

Prologue

HOW TO BE A TEACHER (Part One)

Open the door and walk in. Remain standing. Or maybe you should sit down?

This crowded rectangular room is yours. Right now it has twenty-six chairs with attached desks, a chalkboard, and early-afternoon sunlight pouring through windows onto the tabletops. In a moment, the room will also have twenty-six fifth-graders whose names are printed on the attendance ledger: Richard, Catherine, Anthony, Eddie, Varouna, Giyoo, Awad, Donna Ruth, Tyrone, Ellie, Enoyat, Leticia, Charlotte, Karim, Shanota, Messima, Saundra, Dorota, Ivan, Connie, Illeana, Yasu, Reba, Jumanah, Candice, and Shahroukh.

Your job, according to the state where you happen to live and the school district that pays your salary, is to make sure that, sixty minutes from now, the students have grasped the concept of “rate.” Specifically, if a car is going 55 miles per hour, how far will it have traveled after 15 minutes? How about after 2 hours? By the end of the year, your students should also have mastered fractions, negative numbers, linear functions, long division, ratio and proportion, and exponents. You’re also supposed to teach

them to become good citizens, subtly knitting into your lesson (yes, this math lesson) the principles of democracy. In whatever time is left, remember to help the children vault over any hurdles life has thrown them—racial, economic, parental, intellectual. You must bend reality closer to the dream of the American meritocracy.

Ready?

The door bursts open. With the residual energy of recess, they surge through the coat room, rearranging their clothes and jostling for sips from the water fountain. Here comes Varouna. She is from Kenya, lithe and dark skinned. Giyoo is from Japan. He is 4 feet tall and barely speaks. Catherine is studious and has her hair in braids. Eddie, freckle faced and hyperactive, takes his seat in the back. Tyrone just moved from South Carolina and prefers not to pay attention. He sits closer to you, in the front.

Don't just stand there. Teach something!

Richard sits near the front, next to Tyrone. They're both new to the school this year. On the first day, Richard introduced himself and volunteered that math was his "worse subject."

Half an hour later, the students are all askew, murmuring and chatting with each other. They've been working on a math problem you wrote on the chalkboard while they were out at recess.

Condition: A car is going 55 mph. Make a diagram to show where it will be

- A. after an hour*
- B. after 2 hours*
- C. after half an hour*
- D. after 15 minutes*

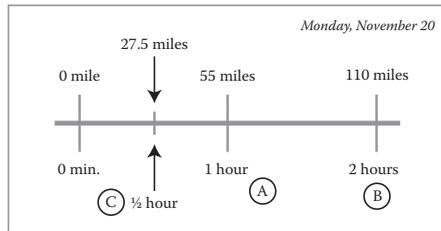
Consider how to get everyone to quiet down. Next to you, on a table, is a small bell. Do you ring it? Perhaps you should raise one

hand and put the other hand over your mouth. Or what about that old line? *When my hand goes up, your mouths go shut.* You go for the bell. Thankfully, it works, and you launch a discussion.

Soon, fifteen minutes have passed, and class is almost over. So far, the students have worked on the problem in small groups of four to six. You have circulated around, peering over shoulders at their varying degrees of success, deciding when to talk and when to nod and when to hold in a laugh, letting it shake inside your chest when a student does something hilarious and adorable. And all of you, together, have reasoned your way through A, B, and C.

On the chalkboard, you've drawn a straight horizontal line, with distance represented on top and time underneath. On the far right is a crosshatch for 110 miles and 2 hours (B); halfway in the middle there is another for 55 miles and 1 hour (A); then there's one more, smaller, crosshatch halfway between 0 and 55: 27.5 miles and $\frac{1}{2}$ hour (C).

It looks like this:



Point to the board. Ask: Can anyone show where the solution to part D should go on the diagram?

Hands shoot up. Then, right in front of you, Richard adds his. You know enough about the others to have an idea of how they understand “rate,” or at least an idea of what they will be able to do with the problem. Richard, though, is something of a mystery. After the “worse subject” speech, you collected his math note-

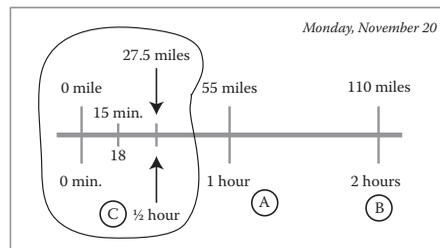
book at the end of each week along with the other students'. But he wrote very little in it and only rarely raised his hand. Now he's volunteering to answer the most difficult part of the question—and you have no idea what he'll say.

What do you do?

Look at the clock; only 10 minutes left. Do you have time to risk a wrong answer? What about Richard? What if he isn't even close? If he's wrong, will he, an African American boy in a racially diverse classroom, shut down and hesitate to participate again? On the other hand, what message does it send to the others *not* to call on him?

"Richard," you say. He stands up, turning his notebook so he can see it from the board, and walks slowly to the front. Everyone waits, silent.

