Student Shadowing: Day One

On September 4, 2003, I spent the day shadowing “Paul”. A seventeen-year-old senior, Paul is enrolled in learning support classes for both English and math. Formerly a student in a low-income school district, Paul believes that his difficulty in these subjects derives from inadequate preparation at his previous school. He states, “That’s why I’m in those math and English classes.” Since Paul is in two of my classes – Contemporary Problems and Sociology – it is important to consider modifications to class assignments that involve comprehensive reading and math skills. Some examples could include supplementary or guided notes, partner or group work, and alternative reading selections. It is also important to be in regular communication with Paul’s learning support teachers, as they will provide further insight into enhancing Paul’s learning in the classroom.

Throughout the day, Paul appears to be focused and on-task in his classes. For example, he actively listened to a class discussion during Contemporary Problems, as evidenced by consistent eye contact with the teacher or classmate that was speaking. Still, Paul seldom volunteers to participate during Contemporary Problems or any of his other classes. Although he tries to maintain a “low profile,” he readily provides an answer when directly called on by a teacher. This indicates that I should make an active attempt to increase Paul’s class participation by calling on him even when he does not volunteer. In this way, Paul will gain increased confidence in his understanding of the material and feel more comfortable in the classroom community, which is thus to the benefit of his overall learning experience.

I was fortunate to attend Paul’s English class where I was able to develop a better understanding of his individual learning process. During class, Paul took an inventory
that was designed to measure a student’s preferred learning style. The test determined that Paul is a “random learner,” which means that he likes to know the big picture of a topic before it is broken down into smaller parts. I believe that tests of this type are helpful in determining the individual learning styles of students and thus adapting classroom instruction to meet the needs of these different types of learners. These tests also provide an important reminder that teachers should always be creative in designing classroom instruction in order to maintain the interest and involvement of all of their students.

Lastly, it is important to note that Paul is an athlete – he is a member of the football team, and gym is his favorite class. As such, Paul likes to be in classes where he is able to be active and move around the room (E.g., woodshop). Additionally, Paul’s leadership skills on the football field spill over into the classroom, as he takes on an active role in small group activities. Group work thus seems to be more conducive to Paul’s learning style than either lecture or textbook instruction.

Overall, my observations suggest that I need to include plenty of opportunities to work in small learning groups during classroom instruction. I also need to encourage Paul to actively participate during whole class discussions and to become more comfortable with classroom interaction. Finally, I believe that students should have the opportunity to be active learners. As such, I want to plan lessons using varied instructional strategies so that students actually “do” the subject – in this way, I will hopefully be able to enhance Paul’s deep understanding of the subject material.
“Paul” is a seventeen-year-old, African-American student. He is a senior and also a football player – dressed for game day.

Contemporary Problems
- Late for 1st period because car broke down
- Homework assignment completed from previous day
- Follows class discussion of a recent court case
  - Maintains eye contact with person who is speaking
  - Shows interest in dialogue, but does not volunteer
    - Appears to be actively listening
- Some off-task behavior (shaking leg, cracking neck, wandering eyes)
- Followed teacher instruction to take notes
- Overall, classroom environment provides for minimal distractions
  - Paul sits in the front of the room
  - Less structured classroom environment
    - Open discussion and participation encouraged
    - Teacher sits to side of the students to facilitate discussion

English
- Learning support classroom
  - Paul sits by himself in the back of the room at a long table
    - Less focused on the teacher; attention seems to wander
      - Teacher tries to get Paul’s attention. She states, “Good morning, Paul.”
    - Feet on desk and plays with a water bottle
- Topic – What is grammar?
- Paul answers when called on, but does not volunteer
- Paul takes a pre-test and remains focused throughout
  - Continued to work on test after teacher told the class to stop, then hands it in
- Followed teacher direction well
- Learning inventory determined that Paul is a random learner
  - He likes to know the big picture

Math
- Learning support classroom
- Paul excuses himself from class at the start to use the bathroom
- Sits in the front of the room
- Answers questions when called on. Still does not volunteer
- Teacher says Paul looks “smirky” today and must be proud of accomplishments
  - Reference to Friday night football game
- Paul is prepared for class with homework assignment
- Takes notes when directed to do so
- Paul spends time playing with calculator while the teacher is instructing

