

# TAKING ON THE WORLD

by

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*Students are not much different than their adult counterparts when it comes to their perspective of the world and their place in it. It's especially easy for a student to go through his or her entire day without one reminder of what's going on outside of school and its limited social circle.*

## *First Challenge: Uninformed Students*

**T**his year, while attempting to teach writing and novels to eleventh grade students of all academic and social qualities, I was struck with what I thought was a moment of brilliance—I would have the students write their own war fiction, including all the characteristics of typical war fiction (confrontation with death, choice of whether to act or suffer, etc.), only their piece would be related to anything that happened on or after September 11th.

I thought I had finally found a relevant writing assignment. Piquing the interest of students, particularly those who informed me on the first day of school that they were only in staying in school until they could drop out, was a daily challenge and source of frustration. They could write about anything—being a soldier, a family member of someone who was deployed, a flight attendant who doesn't want to go back to work. I gave them some suggestions but allowed them to choose anything of interest. Most students were excited, but some looked panicked. "What if we don't know anything about what's going on?" they said.

I was surprised to discover that some of these students, juniors in high school, did not know where our troops were, what the fight was theoretically about, what previous engagements we had been in between Vietnam and now, and did not know what the letters P.O.W. meant. And this was after Jessica Lynch had been rescued and returned!

### *Second Challenge: Apathy*

Surely for any 17-year-old to be this far removed from society stems from negligence on the part of the school, the community, the parents, and the students themselves. Our community had not organized any rallies, held any protests, or sponsored any collections. I knew the history department was trying hard to incorporate the material, but it was too easy for students to just ignore what they didn't want to hear.

There were students who were aware of the situation, many of whom had a family member involved in some capacity. However, I wanted to communicate to the students that being a citizen means requires carrying material from all classes outside the classroom door. I didn't want to make them pro-war or pro-peace or get into the politics of the situation. I just wanted them to care about something that exceeded the boundaries of the two highways and the Susquehanna River. But I didn't want them to care just because I told them they should, or even pretend to care just to humor me.

The two most significant obstacles with my classroom students were a lack of knowledge and a lack of interest. Most of the students either did not know what was going on, and/or didn't care what was going on. This is hardly a revelation to anyone who has spent time in a public school classroom, and although I was appalled and frustrated, my biggest shock was going to come from outside of the classroom.

### *Third Challenge: Service Learning—Just a Requirement*

I saw an opportunity, as a first-year advisor for National Honor Society, to reach the previous goals of opening the students' lives to the rest of the world. While structuring service projects for the members, of which they are required to do at least two a year, I wanted to encourage them to get beyond the traditional volunteering at libraries or nursing

homes. These are worthy activities but they also needed to do something to address the solipsism that infected everyone in the community.

I discovered a project that seemed perfect. It was a United Way drive to collect goods to send to service people overseas, which was sponsored by a local television station. I encouraged not only the NHS members, but also everyone in the school to participate. I selected it because it wasn't political; it was just a way to let those overseas know they were being thought of back home. Less than half of our members participated, and the person who brought the most items in was not in the NHS, but rather was a student whose family was in a bad enough financial state to receive canned goods during our food drive.

I was amazed and so disappointed at the way we allow our students to just cruise along through life with so little emphasis on empathy. I now realized that even the NHS students, who have to meet a character and service requirement, still fall short. I encouraged all members to come to me if they had any ideas for community service. They could set up their own, like tutoring, shoveling sidewalks for shut-ins, etc. or complete one of ours. One student organized a coat and blanket drive for homeless people in New York City, which her church was actually sponsoring.

Another boy was working towards becoming an eagle scout, and needed help staining a community pavilion. We allowed students to participate in projects sponsored by other clubs, such as a school supply drive for Bosnian children, hygiene kits for refugees, or a family fun day. I set up opportunities at the elementary schools for reading, games, or an Easter egg hunt. The students could work at a school carnival or help the police wrap presents for Toys for Tots. The public swimming pool requested students to help paint murals or just get it cleaned up to open.

## *An Action Plan*

Next year I will be teaching in Schuylkill Haven Area School District. These past experiences will help me as I plan a different direction for the future. In my new setting, I will be working with seniors while they complete a senior project, which sometimes requires a community service element. Quite possibly, the same challenges will arise: apathy, ignorance, disrespect, and poor judgment. There is nothing

that school districts and teachers can do that will immediately solve every aspect of this problem. But we can develop a plan for the future.

First, we need to model good citizenship if we expect students to display good citizenship. As mentioned earlier, I can't expect students to be oriented toward service to the community if they haven't seen adults model these behaviors. If parents are apathetic and self-absorbed, students will likely be the same. I will have to demonstrate my interest in the community and other parts of the world in a way the students can observe.

Second, I will take the time to have every student define what he or she thinks community service *is*. This is the kind of topic that is definitely worth discussing as a group, because it will give the students the perspectives of at least a handful of other people. The two best NHS projects my previous students completed were those they initiated and organized themselves; their genuine interest made these projects successful.

Third, I would like to bring community members into the classroom to offer students opportunities to become actively involved. This kind of mentoring is an excellent way to expose the students to positive modeling by adult citizens.

Completing the required service project may be the only chance my students get to be a productive member of the community. An added bonus is the feeling of self-worth a student can develop by being a part of something bigger than their usual scope. We can't take our students around the world. But we can bring the world to them as they meet it in their own community.

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