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FYC 13100

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Mr. Aaron Smith

It is difficult for me to recall a day that was more disappointing than the one on which I got my senior class schedule. I was pleased with my classes and their order in the day since I had almost complete control in choosing them. What caused my stomach to lurch, however, was far worse than either of those could have been. Rumors had been flying around all summer that the beloved world history teacher, Father Jones, was going to retire. McQuaid Jesuit High School, the only all boys high school in Rochester, NY, would be devastated by this blow. Even worse, I had heard that he was to be replaced with the man who taught my class United States history when I was a freshmen. Both of these awful suspicions were confirmed when I read the words “Mr. Aaron Smith” under the instructor section on my schedule. This meant that my class would be the first, and one of only three, to be subjected to the horrendous pain of surviving two school years of instruction from this utterly bewildering man. Thinking about the many bad experiences from his class still fills me with rage even though I have been safely out of it for almost a year. Mr. Smith significantly devalued the quality of

the student-teacher relationship and was an absolutely horrible history teacher in almost all respects.

Mr. Smith, despite his welcoming appearance and seemingly calm voice, is an extremely intimidating individual. It takes experience for students to learn this, but one wrong word will set him off on a rant that could leave even the most confident of students retreating fearfully. The fact that he required participation and counted it as fifteen percent of the final grade simply made matters worse. Students would be afraid to raise their hands and contribute for fear of being berated in front of the whole class, yet they had to do so in order to get the participation grade. I can remember vividly one of the occasions when I got gutsy and decided to respond to a question posed to the class. It was towards the end of the fourth quarter so most of the class, with their minds already looking toward summer and college, had completely checked out and were no longer reading the assigned text. I was not one of them so I had a fairly good grip on the subject. We were covering twentieth century Asia, and Mr. Smith asked why China's "New Plan", a socialist-like system, had failed. I responded with what seemed like a logical response, stating that since everyone was paid the same salary no matter how hard they worked, the citizens became less motivated to put forth effort, causing the economy to fail. Not only did this claim seem rational to me, but it was clearly supported in the textbook, which I had read only the night before. He said that my answer was incorrect while

giving me a nasty smirk as if he enjoyed saying it. I nervously told him the page number from which I had read it the night before, to which he responded, “You *can’t* just take answers from the book.” At this point I became thoroughly puzzled, and I think most of the class must have too, as I heard whispers break out across the room. It was absolutely ludicrous for Mr. Smith to call my answer wrong when I, one of the few students still actually reading, took it directly from the prescribed text. Several of my peers immediately came to my aid by raising their hands in protest, and after a couple comments from them his frustration grew while he still refused to accept his error. I do not know what Mr. Smith was thinking that day, but I do know it certainly made me feel like my contribution was not appreciated and discouraged my speaking with him in the future.

That instance was only one of many in which it was nearly impossible to understand Mr. Smith’s logic. His ideas often seemed like good ones, but the way he went about executing them, along with his vindictive attitude, made them very ineffective. He used to require an exercise he called the TPS, for “think, pair, and share”. He would present the class with a question or issue relevant to the subject we were covering and ask us to write our thoughts down, talk with a partner about our ideas, and then share them with the whole class in a group discussion. On the surface it appears to be an interesting method to develop critical thinking and communication skills. It was nowhere near

that productive. Mr. Smith would allow only fifteen to twenty seconds for us to construct our ideas alone and maybe one minute to converse with each other. We were then forced to attempt to share our ideas with everyone for the remaining forty-eight minutes of class time. This time allotment strategy set up those periods for disaster. We all rushed to scribble as many rough ideas in the TPS notebooks as we could, and they often had many logical flaws since we were not allowed the proper time to consider all factors. Our partners would not catch these errors either, as they would hurriedly write down whatever was said without thinking about it just to get the grade when the notebooks were collected. This lack of full comprehension caused problems later on when if a student had not yet proposed an idea, Mr. Smith would say, “Well come on, what did your partner have to say?” That question was posed to me on one unfortunate morning when I was paired with Charlie Preston, the biggest history buff in our class. I shared what I had written down about his plan for focusing the radical Muslims’ enthusiasm and energy into something productive and beneficial only to be cut off by Mr. Smith, as students often were, and chastised as if I had just called him some nasty name. He denounced my statement saying, “Why on *earth* would they (Muslims) listen to us Americans?” I fumbled to formulate some support for my argument but could not think of anything. After a half minute or so of my getting repeatedly shot down, Charlie, the sharp guy that he was, jumped to my rescue and explained

his case. Mr. Smith looked at me like I was too stupid to function and said, “See, why couldn’t you have just said that?” It never occurred to him that I could not properly defend a claim that I didn’t have any time at all to digest. These sessions often just left students feeling demoralized and dumb rather than accomplishing what I hope was their intended purpose.

