

## They were ‘my kids’, but how could I motivate them?

Year 8/9

STELLA®

Jacky Russell

I teach at a high school of fifteen hundred students with a great range of abilities. To help some of the less able students, particularly those who are still at a grade 2 to grade 5 ability level in English, our school has set up special Impact English classes for Years 8 and 9. Due to timetable constraints I shared a combined Year 8/9 class of 13 students with another teacher. We taught in neighbouring classrooms and hence were able to collaborate easily. In broad terms, we decided that she would deal with the reading, speaking and listening sections of our program, while I would tackle the writing component. This seemingly unfair division (3:1) of the workload was based on previously ascertained knowledge that the students found writing, especially sustained writing of any length, way beyond most of them.

While the students presented obvious learning problems, they also exuded negative attitudes towards school, and writing in English classes in particular, which meant that they often engaged in disruptive behaviour. They were, in short, archetypal school ‘resisters’. In handling these matters I decided that motivation was the key to handling ‘my kids’ – I’d begun already to claim them as my own – so what was I to do? For three terms we had tackled spelling, punctuation, writing memos and writing pieces based on the various novels of their own choice which they had read in my colleague’s class. I had also encouraged them to do some writing drawing on their personal emotions and experiences – ‘My Worst Day’, ‘My Happiest Moment’ – with me taking on the role of ‘Big Bird’, constantly encouraging them, keeping them going, enthusing, cajoling and so on.

The result of all this was that by the end of third term, seven of the original 13 students had improved sufficiently to be mainstreamed. Yes, not only were they now capable of working in a regular English class, they also willingly and happily left their special classes behind. The problem for us teachers now was that we had six students who simply found English more than they could cope with and subsequently had no interest in tackling regular classes. I was really at a full stop. No ideas were forthcoming. It was at this point in time that a teacher of a ‘top’ Year 9 class showed me the results of an autobiographical unit that her students had worked on, and a germ of an idea was planted in my mind. I felt I could easily adjust and expand this unit to suit the students in my Impact English class.

At the beginning of term four I informed the students that if they worked hard, they could start producing an illustrated book of their own, in the form of a bound folder that would be provided for them, and which they could take home to their parents at the end of the year. There was no specific task sheet, just a verbal understanding, as the entire project was only going to be viable if the students were obedient and cooperative.

It was agreed that their previously written and stored pieces of writing would provide the basis of stories for their ‘books’. They were to re-write these once they had been deemed worthy of publication, with the emphasis being on producing work that was, if possible, error free.

It should be pointed out at this juncture that these remaining students were all on an Individual Education Program (IEP), which for the majority simply required that they attend class, bring their equipment, and behave in an acceptable manner. I’d have to be honest and say that the thought of providing them with a formal task sheet never crossed my mind,

though in retrospect it could have been quite an incentive. At any rate, the moment they received their folders they immediately wanted to do their front covers, choose suitable names for their 'books', and this alone generated a huge amount of excitement. With no prompting from me, the next few lessons saw them going to their files and extracting pieces of work that they felt were worthy of being included. It was a sheer delight to see them happily conferring with their peers and me, accepting corrections and energetically working on their productions. Whenever students completed a piece of writing and placed it in their books, they excitedly congratulated one another. Indeed, each new entry took on an almost ceremonial atmosphere.

To maintain their enthusiasm I took photos of them working alone or with friends, and they used the photographs as illustrations in their work. I also made plenty of suggestions – they might, for example, consider including a photo with a piece of writing that was supposedly a police file, or a photo of their pet to accompany a lost animal advertisement. The students, however, worked pretty slowly as it inevitably took some time to confer over each piece and to ensure that everything was exactly right. After several weeks the momentum was fading. What was I to do?

We called time out and I told them about my feeling that they seemed to be slowing down. They absolutely agreed, so we decided that we would have to come up with a new plan for a final piece. Ideas were submitted and rejected (always politely), until a consensus was reached. Earlier in the year, we had read a play entitled *Greenspace* which they had really enjoyed, and now they wanted to write a play of their own. They wanted to write what they wanted without any ideas from me, and they wanted to work on it as one group. While I was excited that, for the first time, they actually wanted to work with one another – they had spent most of the year ridiculing one another – I did feel a little uncertain whether everyone would do their fair share of the work, but their enthusiasm was contagious and I gave in.

