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Professor Heather Roberts

Teaching & Learning III

April 14, 2016

Round Reflection #4, Spring 2016

In my final round visit of the year, I took another trip to University Park Campus School down the road from my home at Claremont, this time to visit my friend Laura Matthew. Ms. Matthew teaches 8th grade English at UPCS. I found it fitting that this should be my last round of the year, as Laura and I have known each other since our first days as first-year students at Clark. She and I have taken at least twenty classes together, mostly English and education courses.

Ms. Matthew's focus today was on "Moving towards Independent Work." To accomplish this goal, she constructed a lesson based in the "Save the Last Word" style conversations. Essentially, students were tasked with finding quotes from Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and explaining how they enlighten aspects of character and motivations. Students had a chunk of time to work in small groups to complete the activity; giving her students the independence and trust to work on the activity for a lengthy period of time would help them figure out ways to engage with classmates. Ms. Matthew showed today her emphasis on student-centered classes, which has always been one of her strengths.

Students began by entering class and partaking in a Mindful Minute. This minute of meditative silence at the start of the period happens in many UPCS classes, and it almost always helps start class with a calmer, more focused mindset. After, students got into groupings based on discussion roles they had selected during a previous lesson. They then received envelopes with instructions for class. Students essentially had forty minutes to have a discussion in groups

of four where they pulled quotes from Alexie's young adult novel relative to what Junior, the narrator, says. Then, they were required to each go around the circle to talk about the chosen quotes before the group member who initially opened discussion gets *the last word*. When finished, students had the option for an additional challenge, where they brainstormed discussion questions for the next lesson's conversation.

Overall, Laura's lesson excelled at getting students to be the center of conversation, since they were the ones leading it. I appreciated that she spent so much time teaching them appropriate speaking and listening skills. One student in my group, though not always focused, did contribute to politely reminding group members that they needed to stay on task. Groups tended to know what they needed to accomplish, though at times some members needed reminding. I was happy to see that these students have shown enough poise this year to be able to even think about having self-sustained conversations for an entire period. Not many middle school groups can do that effectively.

My one suggestion during post-round was something that my own mentor teacher had instilled in me, that sometimes a sense of urgency gets kids working harder and with more focus. Students did not seem to need the full forty minutes in the groups I observed, often spending extra time on unrelated conversation. I think telling groups that they only have twenty minutes to work puts gentle pressure on them to stay on task. Worst case scenario, a teacher can then extend time if students can truly benefit from it. Alternatively, scaffolding conversation more and giving more talking points could extend a conversation to the forty minute mark in these small groups.