D: Show where the car going 55 mph will be after 15 minutes. Reaching for the miles section, on top, he rests the chalk halfway between 0 and 27.5. "15 minutes," he writes. Below, between 0 minutes and $\frac{1}{2}$ hour, he writes, "18." The board looks like this:



"Ummm," he says. "Eighteen."

Huh? Not only has he put time (15 minutes) where distance should go, but he has also proposed another number, 18, that makes no sense. A car going 55 miles an hour could not travel 18 miles in 15 minutes. And what reasonable computation would get you to 18? Not dividing 27.5 by 2, or 110 by 4, certainly, and not anything else related to the numbers on the board either.

What do you do?

You could quickly correct his time-distance reversal, not drawing too much attention to the mistake, on the assumption that it was a careless error. But what if it wasn't? You decide to assume nothing. "Eighteen miles," you venture, "or eighteen minutes?"

Clarify: "You wrote 18 next to minutes. Did you mean 18 miles and 15 minutes?" Richard nods, erases, and rewrites. Now the numbers are flipped: 18 miles, 15 minutes. But there's still that mystifying 18.

What do you do? Should you say, simply and directly, *That's wrong*? What does Richard mean, anyway?

Look at the class. Ask: Can anybody explain what Richard was thinking?

Another jolt of hands. Try to memorize who is asking to speak, and who is making a fan out of his pencils. Remember, you aren't just teaching Richard; the other twenty-five need to be educated too. What are they thinking? Are they learning?

Check the time. Just a few minutes left, but this could take much longer. Maybe better to give up; there's always tomorrow. But look at Richard, who still believes 18 makes sense, who doesn't know what he doesn't know.

Call on studious Catherine. "Ummmmm," she says. "I disagree with that." She pauses. Then, "Ummm . . ."

Think. She wants to give the correct answer, yet you said, can anybody explain what *Richard* was thinking, not can anybody talk about her own idea. Catherine seems to know she's out of order. That "ummm . . ."—she's eyeing you, looking for permission to disobey.

Do you grant it? Maybe you should. Nod, and the right answer will come—clear and concise, knowing Catherine, and just in time for the end of class. But look at Richard. If quick Catherine, a white girl, jumps in with the save, what effect will that have on

him? On the other hand, if you don't let Catherine continue, how will that affect the rest of the class? In either case, what will the class learn about race, gender, and—oh yeah, math?

On Monday, November 20, 1989, Magdalene Lampert, a stoic, watchful woman with straight blonde hair clipped to the back of her head and more than a decade of teaching experience, made a snap decision. She pointed to the 18. "Does anyone *agree* with this answer?" she asked.

The common view of great teachers is that they are born that way. Like Michelle Pfeiffer's ex-marine in *Dangerous Minds*, Edward James Olmos's Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*, and Robin Williams's "carpe diem"—intoning whistler in *Dead Poets Society*, legendary teachers transform thugs into scholars, illiterates into geniuses, and slackers into bards through brute charisma. Teaching is their calling—not a matter of craft and training, but alchemical inspiration.

Bad teachers, conversely, are portrayed as deliberately sadistic (as with the Sue Sylvester character on *Glee*), congenitally boring (Ben Stein's nasal droner in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*), or ludicrously dim-witted (Mr. Garrison from *South Park*). These are the tropes of a common narrative, a story I've come to call the "Myth of the Natural-Born Teacher."

Even in the rare cases where fictional teachers appear to improve—as happens in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, the novel-turned-film, in which a bland schoolteacher named Mr. Chips comes to "sparkle"—the change is an ugly duckling-style unmasking of hidden pizzazz rather than the acquisition of new skill. Others think Mr. Chips has become a "new man," but in fact, we are told, he has only peeled back a "creeping dry rot of pedagogy" to reveal the "sense of humor" that "he had always had."

The idea of the natural-born teacher is embedded in thou-

FURTHER READING. A discussion of how to be a good teacher sounds a little narrow and probably not very relevant to most of us. Few of us want to be a school teacher, instructing children in some narrow academic subject or other, which is what we overwhelmingly associate with the word "teacher", the person in a rather frayed jacket in front of the class, the type who bored us rigid for long stretches of our early years. However, teaching is far from being something that we only need to learn if we're contemplating a career in education. Considered properly, teaching "by which we mean, the v Are you a good language teacher? Are you an awesome one? This post is all about how to connect with your students and become a teacher that they'll remember. But even if you're an amazing teacher, you can probably think of a language teacher who wasn't so great. This may come as a shocker to many of us, but being an expert in the language you teach doesn't necessarily translate to teaching well! While your language acumen is undoubtedly crucial, it's only one prerequisite to awesome teaching. Just Because You Can Speak a Language, Doesn't Mean You Can Teach It Well. Let's do a quick example. Think back to one of your favorite language teachers from your past. What was it about them that you remembered and adored so fondly?