The “Hot Seat” Activity
Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*

Today, I hosted my second teaching round, which helped me, again, to inform and reflect on my teaching practice. Similar to my first round, I was teaching Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* to sophomore students, although this time, unlike my first round, my period two Goddard Scholars were the students that participated in this round. It has been a great experience re-teaching my unit “Emotional Truth and Storytelling in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*,” as it has allowed for me to improve and tweak aspects of the unit from the first time around. Furthermore, it has been beneficial to observe the difference in pacing between teaching this text, first, to college students, and then again, to a class of Goddard Scholars. The experience of today’s class has helped me to better understand my students’ participation and engagement in class time and particular activities and my role in facilitating their learning, in order to improve and better our classroom experiences together.

As mentioned, today’s class was one of the final days working on our unit with O’Brien’s fictional text. We completed O’Brien’s text last week in class, and this past week, we have been continuing to analyze the text by engaging in projects and activities and writing essays. We will be finishing up the unit tomorrow by presenting and sharing students’ graffiti art projects, and today, students will participate in the hot seat activity. The hot seat activity typically works in that a couple of students are chosen to be in the hot seats—meaning these chosen students will take on the personas of characters from a text—and all other students will ask questions of those characters. In order to ensure students felt prepared to participate in today’s activity, all students on the hot seat were alerted last week of their roles, and every student brainstormed three
questions for the five designated characters from *The Things They Carried*. I chose five students to play one of following five characters from the text: Tim O’Brien (as author and protagonist), Mary Anne, Azar, Rat Kiley, and Norman Bowker. Together, all of the characters represented many of the different perspectives that the text offers, allowing for students to further analyze the characters and their roles in *The Things They Carried*. Thus, today’s lesson focused on analyses and deeper understandings. My learning goals for today’s lesson included:

(1.) Students will be able to use their knowledge of the text and its characters to analyze the motivations for the actions of each character.

(2.) Students will know how to use their critical thinking skills both to formulate and answer questions about the five characters in the hot seats.

(3.) Students will be able to practice their speaking skills, both impromptu by answering questions in the hot seat and planned by asking pre-written questions.

(4.) Students will be able to discuss and analyze major themes of the text through the lenses of particular (pre-designated) characters.

The concerns that I noted prior to beginning today’s class included designed students for the hot seats being absent, and the constraints of time. Since we had never completed this activity before, I was unsure of whether or not it would take the time I allotted, so I was sure to over-plan and have additional activities, should we have finished early. Overall, now looking back at the class, it went quite well and as planned.

In order to better my teaching and the experience of the students’ learning, I try to incorporate an exit slip into each and every class. For today’s class, students finished the following sentences: “The best part of today’s class was…” and “The most important thing I learned was…” Their exit slips were quite positive and made it clear that they both learned from and enjoyed the
hot seat activity. For example, one student noted that today’s activity helped to “facilitate essay writing,” which illustrated that he more deeply analyzed the text in a way that will be useful in completing his final eight-paragraph essay for the unit. Student engagement throughout the lesson was also telling in terms of how effective the activity was in reaching the learning goals and in regards to my rounds questions. All but one student asked questions of the characters in the hot seats and while students did use their prepared questions, they used the spontaneous questions of others to ask their own spontaneous questions. I was glad that students had their own list of questions that they had prepared prior to the activity because it seemed to help the quieter and shier students participate and ask questions.

Most of my round questions asked for those that attended my round to observe student engagement, use of prior knowledge, depth of understanding, and how their comfort levels impacted their participation in the activity. I received feedback noting that there were a handful of students that asked philosophical and deep questions, illustrating a deeper analysis and understanding of the text. I was also told that my students used some of their vocabulary words (they learn ten new words a week and the words are taken out of the text that they are reading) in the questions that they asked. I did notice students using their vocabulary words, but it was great to hear that others observed this as well. It alerted me that students have understood and truly learning the vocabulary words they have been taught. Furthermore, it was observed that students were incredibly comfortable in the classroom, and this was also evident in the video of today’s round. Most students did not hesitate to ask questions and all students in the hot seats appeared to be comfortable and generally, did a nice job answering questions asked of them.

While I did predict some challenges that I might have had during today’s lesson, both time and absences did not cause any issue with the exertion of the activity. In fact, none of my period
two students were absent so everyone was able to participate! A piece of feedback that I did receive in terms of how to improve today’s hot seat activity included pushing the quieter students to ask more questions of their fellow students in the hot seats. One was to help all students participate next time is not to allow the more chatty students to ask more questions (of the character in the hot seat) until everyone else has asked a question. Another recommendation that an attendee of my round provided me with was to move through the seating arrangement (“U” shaped) and have each student in the circle ask a question. These were definitely good pieces of advice to keep in mind for next time I facilitate the hot seat activity in one of my classes.

Ultimately, the whole experience of today’s round was useful because it provided me with more information on my teaching and how my students are enjoying the class, as well as what their “take away” is. My yearlong goals for all students are to become avid readers and writers, and each unit and therefore, lesson, should be enjoyable for students. My hopes are that students can learn the content in a way that is fun and engaging and in turn, they will learn to enjoy reading and writing. I was pleased to see students having fun in their English II class, while also learning and further analyzing the class text. The hot seat was generally successful in that most students participated, but it was also informative and helpful in terms of ensuring that all students participate even more next time we complete the hot seat activity—or any collaborative group activity, for that matter. I hope that next time, in the future, when we complete an activity similar to the hot seat activity, my period two students are able to enjoy and learn just as much. Overall, today’s class was incredibly student-centered and I truly acted as merely a facilitator for the activity; this only reaffirms the idea that the best teaching and learning experiences are focused mostly on the students and their participation, engagement, and facilitation.