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November 20–23, 2014
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Postconvention Workshops
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Opening the Conversation

Meeting Mr. Danza. Or Not.

In 2013 we attended the NCTE Annual Convention, as always. We went to meetings, attended conference presentations, and enjoyed some pleasant time with friends and colleagues. One of the events that we were looking forward to was Tony Danza’s address at the CEE Friday luncheon. Danza was set to talk about his experience as a high school teacher in Philadelphia and about his book *I’d Like to Apologize to Every Teacher I Ever Had: My Year as a Rookie Teacher at Northeast High.*

In addition, we were thrilled and honored with an invitation from the publisher of Danza’s book, Three Rivers Press, to have dinner with Tony at a swanky Italian restaurant in Boston. Our preparation included conversations about what to wear to the dinner, how to get pictures of ourselves with Danza, and other less-than-academic topics.

Unfortunately, Mr. Danza was sidelined by a skating or skiing accident and was not able attend the CEE luncheon or the swanky dinner. We still got the dinner and copies of his book, but we came home with no pictures of ourselves with Mr. Danza.

As a result of this memorable (non)event and because of the inclusion of an article by Jacqueline Bach and Susan Weinstein, “Who’s the Teacher? What Tony Danza Taught Us about English Education” in this issue, we decided to dedicate at least a portion of our editorial to a discussion of Danza’s book. We both read the book recently and discovered a few compelling issues that relate quite well to English teacher educators and to English teachers: his emotional reaction to teaching adolescents, the support he was provided, and how things might have turned out differently if he had been provided with more than a five-week seminar as preparation for teaching.

Emotional Reaction

So what happens when a television and movie star becomes a teacher? Reality—not the imagined world of teaching as portrayed by Hollywood. Danza
consistently described the physical and emotion impact of his first moments in the classroom. His first day, like many teachers’ first days, did not go according to plan. And days after that did not go according to plan.

In the opening chapters of his book, Danza deftly described his sweat-soaked shirt, his tears, and his fear and nervousness at encountering high school students. In spite of this overflow of emotion, he persevered in the classroom, and he wanted to be better for his students. All of us who have been English teachers or English teacher educators have experienced similar emotional reactions in ourselves or in our students; indeed, a necessary part of a novice teacher’s experience is learning to set aside fears of how we might fail ourselves and our students, choosing to focus instead on what we know about how students learn. In this way, we put aside our imagined identities and learn to deal with realities. Bach and Weinstein, in their article in this issue, express the importance of this process:

*Teach* provides an opportunity for us as English educators to deconstruct, with our students, the teacher-hero myth that they will have encountered in popular culture and may have internalized to varying degrees. It also provides an opportunity for preservice English teachers to realize, by comparison with Danza, the extent to which they have entered the discourse of the professional English teacher, as they see how easily they and their peers can identify Danza’s errors and misjudgments. (p. 323)

It is possible, perhaps, for novice teachers to see Danza’s emotions, his “errors and misjudgments,” and then use this new perception to manage their own reaction to what is necessarily a highly fraught experience. In other words, Danza’s teacher narrative offers a compelling method for encouraging others to share and to understand better their own experiences (Gomez & Tabachnick, 1992).

**Extensive Support**

Unlike many beginning teachers, Danza had a fairly extensive system of formal and informal support (i.e., mentoring). Although he describes a somewhat tenuous relationship with his principal, Ms. DeNaples, he is offered the services of a coach who observes his classroom on a regular basis and gives him suggestions for how to engage students in the work of reading, writing, and talk that is necessary to a high school English language arts classroom. He also collaborates with a small group of teachers in his building. Additionally, Danza receives an advice letter from a recently retired teacher. Danza was given effective mentoring, which combines the profes-
sional (e.g., observing, advising, evaluating) and the personal—befriending and counseling (Rippon & Martin, 2006).

With a teaching schedule of one class period per day, Danza has plenty of time for reflection, lesson planning, advice seeking, and grading. He has energy for engagement in after-school activities. It is perhaps appropriate that he be given this level of support, since his preparation prior to engaging in his one year of classroom teaching at Northeast High School was rather minimal. Danza’s support met some of the guidelines for effective mentoring: it seemed fairly structured, his mentor was given appropriate time to mentor and teach, and he had time to plan/collaborate with others (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

His experience left us wondering what novice teachers who had completed a traditional teacher preparation programs could have accomplished with a much more rigorous preparation program behind them and the same level of support provided to Danza—a coach, and perhaps a film crew—during their experiences.

**What Might Have Been Different**

We both wonder what might have been different had Danza gone through a formal teacher education program rather than a short boot-camp-like training. However, because he did not spend time in teacher education courses and varied field experiences, he (not surprisingly) struggled mightily both to be and to feel successful even though he was given a solid support structure. In this, he reinforced our belief in college/university-based teacher education, which would have prepared him for many areas in which he struggled (and wrote about): designing literacy lessons and units, creating quizzes and tests, handling student misbehavior, etc.

For example, Danza’s high school, like many others around the country, was comprised of a wide range of students who came from all over the world and spoke many languages. In their article “Reframing Literacy Practices for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students in U.S. Schools,” He, Vetter, and Fairbanks use the notion of cosmopolitanism to bring out how “students and teachers need to develop a critical appreciation of Englishes in language teaching and learning practices that emphasize critical awareness, examination, and language use in both local and global settings” (p. 351). Because Danza missed out on coursework that would have covered this topic, he struggled with how to interact with some of his students and their parents/guardians.
Closing

Danza is a well-known television and movie star and through telling his story he reinforces what Berry, Cavallaro, Vázquez, DeJesús, and García (this issue) claim: “No singular truth resides in one or another story; each one reflects the complexity of community experiences, and together they show us the different ways in which individuals occupy their positions, understand their community, and see themselves” (p. 295). Thus, as Bach and Weinstein claim, “In the unlikely figure of Tony Danza, English educators might find an ally and someone who, perhaps unintentionally, demonstrates the challenges of our profession to the public in ways we in the academy are not always able to do” (p. 302).¹

Note

¹. We have to note that we were disappointed that Danza suggested that readers support teacher development by donating to alternative programs, which he named specifically, while leaving out college/university teacher preparation programs.

References