Those TPS exercises, in addition to several other regular activities, raised suspicion among the students that Mr. Smith simply did not want to make real lessons and “actually teach us”. Therefore, for lack of a better word, we students came to consider him lazy. We could not believe that he was actually doing much work when all we followed in class were some haphazardly thrown together notes in a Word document projected onto the screen. They often had very little content, and we actually found out that he copied and pasted several series of notes from random websites that he found on Google. P.J. O’Rourke, a particularly outspoken and authority-defying student, first discovered this. One day during lecture, Mr. Smith ordered him to either take notes or leave the class. P.J. quickly and coolly responded that he did not need to take notes during class since he could find them by merely Googling one sentence of what was shown on the projector. Mr. Smith was infuriated by this accusation, even though it was completely true, and sent P.J. to the dean of students. We never caught him using notes from the Internet again.

His questionable notes were not the only indication of his neglect. Almost one whole class period each week would be spent watching a film relevant to the topic we were studying. Mr. Smith would use this time to either grade the most recently collected homework or quiz while most students just fell asleep. Of course, if by chance he looked up from his grading, then he would angrily yell at the students to wake up and pay attention, even though the content of these films was never on a test or quiz. The epitome of his lack of effort came during one week when we were learning about eleventh through fifteenth century Japan. Monday and Tuesday were completely spent watching movies. He then assigned a research topic to groups of five students and told us to have our findings prepared for class the next day. On Wednesday we talked about our topic amongst our small group for the whole time while he graded homework at his desk. Thursday and Friday were totally invested in a TPS-style makeshift discussion in which groups would report on their topics and copy down information about others'. We were held responsible for knowing none of what we talked about during discussion or saw in those films, so that whole week was essentially a waste of time. No student felt compelled to learn these facts in addition to what was necessary to perform well on tests. Mr. Smith constantly claimed that he would stay up until one o'clock in the morning working on class-related material, but there was very little to show for all of his supposed efforts.

The fact that he claimed to have worked so hard when it could not have been plainer that he did not caused students to question his trustworthiness. He was caught lying many times throughout the year, and denied this behavior to the best of his ability whenever confronted about it. In fact, he told us a lie on the very first day. We would not realize this, however, until later on. He opened up the first class by saying that his world history would be a “survey course”, which he defined as one in which students are not expected to know very specific information. He said that we would be studying many different topics, and that we would only be tested on very general ideas so that we could cover as many areas as possible. It became evident rather quickly that this was not true. On quizzes Mr. Smith would require that answers be taken nearly word-for-word from the text or his notes, and when discrepancies arose between the two, he was never reasonable about finding a solution. When grading a certain quiz on Africa’s geography during class, he was particularly inconsistent. He asked us to list the four boundaries of the Sahara Desert as discussed in class. We had received these in his notes, and they were listed there as the Atlas Mountains, the Sahel, the Nile River, and the Atlantic Ocean. The book, however, differed slightly from his notes, saying that the Atlas Mountains were only the western half of the northern border while the Mediterranean Sea bordered the eastern half. Although we explored both of these resources in class, he refused to accept the Mediterranean

as an answer. He even went so far as to pull up his notes and say, “Look, it’s right here in the notes I gave you!” Students yelled protests and showed him the page where it explicitly stated that the Mediterranean *was* considered a border. He didn’t budge, however, holding firm to his belief that we hadn’t gone over this discrepancy in class despite the arguments of every student in the room. As a result of these frequent and blatant contradictions, students began to sarcastically yell, “Survey course!” aloud during class. Several other teachers even got in on this joke and made funny statements about survey courses during their lessons.

The lie about the style of the course was certainly agitating but nowhere near as infuriating as Mr. Smith’s most abhorrent violation of the students’ trust. On the day of the first test, he told us students that if our cell phones rang during the period, then we would immediately fail the exam. He offered an alternative, however, saying that our phones could be placed in a box on his desk and returned when the test was completed without penalty. Approximately twenty of the thirty students in the class took the bait and submitted their phones, which were not permitted to be carried to class. At the end of the period though, he did not return the phones and actually said that he was going to give them to the dean of students, Mr. Higher, so that all of the cell-phone carriers would be put in detention. This was met with fierce student outrage and diminished the willingness of most to trust him ever again. Fortunately



for us, Mr. Higher was so annoyed by all of Mr. Smith's antics that when presented with the phones he replied, "I don't have time for this. Give all of their phones back." His attitude towards Mr. Smith was characteristic of most in the school, students and teachers alike.

Mr. Smith's approach to teaching was undoubtedly the worst that I have ever had the misfortune to experience. He may have had a good knowledge of history, but his lack of knowledge of dealing with people made students feel uneasy and insignificant in his class. Unlike the other amazing instructors at McQuaid, he did not inspire students to do well or even try hard in his class because he made it so difficult to do so. Mr. Smith lost the trust and respect of nearly all of his students, and he was an absolutely awful history teacher.