Tuesday, December 15, 2009

Making Students Cry for the Holidays

In honor of the holidays, I made a student cry today. I say it's not my fault. You tell me if you think otherwise.

This is Finals Week at my school. And just to reiterate for newcomers -- this is college. I have a nice, streamlined system for collecting final papers from students: I sit in the lino- leum paradise of my office, and students have a three-hour window to stop by and turn stuff in. They hand the essays over, I praise them for their outstanding ability to meet a deadline, they lie and say our class was the best one ever!, and I wish them luck in their future endeavors. Then they scramble to get out the door and begin the process of wiping our class from their memory banks. Probably with a quick succession of jager bombs.

So I'm sitting in my office today, collecting papers, watching the clock. Everyone has until noon. I've told students about today's deadline weeks ahead of time: "I'm leaving at noon. Don't be late. This paper is worth 25% of your grade. Don't be late. I won't be checking my email later. I won't accept anything late. Don't be late. I'm hardcore about deadlines and you know it. Remember The Usual Suspects?" I say to them. "Remember Keyser Soze, the guy who disappears without a trace? At noon on the 15th, I'm gonna Keyser Soze my ass outta here, and not reappear until Spring Semester."

It's a whole speech. I give it every year, and at this point it's honed to perfection.

Here's the thing: One student always blows it. Inevitably, one student always misses the deadline and takes a zero on the last paper. Every semester, I predict who it might be. Sometimes I'm right, sometimes I'm not.

This year, I predicted it would be Joey McFakeName.

Joey is a good guy. He's smart. He's a good writer. Joey McFakeName's main problem this semester has been procrastination. He was late to class a lot, missed deadlines, failed to follow instructions, etc. Yet he showed an enthusiasm for everything we talked about in class. Yet he wore a cool fedora.

At 11:57 this morning, I look at my watch and realize I haven't seen Joey. Students have been filing in and out all morning, handing me their papers and wearing expressions that I can only liken to that of the pilgrims when they gave the pox-infected blankets to the Indians: For you! No, really, it's a gift! No, it won't give you diarrhea, back pain and pustules! Joey hasn't shown up yet, and we're down to the wire.

I take no joy in giving students zeros. I like Joey. I think Joey is cool and on the side of Good. I have no doubt that a heart of gold beats beneath that Bob Marley T-shirt and second-hand blazer.

At 11:59, Joey shows up. He's sweaty and breathing hard. I'm relieved until Joey says, "I, uh, have a problem."
No, Joey! No no no no! Come on, Man, sack Up! Be All You Can Be! Make It Happen! Bring It To The Table! Or some other combination of manly exhortation phrases! Just show me you can rise above your own self-imposed limitations and be the smart guy that I know you are!

"My paper's not quite done yet," Joey says. He's staring at his shoes.

"Joey," I say, "what happened?"

"I procrastinated." He's a senior. He's probably 21. But when he says this, he sounds ashamed, like it's third grade and he forgot his styrofoam model of the solar system for Science Day.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear it. I'm about to pack up and leave."

"I know you don't accept late work --" he starts to say, and I want to stop him right there. If you know, I think, then shouldn't we be done here?

But he continues: "--but I was wondering if maybe I could email it to you today. I can have it done in like two hours."

Two more hours. That's all he wants. This perfectly nice kid in the goofy hat who's maintained a great attitude in a class that seniors usually hate to take. Who's taken his own lackluster performance in stride with a shrug and a smile all semester, knowing that in the big picture of the universe, school isn't really all that galactically important.

He was never bothered by receiving zeros for past missed work. But if he gets a zero for this final paper, he can't pass the class.

I tell him I'm sorry, but no. Of course. Teachers (and pirates, incidentally) are very strict about deadlines. We have to be. It's not about punishing students who are late, it's about maintaining fairness for the other students who get work in on time. I say this to Joey McFakeName. I explain that it's not about coming down on him -- it's about fairness for everyone. I tell him that I think he's smart, a good writer, a good guy, but if I accepted late work from him, I just couldn't justify it to my other 93 students who worked hard to make the deadline.

As I explain all this, I'm aware of two things: 1) My voice is sounding more and more like a father who tells his son, "I'm not angry, son. I'm just disappointed." 2) Joey's eyes are welling up.

Oh Crappity Crap.

It's hard enough when female students cry over stuff like this. When guys cry, it's even more uncomfortable and awful and awkward and I know there's probably something sexist about why it's worse when it's a guy but I can't help it and it's just BAD.

