

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Henrietta's Workshop

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The story of Henrietta's workshop is based on my real-life mentor and teacher Regina (Jean) Byrne. The story that follows has been tweaked, shortened and, of course, fictionalized, but the underlying message remains true to my experiences. Even though the events did not take place in a traditional classroom for children and youth, I felt it would be a more authentic representation of what helped shape my learning and teaching philosophy because it represents my actual experiences.

Jean, whom I met when I was a young college graduate, began as my boss and ultimately became one of my dearest friends. Through my time working with her, I learned so much about what it is to be open to true learning, and what qualities create a remarkable teacher. She was both an impassioned learner and a dedicated teacher. She overcame many challenges-- both physical and emotional-- to become what she dreamed of becoming. Jean's passion, regard for people from all backgrounds and abilities, resilience, curiosity, and ultimately, her wisdom, continue to inspire me today.

Jean died last year at age 78 after battling cancer. I think of her daily and miss her physical presence in my life very much. In this story, I use the voice of Henrietta (Etta) to give voice to my experience of Jean's learning and teaching philosophy. I offer you this short fairytale in the spirit of celebrating the teachers in our lives who have made a true difference.

As I prepared this essay to share my learning and teaching philosophy, I found that my former career as a writer, editor, and community organizer provided me with many rich opportunities for reflection. I chose to focus on one work experience in particular -- a staff writing workshop -- because it seemed to encapsulate many of the guideposts suggested by Dr. Jeter-Iles regarding who learns and who teaches, how we learn and teach, and how we can integrate all learners into our classroom.

I look forward to translating what I once learned in a vibrant community of adults into an understandable language children from all backgrounds will enjoy. It is my deepest hope that as a reading and writing teacher, I will have the privilege of helping others find and develop their voice so that they can live the fullest life possible.

The reason I chose the medium of a fairytale is because I can imagine that balancing and integrating the needs of students, administration, families and teachers must indeed involve some powerful magic! Because I have not yet had the experience of working in the classroom setting, I feel as though my philosophy at this point is based on intentions rather than working with these various specific groups. But I do believe that the character in this story, when asked to carry out a task requested by her director, reached in and utilized every tool she could think of to honor, join, and prepare the “students” she was asked to work with, while addressing the needs of her community and directors, just as any teacher would be required to do.

Once upon a time in a tall building in a small city, there worked a tiny old lady with short, white hair and enormous glasses. This lady loved to write, and she had worked hard to climb all the way to the top floor in the tall building. She also loved to read other people’s stories and so her work was to read other people’s stories and help the stories become as beautiful as they could be. This old lady had a name. It was Etta. But it wasn’t always Etta. A long, long time ago, her name was Henrietta. And when she was two years old, Henrietta lost the ability to see very well and had to have very special glasses made for her. Well, Henrietta’s mother was very young and didn’t have anyone to help her pay to make Henrietta’s eyes better, so she had to do a very sad thing. She felt she had to give Henrietta away to a home for children. Henrietta was old enough to remember that her mother had given her away and she never forgot the last time she saw her mother.

Henrietta spent a very long childhood moving from place to place. Her solace became reading and then writing. Through reading, she felt less alone and even though her characters did not know her, she felt they were like her family. The nuns that took care of Henrietta always tried to make sure that she had a good pair of glasses because they could see how important reading was to her. There was not much else they could do to fill the hole in her heart left by her mother saying goodbye. But they felt it was something.

Over time, Henrietta grew up, as children do, and even though it was uncommon for a young woman to do in her time, she decided that she wanted to be a writer and work for a company that made magazines. She went from place to place, trying to find a job, but the places she went to did not seem to want to hire a tiny woman with long brown hair and enormous glasses. She stayed committed to her dreams even though it felt hard to reach them. She decided she would have a new name: Etta. She felt it had some good bounce to it and that such a name would let people know that she was a fighter. After lots of searching, Etta finally found a job. She was hired by a company that wrote about plants and flowers in a small magazine.