**Paul seems to have minimal interest in his math and reading classes. He seems more engaged in his other classes but rarely participates. However, he seems to be able to take a more active role in a small group setting. His favorite class is gym – he likes to be physically active. He also likes Contemporary Problems because he does not have to work out of a textbook. He took Woodshop because he thought it would be easy. Paul was formerly a student in the School District of Lancaster, which he says explains his placement in learning support classes.**

**Student Shadowing: Day Two**

On September 5, 2003, I spent the day shadowing “Carrie”. Carrie is thoroughly a senior, who “can’t wait to be done” with her high school career. Although it is still early in the academic year, Carrie seems to have already developed “senioritis,” an attitude that pervades much of her current school life. She often arrives late to her classes and is repeatedly off-task. According to her teachers, Carrie has a tendency to rush through her work quickly and does not take the time to check her answers. Additionally, Carrie has already collected several school absences in only the second week of the academic year. Her teachers note that she is beginning to fall behind on her class work.

Still, Carrie displays numerous strengths in the classroom. She frequently volunteers to participate and responds well to teacher instruction. She also readily takes notes during class, as she states, “I love to copy things from the board.” Of note here is Carrie’s use of colored pens – she likes to take notes in a variety of colors, which appears to help keep her attention on the task. Carrie also seems to prefer a less structured classroom environment where she is able to use her interpersonal skills, as Carrie is a self-described “talker”. Indeed, Carrie spends most of the school day talking whether in
the halls, during class, at study hall, etc, which is sometimes to the detriment of her overall learning in the classroom.

To better meet Carrie’s learning needs, I will have to make modifications to classroom instruction that address both strengths and weaknesses of the learner. One modification could include small group activities that allow Carrie to utilize her interpersonal skills by talking to her classmates. It will be important to actively monitor group work – either teacher or peer monitoring – to ensure that Carrie stays on-task with the assignment. I also believe that I should look for opportunities to incorporate creative arts into classroom instruction. Throughout the school day, Carrie demonstrated that she likes the use of color and to work with her hands, which could somehow be integrated into my lesson plans.

Additionally, I feel that Carrie’s school absences and missed class time indicate the need for an open dialogue to be maintained between teachers and her parents – we need to keep Carrie at school and in the classroom. Although Carrie devalues her senior year, there is still important learning to be done before graduation. This speaks volumes for the overall senior experience: How is it that teachers can maintain student interest when many students are just waiting to graduate? How can we stress the importance of senior year to overall student learning? These are some of the questions that I will have to address as the semester progresses and students become increasingly difficult to reach.

**Student Shadowing: Day Two**

**Selected Observation Notes**

“Carrie” is an eighteen-year-old, Hispanic student. She is a senior and “can’t wait to be done” with school. Carrie has already missed several days of school – and it’s only the second week.
Crafts
- Arrived ten minutes late for class
  - Also left part way through the period to visit the nurse
- Spent class time drinking coffee and socializing
  - A lot of time was spent off-task
    - With teacher redirection, Carrie returns to work
- Self-described “talker”
- Says that she likes Crafts, but is not good at it
- Behind rest of classmates on art project because of her school absences
- Good interaction with teacher. Receptive to suggestions

English
- Learning support classroom
- Some behavioral problems
  - Backtalk: “Who wants to do vocabulary?”
  - Wandering eyes and frequently calls out
  - Spends a lot of time scribbling in planner
- Overall Carrie follow teacher instruction
  - Raises hand to volunteer
  - Note taking: “I love to copy from the board.”
- Learning inventory determined that Carrie is a random learner
  - She likes to know the big picture
- Demonstrated that she retained material from the previous day
- Seems to prefer a less structured classroom environment
- Uses lots of different colored pens to take notes
- Works diligently on pretest
  - Did not want to make punctuation corrections when directed to by teacher
  - Teacher believes Carrie rushes through work too quickly. She doesn’t want to go back and check her answers

Personal Fitness
- Carrie is very interpersonal
  - Spends lots of time connecting with other people
- Independent workout. Carrie is responsible for her own progress
  - Prepared with gym clothes
  - Completes required workout for the period
  - Talked with one friend the entire class

** Carrie seems to already be under the influence of “senioritis”. Her schedule is pretty light – yet she misses a lot of school and is beginning to fall behind. Possible suggestions to improve learning include small group activities that allow Carrie to talk. Also provide Carrie with the opportunity to be artistic and creative. Be sure to present “big picture” up front. Also important to address absenteeism and tardiness.