He stands there for a second and he's about to cry, and I'm sitting in my chair and we're both wishing for vortexes beneath us to open up and swallow us fast. Instead, Joey holds out his hand. He's got a sheet of paper. His voice cracks when he says, "I do have this," and when I take it, he turns and walks out quickly, gone.

I read the sheet, which has just a couple of typed paragraphs. It's a letter to me. It begins, "Dear Mr. Smith, I know that I didn't perform well in your class this semester, and that I continually failed to meet your expectations. But I wanted you to know that I think you're an outstanding teacher, and I can see how much my writing has improved under your instruction. I particularly appreciate how..."

ARRGGGHH. He won't write the final paper, but he'll craft an eloquent, grammatically flawless letter that now makes me feel like the biggest asshole in academia. Damn you, Joey McFakeName.

I'm still not going to let him email me his paper late. But now I have to feel shitty forever.

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So I'm All
The Didactic Pirate: Making Students Cry for the Holidays

8 comments:

melaniebooth December 15, 2009 at 3:55 PM
Wait - I have Joey in MY class! How is it that he's here and there, at the same time? (I *hate hate hate* final's week - this ALWAYS happens!)

Reply

Meg December 15, 2009 at 4:06 PM
You just did Joey the biggest favor of his ENTIRE LIFE, seriously.

Reply

Ruthie December 15, 2009 at 4:08 PM
LMAO DUDE. No. No feeling shitty or "I feel like an asshole" for you. THIS IS WHAT THE TERRORISTS WANT. DON'T GIVE IN!!

As a fellow procrastinator (AND a fellow senior...times. er...ok, I'm a super-senior now) who arrived at said deadlines at 11:58 BOTH times I took your class AND actually handed you a paper*, I feel no pity, nor should you. Kid should have sucked it up and stayed up all night like the rest of us procrastinators...your papers are hardly all-nighter's, especially considering that he's so "brilliant."

"If I recall correctly, I think I actually completed those final papers DURING that 3-hour window you established, and managed to book my butt over to your office, which was previously in that stupid no-man's-land of the Extended Studies building, a million years away from everything, all without missing you. I admit I had a small heart attack in the process of worrying about doing it, since I knew for 112% certain that much as you thought I was awesome you would not hesitate to leave me and my brilliant rhetorical analysis stranded without a pumpkin coach once that clock struck 12...but hey, I walked faster.

Heck, the kid could have pulled the relatively common stunt of "changing two paragraphs and then just reprinting the rough draft." Even if you gave him a 50% on the final paper, it's still a better grade than a zero. What a moron.

No tears, no guilt. Kid has to screw up and you are the King of Tough Love. Someone needs to do it, and hey, you're good at it! Besides, it makes me think of this!!

Though I have to admit, I am probably biased because I delight in the thought of making boys cry, period. Heh heh.

Reply

saragal December 15, 2009 at 6:22 PM
I agree with Ruthie and Meg. At this point in the semester, I always remind myself that I managed to earn a degree as a single mother with two little ones and no spousal support and still managed to make ALL of the deadlines and get 'A's in all of my classes. I know I'm smart, but not that smart. Yes. You are the king of tough love, and you are doing Mr. Cool Hat an excellent favor. No Crappity crap.

Reply

Benjamin Tomkins December 15, 2009 at 8:15 PM
Hold your ground. Never give an inch!

Reply

Aunt Becky December 16, 2009 at 11:16 AM
Awww. He CRIED for you! That's pretty outstanding. I never cried for a teacher. Did he give you a REASON why? Because my father was master of (I shit you not) wiping the hard drive--and my papers--off hours before my
classes and papers were due.

Talk about clusterfucks.

Somehow, I never needed an extension. Nor did I cry.

Reply

Janet  December 17, 2009 at 10:13 AM

Yeesh. That bites. For both of you. Does it mean the kid isn't going to graduate?

We had it easy when I taught Computer Science. Set up a job to (electronically, natch) accept final projects. Set the job to stop at noon. Once the job is stopped, the project cannot (not may not; CANnot) be turned in.

Hey, at least my way the students get to cry in the privacy of their own dorm rooms.

Reply

coloradobee  December 18, 2009 at 12:51 PM

Dear Pirate, do not forget your calling... "Didactic." Let me remind you again, of what it means: designed or intended to teach. And you taught that procrastinating prick that this is THE REAL WORLD. Maybe he'll silently thank you one day... or maybe he'll hate you forever. That's his problem. Happy holidays!

Reply