I issued each with large pieces of paper, desks were rearranged, and away they went. Lesson after lesson they worked enthusiastically on their own and this resulted in four different scenes to their play. I was eventually invited to read their initial draft. It was full of energy and the most amazing experiences, which they claimed were their own. 'Let's go knock off a 7-Eleven hey!' – 'Is that the police? Yes – listen – there's a terrible party going on next door. The noise is horrific and I'm sure they're drinking alcohol and doing drugs – and they're only fifteen . . .' These excerpts they assured me were true to their lives. After I had read their play and they felt that the shock value of their activities had been duly noted and discussed, I felt that there was a mood of anti-climax in the room. We had policemen, drugs, shoplifting and family arguments. It was good, strong work, so why was everyone apparently feeling dissatisfied? I knew that I had to do something. Dare I suggest that the play needed something extra? I guess I didn't think about it in too much depth. It was a 'seat of the pants' type reaction – I gently asked if the kids felt that the play needed 'something else'. After an initial silence there was unanimous agreement. They had a gut feeling that I was right, so they said, but they were too tired to do anything about it. They were completely 'written out'.

Again instinct took over. I told them that if they wished I would be willing to help out and write the final scene for them. I assured them that they were not obliged to take up my offer and that I would definitely not be upset if they rejected my suggestion. They weighed this up. There was some concern – after all this was their own. They weren't sure. I was questioned at length about what ideas I had – and only when I assured them that what they had already written would not be altered (except for the normal conferring and corrections) we were able to strike a deal.

I wrote the final scene, setting it several years into the future. I presented them as characters at a school reunion, all with jobs that over the year they'd told me they aspired to: two girls were policewomen, two boys were chefs, another a professional footballer, all successful

adults. They were thrilled. In the words of one of the students as stated in his reflections on their production, 'We included the last scene to show how much people can change.'

With the help of a teacher-aide I managed to get the play typed up beautifully and photocopied and every student was given a copy for their books. They were so excited about the finished product that they decided they wanted to perform it. This posed further challenges. First there was the question of the audience. There was a group of senior Indonesian students who had taken an interest in their activities and they would be available, but I was genuinely surprised and delighted when they chose their Year Coordinator, members of the Administration and other members of staff, including the Head of English, to come and watch them. They then asked me if I would like to invite anyone, as I had written a scene as well, so I suggested the teacher-aide who had done all the typing for us. All this meant that they had to do two more writing tasks: they had to write a letter of thanks to the teacher-aide and design an invitation that could be used for everyone. They accomplished both of these tasks in record time and very effectively at that. I felt that they showed real motivation. They obviously in no way saw these last two tasks as school work! It was simply something that needed to be done.

The delivery of the invitations was done by the students, who practised what they would say in the event of someone being extremely busy, or unavailable and so on. Some of their suggestions had to be modified, but in the end it was a sheer delight to see them as they slicked down their hair, tidied up their uniforms and even cleaned their shoes. One of the most difficult boys went off to the Principal with his invitation and a grin from ear to ear saying 'I can't believe it. For once I'm going to be a stiff!' (stiff = nerd; goody-goody; top student).

We expanded the performance into a luncheon event – the 'Reunion Party' – and it proved to be a real success. Suffice to say, the students thought they were fantastic and found the administration and staff to be 'Not too bad at all!' It was delightful to read in my 'stiff's' 'Thoughts on Our Presentation', the following: 'Mrs Anderson (one of our Deputy Principals) talked to me about fishing for about ten minutes. All the teachers did. Miss Hogan (their Year Coordinator) stayed . . . because she enjoyed herself . . . I hope she has a few days off and gets better.' All this from a student who had given Miss Hogan and the administrative team just so much trouble. It simply brought tears to our eyes.

While there was no formal assessment (A to E) for this subject (the students were simply given comments that stated that they were on a special course, their behaviour had tremendously improved, and so forth), I felt that I had successfully accomplished my goal of motivating my kids. Not only were they arriving early for classes following the lunch hour, they were above all else just so happy with what they had accomplished. No longer were they failing English. They 'knew' that they hadn't passed the subject either in the strict sense of the word, but they were just so proud of what they had been able to do. All this is just so much more important than marks.

Term four certainly proved to be a very rewarding experience, capped off by all but one of the students proudly taking their 'published books' home as a gift for their parents/carers. The last student presented his book to me. 'You'll appreciate it much more than either of my parents would Miss,' he said. 'Could I please just have the photos so that I can remember what we did?' He still comes to visit us regularly, just to say hello and, as he says, 'To get my Auntie Jacky hugs.'