

TOMORROW IS SCHOOL

and I'm Sick to the Heart Thinking About It

In this case study, two students and a professor explain, in their own words, why every education student deserves the opportunity to read this book.

THE SCHOOL :

Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Canada

THE COURSE :

ED 4410 - Educational Psychology (1999-2000)

THE INSTRUCTOR :

Vera M. Haines, Sessional Lecturer

THE BOOK :

Tomorrow is School... by Don Sawyer

THE ASSIGNMENT :

1) Please make informal notes on paper (or in your book if you desire) pointing out Don Sawyer's personal and professional development. You may consider the emotional, social, cognitive, physical, or spiritual areas of development.

2) Please make informal notes on paper (or in your book if you desire) about the various issues related to teaching and/or education that are discussed in the book.

3) The informal notes (or book with notes) will be handed in on the due date for evaluation with the one-page assignment below. Colour coding may be used to separate the issues.

4) Please create one page that represents what the book meant to you. It may be presented in any one of the following: a book review, lesson plan, mind map, journal entry, personal reflection, musical composition, artwork, diagram, chart, dramatic work, discussion starter, or correspondence with the author, Don Sawyer. His e-mail address is dsawyer@ouc.bc.ca. If you have an additional idea, please clear it with me first. Thank you.

5) Evaluation: 15% informal notes; 20% one-page representation; 35% total.

WHAT HAPPENED :

(The following commentary was provided by Vera Haines)

I found that most students did an excellent job of making informal notes, either in the book or on separate sheets of paper, about the specific areas I requested. The areas I focused on were relevant to the main content of my course (development and learning). Many students had read the book as soon as they had bought it, at the beginning of the school year, and some had to go back over it to make notes. This was partly my fault—I was not quite sure where to put the book in the school year, as it was the first time using it. It is still something to consider, as some students said they wished they had known about the assignment before reading the book and others said they liked having the book near the end of their placements as it meant more. So, where the book best fits into a school year or class is up to each instructor's best guess.

The allowance of being creative concerning what the book meant to each student went over extremely well. Most students enjoyed this and a variety of media were used. Students wrote songs and performed them live, on tape, and on CD. One young man wrote a viola composition; another talked about the book while playing in the background certain songs relevant to the topic. Students put together collages, paintings, artwork, lesson plans, mind maps, and one oral discussion. Several communicated with Don Sawyer and found that very meaningful. Others wrote personal reflections or journal entries or book reviews. All in all, this part of the assignment seemed to be exceptional for them to experience. It definitely was for me.

I marked all the assignments within a week so they could be handed back before the end of term. As I was marking the assignments I realized that the rest of the class should share in what each other was doing or thinking. When I handed the assignments back, I encouraged the students to share their work or thoughts. We ended up using each section (I

had seven) that way. Many students were amazed at what their peers had done, and several said it was one of their most enjoyable classes.

For a discussion of the book, a class period was used where students were grouped in fours and provided large sheets of newsprint and markers to write or draw examples of the various areas of development. For example, one group did emotional development, another cognitive development, etc. We processed their responses as a whole class. Another class was used to identify the educational issues discussed in the book and how they compared to today. I felt it was valuable for the students to appreciate the historical perspective of such issues as standardized testing, group work, etc.

In conclusion, because the book is written in a narrative style, a higher percentage of students actually read the entire book and were able to reflect a greater understanding, not only about teaching, but the variety of educational issues that are involved, then and now. Positive comments about the book were consistently expressed.

It is a pleasure to recommend this book very highly.

Vera M. Haines
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University

TOMORROW IS SCHOOL and I'm Sick to the Heart Thinking About It

by Don Sawyer

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Student Response: It do

(The following letters are unsolicited e-mail messages from two Lakehead University students to the author, reprinted with permission of the writers.)

Dear Don Sawyer :

I am a student in Vera Haines' Educational Psychology class. Our final assignment was to read *Tomorrow Is School*. I must admit this task proved very difficult for me. I just couldn't get into it. I felt as though I had heard enough about the "art" of teaching. Everyone around me kept telling me they couldn't teach me how to teach—they could only give me helpful hints on teaching. Well, I was sick of it. I had spent months in classrooms and my four-week teaching placement had gone well.

Then, I hit the wall in my second teaching placement. This one lasted only three weeks but I counted every second of it. It was a Grade 9 class and I was way out of my league. I didn't understand my lessons and neither did my students. My classroom management wasn't working. Some days were awful, other days I just barely held control of the classroom. The worst part was I really felt like I wasn't getting through to my students on a mental or emotional level. I dreaded each day. In short, I felt as though I had failed miserably.

I went home and picked up a copy of your book. This time I could not put it down. It was like a refreshing breeze. It really helped me work through all the difficulties I had encountered. You showed me how teaching is a learning process. You were so persistent. You met every challenge head on, adapting and changing with it. I was so inspired. It was reaffirming to know that I wasn't alone in my experience. When you wrote about how difficult it was to fit in, it was as though you were writing about my experience. I was so keenly aware of how my every move was being monitored. The emotional struggles you and your wife lived through really hit home with me. I am living thousands of miles away from all my family and friends. Like you, I felt emotionally exhausted at the end of the day.

