
TANZANIA CONNECTIONS

Nancy Winters and Martin Werner

Late October 2015

Experimenting with low scoring students

Nancy and I are trying a number of things to bring up the performance of the lower scoring students in our class. I have been taking five students at a time for a special session to work on basic sentence writing. Meanwhile, Nancy teaches a non-essential topic to the others. We have seen good results for some, but not all, of these students. One day, we dismissed the twenty highest scoring students an hour and a half early, spit up the lowest 20 into two groups, and worked on basic sentence structure with them. One student in the latter group is now scoring in the top quarter of the class. Others haven't improved as dramatically, but none seem to want to get caught in the lower half the next time!

We have also developed a seating chart that pairs top performers with lower performers and are asking the higher students to mentor their partners on some projects. We are hoping that will bring the lower students up. We think that having the top students explain some concepts and instruction in Swahili may help. We also sent letters home with the 12 lowest scorers and encouraged their parents to have their child study harder.

In the past we have noted a dramatic increase in class performance at about week seven. We think that results from enough pieces coming together for the students that the learning rate increases. We are hoping we can reach that point a little earlier this year because then we would have more highly productive weeks of accelerated learning. We'll keep you posted on our progress.

Marty

Tumsifu

Tumsifu (pronounced Toom See Fuu) stands several inches less than 4 feet tall. He is the

youngest in our class, and at 11 years old he is the youngest Pre-Form 1 student we have had. He is so tiny that sometimes I cannot tell whether he is sitting or standing to answer a question. Despite his size and frequent razzing from the other students, he has great spunk and stands up for himself. He is also one of the better students in the class.

During the skits for the Health Living unit, Tumsifu's group had to portray the use of mosquito nets to prevent malaria. The group was having trouble getting started. Marty went over and talked with them about several ideas. He suggested that malaria was a significant killer of babies and children under 5 years old. Marty had barely gotten the words out of his mouth, when all the students' eyes turned simultaneously toward Tumsifu who was already covering his face yelling "No, no, no!" Less than five minutes later, Victoria, the self-proclaimed leader of the group came to Marty very distressed saying, "Baby runs away!" Marty suggested that they find a new baby. They did and the skit was still a hit. Marty chuckled every 10 minutes that evening until he fell asleep.

Nancy

Our Library

We have a library of about 150 children's books that our students can sign out for 2 or 3 days. Following Ernie's lead from last year, Nancy has each student read a paragraph or two the first time they come to assess their reading level so she can match them with the right book. They must also receive detailed and strict direction from Nancy on how to care for and use the books.

This is extremely popular with the students. Typically 30 hands go up when we ask who wants to sign out books that week. Right now, for example there are 19 books signed out. We can't accommodate 30 at one time, so we assign days (e.g., 10 to come on Monday, another 10 on

Wednesday and the rest on Friday). The students show up at our house after class on their day to sign out their book. One measure of this program's popularity is that on the day we released the 20 high performing students early (see preceding article) we found many of them waiting for us one and a half hours later when the rest of the class was dismissed. We were overwhelmed by this! Most of these students live 1 to 3 miles away, yet they choose to wait for books on their assigned day instead of starting that walk an hour and half earlier.

Now, for a little history on our library. Cleveland, Ohio native, Abbie Dunegan collected our library books as part of her Girl Scout Gold Award project. The books journeyed from Cleveland to Olympia and on to Manow. Since then, others have donated books, including a large contribution last year from Diane Malick. As part of Abbie's project, she and friends also made hundreds of puzzles from cereal boxes with pictures adhered with contact paper. We use these once or twice a week during transition times to teach-problem-solving skills. The puzzles are extremely popular with the kids. Jennifer Dunegan, Abbie's mother, will teach next year's course, and Abbie may join her. So they will see the impact of Abbie's project first hand.

Marty

Class Skit Extraordinaire

The first stories we had the students write followed a pattern of "My name is... I live in Lwangwa... I go to Pre-Form I..." We obviously had trouble getting the students to understand the concept of a story. So we had the students develop skits to spur their creativity for story-writing because they had performed some excellent skits during the Healthy Living unit. We gave them starter story lines, one of which was, "I traveled to Ruaha National Park to see the animals. We were driving slowly in the Land Rover, which had no doors, when a black mamba snake came up beside the car. It lifted its head and tried to come into the car...." The kids had to finish the story in skit form.

