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## Letters to the Editor

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### No Time to Pee: Making the Case for Teachers to Empower Their Profession

Recently, at an English teachers' conference, I asked several teachers if they postponed taking a bathroom break during the school day. "Yes" they all replied, somewhat surprised to be asked. That started a buzz at our table: anecdotes were shared illustrating some difficult minutes in the classroom, waiting for the bell, hoping it rang in time. Later, I posted this question on a blog and got dozens of responses. One person wrote that he knew a student teacher who wet herself. The poor young lady immediately left and never returned to her classroom or the profession of teaching. On the other hand, an ex-marine teacher told me that he was so used to following orders in the military, it was his MO to hold his bladder. Apparently, his is made of steel.

What about other professions? Do lawyers hold their pee? Do nurses or doctors hold their pee? Architects? Accountants? Certainly there are some situations where it's not convenient to

use the bathroom, but, on a regular basis, teachers and soldiers share the uncomfortable situation of not having time to pee.

### No Time to Eat

School lunch periods are typically a half hour or less. We scramble to the cafeteria where we sprint-eat and then spend the remaining moments using the facilities and straightening our rooms before the sounds downstairs become a roar as students inch closer to the door. What do other professionals do for lunch? Do they have more than thirteen minutes to eat? Do they have time to brush their teeth, maybe call a spouse or their kids, do some errands? Some of my non-teacher friends have time to go to the company gym for a work out; others go for a walk. Teachers barely have time for a mental break.

### No Time to Read

I teach five English classes requiring that I read and review fifty to one hundred pages of literature a day. I also lecture, administer tests and quizzes, facilitate discussions, monitor progress, conference with students, and record grades. Of course, I cannot prepare and grade in the nine hours I spend each day at school; I spend five to ten hours a week working at home. At the end of the day there is no time to read anything not related to my classes. That's probably why the English "canon" has stayed unchanged for so long—instructors don't have time to see what else is worthy, and on equal footing with what has become accepted, tested and judged as truly significant. There is simply no time to read. During summer months, I make up for that lost reading time, devouring a book a week or more. I've become a binge reader, grateful for the literary nutrients, but still wishing that I could spread them out and digest them over the course of the year.

### No Time to Talk

I've been to one conference this year—on teaching reading. It was terrific and I left invigorated, with a tool bag full of new techniques. Most significantly, like all good conferences, this one

provided teachers with a chance to connect and converse during breaks. We talked about books, writing, activities, and ideas. We talked about schools, politics, relationships, and food. We talked about students: the issues that face them and the opportunities that abound for them. We connected as professionals and as people, and I was amazed anew at what a smart, creative and interesting lot English teachers are-- a tribe I am proud to be part of.

Back at school, talking is reduced to “meeting-speak” or “teacher talk”, a few words exchanged in the hallways between classes where we enjoy a hi-bye camaraderie in lieu of give-and-take conversations. This dearth of talking also affects students, who have developed their own evolving code of hi-fives and waz-ups as they scamper to and from lockers up and down the hallways. What does this lack of conversation result in? I don’t have hard proof, but an intuitive feeling that conversation, like all skills, needs to be practiced, that it makes the world a better place—leading to better diplomacy, fewer misunderstandings; providing us with a cultural lexicon toward problem-solving; and pondering together rather than soldiering alone.

### No Time to Teach

High test scores on high-stakes tests result in five stars on the education department website—every one wants a five-star school. However, high-stakes tests, almost all entirely multiple choice, evaluate only what is “measurable”—the rivers in Africa, the number of stars on a flag, the main idea in paragraph three. How do you measure a particularly thrilling literary insight? How do you measure inventiveness, or the ability to synthesize concepts from several disciplines? These are the kinds of critical thinking skills that 21<sup>st</sup> century students need to succeed in a world that is evolving faster than at any time in history save, perhaps, the industrial revolution. We should be spending our teaching time on helping our students develop thinking skills they will need and use, not data that they will memorize and then forget.

The media has done a good job misinforming the public about

what teaching is. For example, when you do see a scene from a school, you often see students in uniform raising their hands and answering a teacher’s question in a few syllables or less. This is applauded by the pundit as a model classroom. And it seems obvious: quiet kids, in uniform, in rows, teacher at the head of the class, all cut and dry, black and white, right or wrong. But is that really a good example of teaching and learning? For most English teachers, a good hour in the classroom might involve a debate: Was Macbeth duped by the witches and his wife, or was it his own inner ambition that caused him to turn into a psycho-killer? Excerpts from the text are used to back up multiple points of view. There is passion. Students switch allegiances, insights fuel the debate, more questions than answers dominate. And the teacher, if she has a really good day, is more akin to a conductor orchestrating meaningful dialogue, than to a captain drilling kids to go through the motions.

### Time to Reflect

Are other professionals in the same boat? In today’s health care system, doctors and nurses complain that they have fewer and fewer minutes to see more and more patients. They feel they are unable to provide top-notch care because of this. Patients are herded in and out so quickly that they don’t have enough time to ask the questions that might alleviate anxiety or help them manage their illnesses. Health care and education both suffer from this same malady of “no time”. The implications of this are that doctors are also squeezing their bladders in order to squeeze in their patients.

However, this shouldn’t lead us to accept the rat-race pace as acceptable. We need to question more than ever the sanity of ignoring our health to perform a task, especially when it feels that the task is less than meaningful. How do we go about creating a sustainable, productive pace that allows teachers to eat, talk, read, and reflect? Most schools reduce these basic human functions to small slots of time which is dehumanizing for teachers and students alike. I am afraid we have become used to it, and this is why we adhere to it. But we are not robots. Nor

are our students.

Robots do what they are told; humans ponder possibilities and then act. My husband is one such example. He is the principal of a public, inner-city school where students are poor, and the teachers under the gun to keep off the dreaded AYP list. How can he create a quality environment and still meet the state-mandated goals? It is a struggle. He needs teachers to monitor the buses and the lunchroom, to be in the halls between classes, to take on high course loads. He simply doesn't have the time or the staff to do otherwise. This year, he will try something different—implementing a nine-day-on, one-day-off teaching system in which teachers work together, teach in teams, and allow one day in ten for prepping and grading. One day in ten to revive and invigorate, to talk and to read and reflect. He will pilot this plan with a willing team of teachers this year. If this innovation works to provide a better atmosphere, maybe he will expand it. At least the trial group will enjoy one day in ten to use the facilities at their leisure. Some times it is those little things that make a big difference.

### Time to Write

The editor of this Journal admitted to me that he gets very few submissions from high school teachers. They want to write, but they simply don't have time, he tells me. For years I too was one of those teachers. As a matter of fact, though I taught several writing classes, I wrote very little myself: a poem here, an essay there. Then I stopped teaching for a few years and started writing every day. I wrote a book and then its sequel (unpublished). I wrote and had published ten or so letters about education to the *Star Tribune*. Then, I went back to teaching, and, again, I had no time to write.

I had no time to write, so I wrote about it. Sometimes, it really is as simple as that. You want to do something, so you do it. It isn't always easy, but one thing might help: talk to colleagues about how they are feeling. Can you be creative during the day, monitor each other's classes every now and then to give a friend in the profession enough time to make a call to their son or

daughter, discuss a perplexing student concern, recommend a book, work on a piece of writing, or simply go to the bathroom?

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