Half way through my last teaching practice one of the other student teachers and I had a talk. We were working on our self-evaluations. She said that under goals she felt like putting, "I will not go home and cry for an hour every night, maybe every other night." By reading your book I realized

n't get more positive than this...

that feeling lost and terrified is normal. The key is to work those feelings to your advantage by not allowing yourself to feel comfortable until everything in your classroom is as it should be.

The manner in which you went through all the steps, and the changes you made along the way was so helpful. It is one thing to be told that child-centered learning works and quite another to be shown how it is adapted every step of the way. It was like being given a series of building blocks. I know now that I too will have my series of successes and failures. Before I was too afraid to try in case I made it worse. Now I believe that each new attempt is one step closer to ultimate success. You brought the concept of cooperative learning to a whole new level for me. I knew what it felt like as a student, but now I have an idea of what it feels like as a teacher.

Finally, I have to say that your ideas about teaching English were ingenious. Your creativity inspired me. It makes so much more sense to give students material that is relevant to their lives than material that is not. It makes such a huge difference in the way they approach it. Too many teachers allow themselves to be limited by material. It is so important to improve literacy skills and I believe that you did an amazing job with your techniques. You broke it down for your students and gave them the skills and the confidence to write on their own. I was particularly impressed with the trip you took your students on, to the graveyard. History needs to be made real for people in order for them to understand it.

You truly inspired me with your enthusiasm for teaching. You overcame each challenge through growth and a commitment to the whole student. You demonstrated how learning can be both interesting and exciting. I hope to take all I have learned from your book and apply it in my next teaching term. I want to

thank you for restoring my hope in the teaching profession.

Sincerely,
Nicole Tyson

Dear Mr. Sawyer :

My name is Russell Jordan, and I am a student in the faculty of education at Lakehead University. I am happy to say that our educational psychology professor added your book, *Tomorrow Is School*, to our reading list. This book was nothing less than inspiring. I picked it up one Saturday evening and could not put it down until I had finished it. This is one book that I will certainly be referring to for inspiration as I begin my teaching career.

One thing that I could not believe was that all of the events in your book were taking place in the early 1970s, yet your thinking and your philosophy of education from then is what we are being taught today. We are told we are on the cutting

edge of education and that the way we are learning to teach is almost revolutionary. You, however, were implementing the same teaching strategies and dedication to individual student success thirty years ago.

I have adopted some of the things that you did with your classes in Hoberly Cove with the students I have been working with during my student teaching placements. I recently taught the World War I component of a Grade 8 history unit. After reading your book, and being thoroughly impressed with what you had done with your "deep thought" quizzes, I tried to incorporate this into my teaching strategy. My first lesson was on the causes of the war. During the class, the students and I went through each of the major causes of the war, talking about the different ways each had its impact on the outbreak of hostilities. For a homework assignment I gave them three questions which asked for their opinions—on the causes of the war, which was the most influential and why, could the war have been avoided, etc. At first they were not sure what

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they were supposed to do. None of them had ever been given the chance to say what they thought before. Some of them were lost. I told them to simply tell me what they think, and then back it up.

When their work was turned in the next day I was astounded by the high quality. Many of them thanked me. One, on an evaluation of me, stated, "I like that Mr. Jordan wants to know what we think instead of always having to have perfect answers on what is specifically right or wrong." You must agree that having the students answer questions that require them to think, rather than memorize, reinforces the learning process and instills in the student a wonderful sense of achievement and understanding.

I was also inspired by the part of your book when you describe teaching haiku to your Grade 10s. I had a similar experience with my 8s in the same WWI class. We had watched a video on the Battles of Verdun and the Somme, during which I asked them to write down several points that they felt were important. Afterwards, I told them their assignment was to imagine themselves as a soldier in the trenches and write a letter home describing what it was like there. I was completely floored by the work that was handed in. One girl, who has a learning disability (her problem is communication—she is extraordinarily bright) wrote in part:

"I've been living in a trench since I've been here, life in ... the trenches is horrible. It's been raining for days, lice has gotten into the clothing. From overhead all I can hear ... all day and night is the sound of exploding shells and the ... whine and whistle of the bullets... There isn't a lot of food ... but there are plenty of dead already. Rats are everywhere ... they eat the remains due to starvation. I'm scared at times, but I will be strong, don't worry ... My squad is to go over the top tomorrow, the sound of the whistle frightens me."

After reading this, and many others like it, I realized that I had hit on something wonderful. I was elated. I had given these students the opportunity to pour emotion and sincerity into a homework assignment. I was so proud of them. I collected the best of these letters and asked their authors' permission to keep them as samples. You should have seen the smiles beaming from their faces. I had never witnessed such a sense of achievement and pride.

WE ARE TOLD WE ARE ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF EDUCATION AND THAT THE WAY WE ARE LEARNING TO TEACH IS ALMOST REVOLUTIONARY. You, however, were implementing the same teaching strategies and dedication to individual student success thirty years ago.

I have always held the view that the teacher is there for the students, to foster opportunities for success and achievement, to support and reinforce individual triumphs, and to ensure that a student never feels like a failure. Your book inspired me to etch these beliefs in stone, and to put them into practice every single day I am in the classroom. The classroom must be a forum for discovery, bounded only by the limits of imagination and creativity. This is a fundamental construct upon which a student's educational experience must be built. It must not be limited to the students, but must grasp the teacher as well.

Thank you for inspiring me and for taking the time to read about my experiences.

Sincerely,
Russell L. Jordan

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