This skit was hilarious! So setting the stage... Victoria, an intelligent, attractive, budding young leader with the tendency to

forcefully direct everyone's actions, played the protagonist mother. The Land Rover was driven by a student using the top of an orange 5-gallon bucket as a steering wheel, and was filled with passengers following slowly behind. Meshack, the class clown, played the black mamba snake. He literally slithered on his belly along the concrete porch that served as our stage in front of the classroom. Meshack the Mamba bit and killed two of the students in the vehicle. The "dead" students were Victoria's "children." Then Victoria went into screaming hyper-drive, wrestled the snake to the ground, stabbing it at least 25 times. At one point we thought she would smash Meshack the Snake's head on the concrete. With Meshack the Snake dead, she went and mourned (i.e., wailed) over the loss of the two children. The skit was priceless! And the stories that followed were significantly more creative and interesting.

Nancy

Homeless in Manow.

I am haunted by the number of homeless people in Olympia (I am certain I'm not alone in that). I don't know how many there are, but there are an estimated 2,500 in Seattle and nearly 20,000 in Washington State.

There seems to be a great extended family support system in Manow, so we don't see many homeless. For example, it is very common for aunts and uncles to support the kids of deceased family members. We do know of two individuals who have, in some way, fallen through the cracks and they both present an interesting story.

The first is Sakuka. She sleeps in the church and, in exchange, she cleans the inside of the church and maintains the surrounding grounds. In Manow, different parts of the community are "assigned" church cleaning for different weeks. Sakuka finishes whatever they miss. It's easy to overlook what she does, but we have been told that you begin to notice the difference even when she is gone for a couple of days. The church has either granted or tolerated her clearing land and planting about a quarter of an acre in garden, mostly corn. She takes meticulous care of this garden – hoeing most days and even carrying water to individual plants. On some days, she spends most of the daylight hours tending this garden. Sakuka's

outside cooking fire is 100 yards from our house and every evening we see her cooking and sitting by her fire until well after dark (unlike the rest of us, she does not seem affected by the chronic lack of power this year). We see her almost every day, and she always greets us cheerfully and very directly.

The other homeless person limps through the community wearing a railroad engineers caps without the bill and a long, tattered, wool coat. If Mwasumbre was in the US where I'm better at guessing ages, I'd say he's in his late 60s or early 70s. He carries a walking stick to help him along and a large lumpy sack tied to a stick slung over his shoulder (like the classic story book picture of a hobo). He is constantly looking for pieces of paper or sticks, presumably for his cook fire, and abandoned clothing. He carries the sticks he collects in a bundle over his shoulder or drags them behind himself.

Last week we were invited to a rather formal and elaborate baptism celebrating. There were over a hundred people in pressed shirts or dresses and lots of food (like 8-five gallon tubs full of different foods which they had been cooking since midnight). Typical of Tanzanian celebrations there was lots of music and dancing interrupted by lots of formal speeches, all orchestrated by a couple of MCs. We were there for 4 hours and the celebration was still going strong when we left. Well, all of this attracted Mwasumbre. He danced through the crowd and shook many hands. We could see that the MCs and several of the other teachers were irritated by his presence and asking him to leave. But, he wouldn't hear of it and asserted his right to be there. Finally, someone gave him a heaping plate of food. Then the most honored guest (grandfather of the baptized child and doctor in a neighboring village), took a chair off to the side and encouraged the uninvited guest to sit with him. The two of them spent the next hour talking, until Mwasumbre dumped the remaining food from his second helping into a plastic bag and walked away.

At one point Martin Mwakaje was talking to Mwasumbre, and I could see Martin almost persuaded Mwasumbre to leave. It ended with

Martin laughing and Mwasumbre sitting back down with his food. Later, I asked Martin about it. Mwasumbre asked Martin for 500 shillings. Martin said he didn't have any money in his pocket, but if Mwasumbre came to Martin's house he could give him 200 shillings (equivalent to a dime). Mwasumbre started to follow Martin, then sat back down and said, "I'll come by tomorrow for my 200 shillings!"

That led to other Mwasumbre stories. One was when he was picking up abandoned clothing, which he washes and tries to sell. Martin was there and overheard someone say, "you're crazy for picking up those dirty rags." Mwasumbre replied, "if you think that about me, what do you think about the people who buy them from me?"

Both of these homeless people carry themselves with dignity, actively engage with other community members, and show satisfaction and joy in their lives. I know that in many ways Olympia is a world apart from Manow and homelessness cannot be the same, but these two have inspired me to at least buy an extra cup of coffee some mornings to sit down and listen to the stories of our homeless.

Marty

Send email!!

We would love to hear from you about how things are going for you. It keeps us in touch with life in the US. Please limit the size of the email as the system is still very slow here and crashes easily. Our email addresses are:

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