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## How I Became an Unfair Teacher

It's easy to forget how tiny, arbitrary, everyday decisions can shape a kid's school experience.

BEN ORLIN | JUN 2 2014, 10:00 AM ET



Warner Bros.

In third grade, I got back a spelling quiz with red ink next to the word *kitchen*. I asked the teacher what my mistake was, and she pointed to my sloppy handwriting: "That *r* should be a *c*."

"That is a *c*!" I said. "Why would I spell 'kitchen' with an *r*?"

"You tell me," the teacher said. She strolled off.

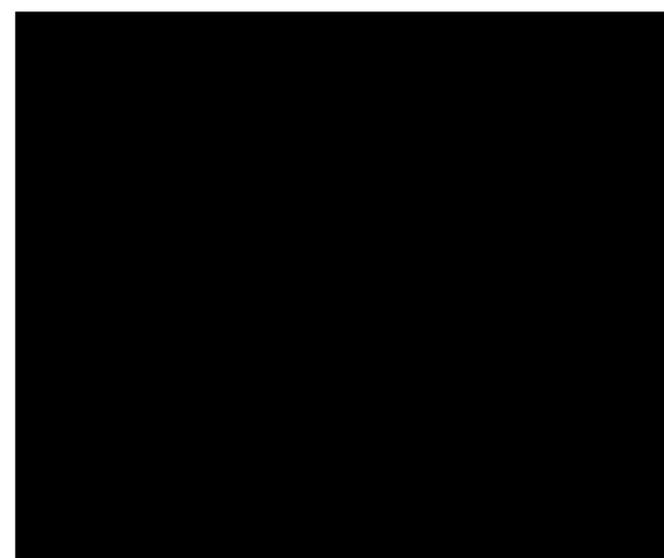
That episode stands out among my memories of the year. More than sculpting dragons and writing Halloween stories, more than field trips, math games, and girls I had crushes on, what I remember most vividly is this unfairness. Never

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mind how trivial and meaningless it was.

It was a c, darn it.

When I became a teacher, I became preoccupied with the enduring legacies of school. I began wondering why we forget so much (quick—what’s a logarithm?) and why we remember what we do. I thought back to my own strongest recollections and quizzed my friends about theirs. A few themes emerged: teachers’ rambling anecdotes, cute lab partners, getting away with mischief.

But most of all, people remember injustices. False accusations of cheating. Getting singled out randomly for scolding. Points deducted on a cheap technicality. As a teacher myself, I vowed I’d do better, that I’d run a fair classroom where every student got a voice and a straight deal.

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### Relearning the Skill of Patience

In October of my second year teaching, the principal called me into his office to meet with a tenth grader. Eyes averted, in a low and quivering voice, the student told me, “I feel like you always get on my case.”

“I’m sorry if you feel singled out,” I said. “When a group is distracted, I tell everyone to get to work.”

“No,” she said forcefully, straining for words. “If

there’s like four people talking, you always call my name, and then tell us to get back to work.”

To my surprise, I realized it was true: The same morning, I’d done exactly that. And two days earlier, too. I’d been experimenting with group work in her class, and I hadn’t yet calibrated my mental detector for “noisy and productive” versus “noisy and distracted.” I knew it was a problem. For weeks, I’d been spinning like a weather vane, letting the class slide out of control and then snapping at them. Or so I thought. It now seemed that I wasn’t snapping at them—too often, I was snapping at her.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said at last. “I’m sorry about that. I guess I notice you more than others because I know you’re a strong math student, and you’re struggling in the class. So I worry.”

“But I’m trying,” she said, close to tears, and I realized I’d made a deeper mistake. I’d chalked up her lack of success to apathy, distractions, low effort—anything that would put the ball in her court rather than mine. With my attention split a hundred ways—the seniors flailing in calculus, the bio class I lacked the expertise to teach, the logistical tangles of running a homeroom—I’d been marking F’s on her quizzes without really considering the name at the top or how my class must look through her eyes.

I apologized again—sincerely, this time—and spent that night wondering how I’d been so oblivious to my own small cruelties.

