Now that I know what to expect, I can better prepare for my future teaching career by observing other teachers and facing the realities of teaching I had so long suppressed. Thirty years from now, I hope I, like Mr. Holland, can look back on my career and all of my students and think of them as one of my opuses, each life a work in which I had somehow helped compose, making the world a better place because of them. My opuses will be my legacy, what I leave behind, like a collection of works, for the good of the world. John Coltrain once said, “My goal is to uplift people as much as I can, to inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives, because there certainly is meaning to life.” And that is just what I plan to do.

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