

I'm Your Favorite Teacher

My confidence precedes me. Raised in a family of Guyanese immigrants who came to the States for higher education, I walk around believing I can do just about anything if given enough time. I stopped wanting to be a teacher after studying abroad—convinced I would get up on a soapbox every day and preach about the injustices of the world instead of getting my students to help remedy them. When I told my college educational studies advisor this, he laughed, told me I was being dramatic. Of course I was—I'm a performance poet—but I wasn't wrong.

I graduated college without my teaching certificate but with a self-designed minor in the pedagogy of poetry. I don't want to be a teacher, I told myself, because I belong on the streets, fighting for what I believe. And yet, I can't escape teaching. There's an addiction that forms when a student gives a research presentation on how serial killers disrupt their own pursuit of the American Dream, or when a student writes a poem about overcoming his suicidal ideation through his exposure to poetry. During a forced choice discussion about the right to safety in the case of the Stand Your Ground law, we all discovered that in every instance in which safety is compromised, one party's right to safety is protected while the other party's is violated—determining what's right and what's wrong is wholly based on perspective. That was a moment for me, a realization that I could do this. I could be a teacher.

Every class I've ever taught—whether a community workshop, English composition course, or Writers in the Schools (WITS) creative writing class—I teach with the belief that I have no idea what I'm doing. I can write a strong lesson plan, act engaging—but I walk into every class with no delusions of grandeur or failure. I put on my heels, pour myself some tea, and just start.

Teaching is not about expertise. It isn't about how many pedagogy books you've read or written, or how many classes you've taught. It's not even about the teacher. Teaching is asking

questions, validating responses, and digging deeper into the perspectives of students. My students tell me my class is their favorite—but not because they can write about whatever they want or because we watch Cartoon Network as homework. In addition to that, I want to know what they think, what they believe, where they want to go and how they plan to do it. They love my class because I ask questions I don't have answers for; because we read, write and make decisions *together*—and that's what a classroom is supposed to do. We spend most of our time discussing the purpose of language, how being precise makes a difference between being seen as a bully or the Devil's Advocate. At the beginning of every term, I always introduce myself: "My name is Ms. Prince and I'm going to be your favorite teacher." Everyone laughs, but I'm serious. My teaching methods are based heavily in my slam poet persona—excessive hubris, high heels, and eye contact. The rest I make up as I go along. This makes my teaching philosophy simple: *let's move mountains and blast walls and light fires because the world is broken and if you're taking my class, you're looking for a toolbox and some super glue.*

English composition or creative writing will not stop genocide, cure cancer, or bring our soldiers home. But the way I teach these classes—with genuine interest in how my students define humanity, with constant questioning of that definition through poetry and prose—I turn ordinary students into self-aware learners who frame arguments, identify inconsistencies, and present solutions to the world's problems. I'm not always successful—not all my students want to improve the world; some don't even want to come to class. The students who decide they don't want to help fix what's broken at the very least learn that about themselves, and I ask for nothing more. As it says in my syllabus, "Most importantly, you will be exposed to people, perspectives, and ideas that differ, align and drastically challenge your sense of self—and hopefully you will leave well-read, well-informed, and just plain well."