Fifteen Minutes of Fame— A Lifetime of Memories

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By Dorothy Franklin

"What a perfect spring-like day for our walk," I said aloud to no one in particular as two other teachers and I accompanied 31 excited seventh-graders from DeWitt Clinton Elementary School, in Chicago, to a nearby restaurant this past spring. There was a slight chill in the air, but after a week in front of a television camera crew, none of my students seemed to notice. The half-mile walk of this celebratory field trip was filled with laughter as students recounted our "15 minutes of fame."

"The first time the camera was on me," Deon said, laughing, "I was knocked in the head with it! I was trying to focus on silent reading, and then this guy bumped me in the head." Raucous laughter erupted as Deon shared his blooper experience. His classmates chimed in with their experiences of cameras being positioned just inches from their faces.

Listening to the students' stories filled me with an enormous sense of pride over how well all my students had performed under the inherent stress of microphones and cameras intruding upon our literary conversations. When I first interviewed to participate in this educational project with Annenberg/Corporation for Public Broadcasting (Annenberg/CPB), I was filled with trepidation. How would my students respond in front of a television camera crew? How would my interpretation of literature-based instruction parallel with those of Dr. Judith Langer, director at the National Center on English learning and Achievement, who spent ten years researching how readers make meaning and how people become highly literate?

Annenberg/CPB contracted with Maryland Public Television (MPT) to film five series of videos on language arts; MPT decided to base them on Langer's envisionment-building process and its implications for classroom use. My reading classes participated in the second series, tentatively titled "Making Meaning: Middle School." The nine videotapes in this series, with a supporting online site and print guides, features eight teachers and provides glimpses into real middle school classrooms where envisionment-building flourishes. Teachers from New Hampshire, Washington, Florida, New York, Maryland, New Mexico, Texas, and Illinois were selected after a national search through recommendations from Langer and her staff, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) members, and National Writing Project sites across the country. Dr. B. J. Wagner, director of the Chicago Area Writing Project, recommended me based on what she learned about my instructional practices during my writing project summer institute. After extensive telephone interviews regarding my educational practices, I was selected.

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Our walk that afternoon—as a class, as future television stars, as those who had seen the other side of the rainbow—was filled with loud, uninhibited jokes. "Your mama is so stupid she failed a blood test!" was cushioned between subdued talk of how our conversations would be interpreted by a nationwide television audience. We wondered aloud about which moments would be immortalized on the videotape that featured our class and which would slowly fade from memory, edited from tape.

"Before you respond in seminar, will you please wait until the camera and mike are positioned in front of you?" Chris, our friendly producer, had asked. When Chris first made that request, I imagined that my students would fail miserably, and seminar would not be its normal free-flowing exchange of viewpoints, reactions, and analyses. In our seminar discussion of "Passing," a short story by Langston Hughes, my premonition of students freezing under the scrutiny of a camera and mike remained unrealized.

"Jack is a jerk for passing for white," argued Alan, a Yugoslavian American, in response to how a Depression-era, African American character had chosen to live his life as a white man.

The cameras captured every moment of our impassioned debate about whether it is okay for a fair-complexioned black man to journey through life as a Caucasian. The cameras did not preclude students from drawing upon what they had learned about the struggles of African Americans in nonfiction selections in their attempts to understand decisions made by fictional characters.

Anthony, an African American, disagreed with Alan. "I don't think Jack is wrong. After slavery, many blacks went North for a better life, but things didn't get better for them. He had to pass for white, or he would have had to go through what all those other blacks were going through….And his mother said it was okay."

Another group was taped during a discussion of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the middle of the group's debate about the effectiveness of Atticus Finch's single-issue defense of Tom Robinson, a camerawoman suddenly appeared with a sound technician who dangled a large microphone on a long pole. Vince, an articulate student who hasn't yet realized his full potential, did not skip a beat. "I disagree. It wasn't that the prosecution didn't put a doctor on the witness stand. It was that Tom Robinson was crippled in his left hand so he couldn't have beaten up Mayella." Group members excitedly added details as they each recalled pivotal testimony from the book. The discussion progressed with total disregard of the television crew who eventually moved onward to capture snippets of other groups' literary conversations.

"Ms. Franklin!" I was snapped back from my trip down memory lane. "Do you think they'll use the part when we were singing?" asked Aroma, a once shy child who learned to respect her own voice in literary conversations. I was saved from providing an answer that I did not have when several children took this as a cue to begin singing our revised version of a freedom song from the Civil Rights movement: "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round…. Gonna keep on learnin,' keep on workin,' workin' for my future plans...." The cameras had been rolling when we proudly sang our revised freedom song during morning circle, which is where we openly discuss students' strengths, weaknesses, and expectations, and life. With an impromptu choir providing he background, I again wondered about which moments would make the final cut.

Would the television producers preserve the teacher read-alouds as a stage in the envisionment-building process? Would students' daily interactions in novel study groups find a place in the videotape reserved for my reading classes? Most importantly, what did my students say about my instruction when they were interviewed on camera outside of my presence? As I watched their camaraderie, their vigor, and their optimism, I realized that it didn't really matter which pieces fit the final puzzle, which minutes would be immortalized on tape. I realized how much my students had gained from participating in this project. My students' abilities to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and think critically were all strengthened that week.

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As 31 ethnically and academically diverse students quieted down before entering the restaurant, I remembered all the naysayers. "My students couldn't handle being in front of cameras for a week," more than one teacher had whispered to me in passing. "My students can't read *To Kill a Mockingbird,*" I had heard too many times over the years. "My students can't...." In truth, with guidance, support, structure, and discipline, our students can do whatever we believe they can do. Standing abruptly over steaming plates of mashed potatoes, chicken, catfish, hot rolls, and corn, one table of boys raised their glasses and surprised me with a toast. "To our teacher, Ms. Franklin," they unabashedly cheered in the busy restaurant. We cemented our bond as a class, as a learning community, as a family. This entire experience had a positive impact on their learning (and mine) for the rest of the school year—maybe longer.

Long after the MPT crew had packed up their gear and moved on to other locations, their presence remained in Homeroom 220. Within one novel study group, for example, a team leader admonished a nonproductive peer, "You did your work when the television people were here! Why stop now?" Students constantly reminded one another of their "national reputation" that needed to be upheld. Learning in front of a camera had reminded my students of the value of learning.

A few months later—with my deep-seated fear of flying playing havoc on my nerves—I boarded an airplane en route to Maryland. I found strength in my students' acceptance and performance during the entire classroom videotaping experience. In groups of four, the eight participating teachers were invited to Baltimore to take part in the third part of the series, tentatively titled "Living Within Literature: Middle School." We engaged in the most ideal form of teacher talk, an intimate, conversational setting, albeit on camera. We reflected upon our classroom practices, concerns in education, and a host of other issues. Just like my students, I looked beyond the many faces and equipment that make television possible.

I fortified my confidence with words, borrowed from an old sitcom, that my students and I recite at the start of each seminar discussion: "I am a voice in this world; I deserve to be heard." I focused on being honest in my reflections on such hot topics as standardized testing and educational challenges. I used the conversations with other teachers as a time to reexamine why I do what I do and to discern where I might need to make changes. Why do we do what we do? is a question that deserves to be answered throughout our careers.

Upon my return to Chicago, I was greeted with three voicemail messages from students who wanted me to know everything that had transpired during my two-day absence from school. They didn't want me to worry about what was going on in my classroom while I as being videotaped in Maryland. Although I still have no idea of the actual footage to be used in our final videotapes, I no longer worry about it. My students and I have already grown immensely as a result of MPT and Annenberg/CPB coming into our lives.

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