Etta, now in charge of the magazine about plants and flowers, decided that she would make the magazine about the people who grew plants and flowers and not just about the plants and flowers. Well, one thing lead to another and pretty soon, that magazine, now containing stories about people and their love for plants and flowers, became very popular indeed. Pretty soon it became clear that people loved to write stories for Etta's magazine because something very special would happen when they sat with her as she read their stories. Etta would read their story, then she would take off her enormous glasses and look right at the writer and say to them something like this, "I really love your story. I can see that everything you write about is very personal and very important to you. Can you tell me more about this flower or this plant and why you love it so much?"

And pretty soon, Etta learned so much about that person, because she opened herself up to hearing what they had to say and what was important to them. Because she was such a good writer and a good listener, she was able to help them find their voice. Etta became so good at helping people tell their stories, that soon enough she was asked to run a special writing workshop for all the people that worked in her company. The head of the company had an idea that it would be a very good activity for all managers and their staff to do because she thought it just might help them understand each other's strengths and improve communication.

So, Etta set to work trying to figure out how all these people in her company want enjoy being in a writing workshop because these were not all people who were banging down her doors to write. They were all different sorts of people, some were very young and some were very old. Some people did not speak English very well and some people did not know even know how to read very well. Some could not hear. But Etta was a resourceful lady and pretty soon, with the help of an assistant, she created a toolbox. She poured all of her life experiences, her collected learnings from books and other people, her resources and her hopes into that toolbox. She also asked for help from her assistant because she knew that she would be much stronger with help.

Etta's Toolbox

To Learn we need:

- Connection
- Compassion
- Curiosity
- Confidence
- Competence

To Teach we need:

- Connection
- Compassion
- Curiosity
- Confidence
- Competence

The day arrived. All the people that worked at the magazine company were waiting. Etta arrived with her assistant and her big toolbox and she quietly stood in the front of the room. With one magical touch of her pencil to the top of the toolbox, the lid opened. To the surprise of everyone, words started floating out of the box and as they floated, Etta's smile got bigger and bigger. The words were very nice words: curiosity, compassion, connection, competence, and confidence started. Her toolbox was magical! While the words floated, Etta began to tell everyone a little bit of her story.

When she was done, she said that the lesson for the workshop would be to use the tools she provided to tell our stories. She explained that the foundation for learning and for teaching was to first listen to each other's stories. She said the floating words were like building blocks in a house, and that all of the words needed us to give life to them if the house was to be strong. Once we knew each other's stories, we could begin to learn, and what we would learn is that we all have special gifts to share. The gifts, she said, would be at their brightest if we found a way to work together to help them shine.

For the rest of the workshop, we broke out into small groups. Etta had other things in her toolboxes like pencils and markers, paper, audio recorders, paint and chalk, she even had a tape recorder with music. Etta and her assistant bounced around the room all day to help the groups use their resources to tell their story.

At the end of the day, we all got to listen to and share stories painted on paper, written into books, and danced to music. It was so much fun! Of course, we knew that this was a special workshop, touched by magic. We knew that when we went back to our desks, we had to meet goals not always defined by ourselves and that we would not always have time to tell our stories to everyone we worked with. But somehow, the words in Etta's toolbox seemed to transcend all those details. They reminded us that if we took the time to attend daily to: Compassion, Connection, Curiosity, Confidence and Competence, we just might have a chance to truly learn something about others and then maybe, just maybe, we would be able to teach what we had learned when the time came.

Etta taught us that we are all learners and teachers all at the same time! And of course, a real magic does sort of happen when you take the time to listen to others. After that workshop, the staff at the magazine, from managers to assistants felt they had a better sense of the strengths they could share and the challenges they could address. They had a sense that by referring back to the magical floating words, they might enjoy their work life better while also fulfilling the goals of their organization. From that day on, everyone tried a lot harder to help other people live . . . happily ever after . . . at least whenever they were able. And as an aside, even though Etta did not get to see her mother again, she had many, many friends that loved her for as long as she was alive . . . and that was something.

Lauri A. Brunton has an MA Ed. in Environmental Education and previously worked as an educator, community organizer, and writer in the field of urban greening. She is currently pursuing a certification as a reading specialist from Arcadia University and now lives in the country with her two daughters and husband where they garden, raise chickens, and generally have a good time.