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First Year Foibles in Sharing a Classroom

When I learned I would be sharing a classroom with Jessie Birch (a pseudonym is used here) I was more excited than ever to begin my first year of teaching English to high school students. I had worked as a substitute teacher and a tutor in the school, so I knew of Ms. Birch, although I did not know her personally. I liked the fact that she was young, dynamic, creative and hip. Students loved her. I often heard them in the hallway calling out, "Hi Ms. Birch!" or saw them hanging around her classroom between classes and at the end of the day.

Even though I was a decade older than Jessie Birch, I felt we had a few things in common and could perhaps become good friends. I imagined us sharing lesson plans, discussing students, going out for a drink after work, possibly even getting together socially for dinner. Teaching was a second career for me and very different from my first career as a truck driver. I looked forward to having colleagues who would be more intellectual than my former co-workers had been. Just being able to claim *colleagues* instead of co-workers was a thrill.

I had some tentative ideas about how I wanted to decorate my half of the classroom. I wanted students to walk into a funky, casual, friendly environment, like my own home, with lots of art and interesting objects around the room. I thought rather than forcing students to sit traditionally at desks, I could bring in a rug, some cushions, maybe even a couch or two. Although this was high school, not kindergarten I thought the students might enjoy sprawling sometimes while they read. In kindergarten and elementary school, students are encouraged to feel comfortable and enjoy learning. By high school, they are expected to knuckle down and sit quietly. I had fond memories of reading circles in middle school, and I prefer to read splayed across a couch. There wasn't much room for couches, but I thought I could make a reading area on a carpet in a corner of the classroom with cushions and cozy reading lamps.

On the first day of school for new teachers, I painstakingly hauled an old, oriental carpet and some cushions up to my second-floor classroom. There was no air conditioning, and the windows looked out on an airless courtyard. It was hot! Jessie didn't have to be at school until the next day, since she was not a new teacher. I wanted to consult her--it was her classroom after all--before I arranged anything. I left everything in a heap in the corner. I couldn't wait for the next day to see her and talk with her. I had trouble sleeping that night, because I was

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so filled with anticipation and ideas for my first week of teaching.

The next day was full of meetings, and I barely saw Jessie until the end of the day. There was little time to spend in our classrooms. I hurried to room 222, anxious to learn what Jessie thought of my plans. She was busy at her desk and greeted me coolly as I arrived. It was another blistering day, and we were all feeling stressed about the next day, when students would begin a new school year.

“Hi Jessie, I’m Helena,” I chirped, merrily.

“Hi Helena.” Her weak smile disappeared as she pointed to my pile of carpet and pillows. “What’s that?” She asked. I told her of my idea to create a relaxing reading space. She didn’t offer any sign of encouragement as I rattled on nervously about sprawling while reading. My enthusiastic description faltered and I asked, “What do you think?”

She replied, “I think the administration may take exception to your idea. The carpet and pillows will be deemed a fire hazard, and personally, I have a serious problem with allergies. I think the dust and fibers will irritate my sinuses.”

My heart sank, but I certainly did not want to make Jessie uncomfortable. I promised to remove the offensive furnishings right away. I stayed at school late after lugging everything back down

to my car. Jessie did not stay long. By the time I came back to the classroom, she was packing up and preparing to head home. She wished me luck and left before I could ask her any of the many questions I had about classroom procedure. I was determined not to be unnerved by her attitude. We all felt pressured, and I was sure that someday we would laugh about our first classroom interaction.

Well, we never laughed about that or much of anything. I don’t know why. Perhaps Jessie resented having to share a classroom with a new teacher. Perhaps she felt her style was cramped by having me around. Perhaps she was just unhappy about her job in general, and I was the nearest scapegoat. At any rate, it was a rough year. Nothing I did pleased her. I learned to not bring anything that was not completely sterile into the classroom. As Jessie pointed out, there were probably students who suffered from allergies as well, so I was doing everyone a favor by leaving my birds’ nests and dusty, old books at home.

Jessie left at mid-term to pursue teaching at the college level. Lisa, who replaced her, became the friend Jessie had never been. Lisa and I laughed and cried about our students. We supported one another professionally with materials and advice. We spent time outside of school, skiing, horseback riding and hiking. We were both new teachers and shared our triumphs and failures. It took longer to have a close relationship

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with a colleague than I had originally hoped. Both Jessie and Lisa have moved on into new career paths, but Lisa and I remain friends.

and a furthering of my own learning, are worth the effort.

I learned some important lessons from Jessie. Some people are just not meant to be friends, just as some students will not like every teacher (or any teacher!). Some people have too little in common to ever connect on any level. In fact, I learned of a few students who did not like Ms. Birch, contrary to my initial impression of her as everyone's favorite teacher. I became less sensitive to rejection and more aware of others' discomforts or discontent. My time spent sharing a classroom with Jessie helped me to become more observant of others and more compassionate. I still wish Jessie and I could have been friends, but I understand that not everyone will share my enthusiasms. I now have my own classroom, without rugs or cushions, but with an acceptance of every individual's right to be comfortable. Rather than decorating with material objects, I chose to paint fanciful clouds and birds on my classroom walls. I display various student projects, and in spite of possible allergic reactions, I have book cases full of old books ranged around the room. I have learned to be sensitive to the needs of everyone around me, while still maintaining my individuality and creativity. It's not always an easy row to hoe, but I've found that the rewards, such as enthusiastic students and colleagues, a sense of helping people in a meaningful way,