The asymmetries of the classroom are intense. With each teacher responsible for a hundred students or more, the typical kid occupies a teacher’s thoughts for—at best—a minute or two per day. But each student only has a handful of teachers. Every instructor looms large in her world, wielding power over her days, via class periods; her nights, via homework; and her future, via grades. She spends much of her time thinking about the teacher’s demands, the teacher’s expectations, the teacher’s preferences and inconsistencies.



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## When a teacher focuses attention on a particular student, it comes with the heat and intensity of a spotlight.

This was a frightening realization for me. Classroom lessons may slip quickly through students' fingers, but the classroom experience lingers in memory. Each teacher offers students a different model of authority and justice. We set our own standards of fairness and sometimes fail to honor them. A teacher swings a heavy club, and we can leave big, purple bruises if we're not careful.

Ideally, we'd consider every student's perspective, every moment of the day. But that effort is difficult with the limits of our time, energy, and imagination. In practice, it helps to adopt rules of thumb, rehearsed habits of fairness that can spare students undue suffering—and keep us from living on as demons in their memories of school.

My biggest rule is a familiar cliché: Always ask before drawing conclusions. It seems simple, but it's a defense against instinct. Often, I think I know what's going on: That student is dozing off after a late night of video games; that kid is copying answers from the back of the book; those two are giggling and gossiping instead of working. But the real story is sometimes innocent: He's dozing because he had a shift at the family store last night; she's only paging through the index, not the answers; and those two are actually giggling over the fact that I wrote "grape" instead of "graph" on the board.

My own memories of petty student frustrations should have taught me what a wrecking ball a teacher can be. But they didn't. The understanding came only after carelessly knocking a few of my own students to the ground, and then working—slowly, purposefully—to help them back up.

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**BEN ORLIN** is a high school teacher and tutor in Oakland, California. He contributes regularly to [Math with Bad Drawings](#).

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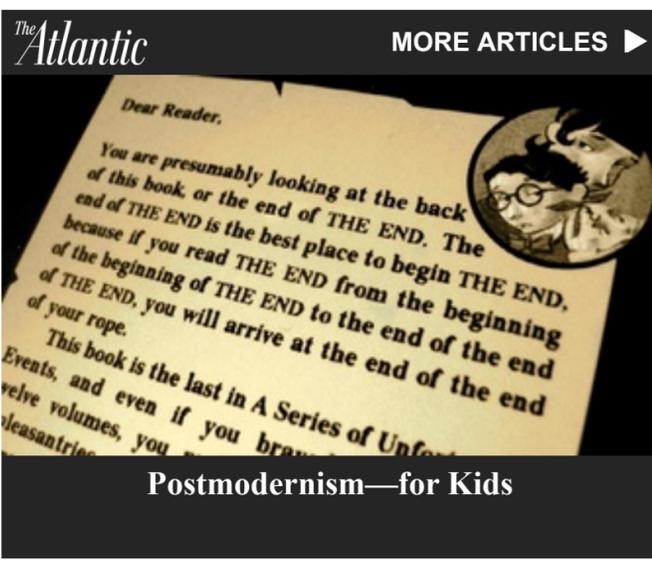
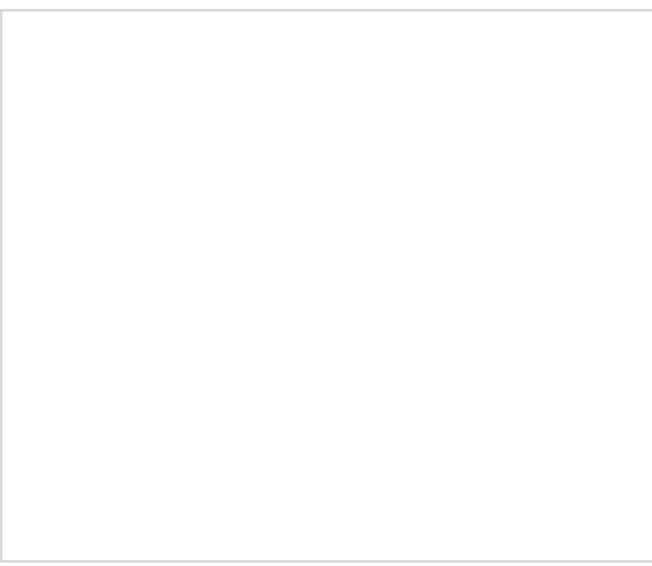
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