

Purpose-full Planning

by Bridget Riggs

Jane walked through the lobby and followed the orange stripe on the wall around the corner to her room. Pulling a cart filled with unread books and unfinished work, the combination of musty air and lemon cleaner made her both excited and nauseous. She had so much to do to prepare and so little time. She turned the corner to see a very familiar site.

The door to room 114 looked worn. After five years of holding holiday decorations, class lists, and emergency evacuation information, the lacquer paint on the door was stripped. Although Jane was a young teacher, she had locked this door in June feeling exhausted; she had expended a tremendous amount of energy battling what is commonly known as senioritis. During that time, Jane had wanted nothing more than to escape from this room. Now, after a few weeks of rest, the two-tone stain on the door was a welcome and somewhat exhilarating site to Jane's eyes.

Upon unlocking her classroom, Jane's excitement for a new start transformed to an overwhelming sense of anxiety. Although the floors were newly waxed and her chalkboards were clean, Jane's classroom still appeared disheveled. As it was the year that all English classes would receive updated textbooks, no one really expected organization, except Jane. Stacks of outdated literature books stood like dried up oil wells in the back corner of the room. Although they were useless, they were ironically unable to be discarded. Jane remembered her department head retorting, "One must ensure that the new textbooks actually arrive". It was a response to Jane's suggestion that the old books be boxed up to make room for the new ones. Jane had simply thought that planning ahead was the most obvious thing. Recalling the fiasco of the last textbook adoption, she reluctantly agreed that saving the texts for now was prudent.

Moving past the obvious eye sores, Jane began to mentally note all pending jobs on her legal pad. A woman of many lists, Jane was never without something to do.

1. Clean out desk drawers
2. Inventory paper and supplies (place orders if needed)
3. Organize file folders of lessons

Her list began like any other for a teacher returning to school. The difference with Jane, however, was that instead of getting started on the very tasks that were causing her stress, she continued to create add-ons to her list.

4. Print off syllabus
5. Well, create syllabus and then print it off
6. Figure out a seating arrangement
7. Create questions for video series

The list continued. By the end of an hour, Jane was engulfed with a list of jobs that needed to be completed. The feeling of immediacy crushed her like a tsunami. Starting at the top of the list was not Jane's style. She was not as predictable as her plain name might suggest. Her lists were merely a chronological diary of the things that she recognized needing to be accomplished. Scanning her list for a place to begin, Jane decided that she would begin with arranging the desks of her students. Fitting thirty desks into such a small space would be difficult, but if her arrangement was right, the students would feel like they could easily interact with her.

After about 20 minutes of testing her retention of knowledge from hours of watching HGTV, Jane slouched down in one of the student desks and admitted that she was not a decorator. She stood as if she had visualized one last seating possibility. Jane blew her bangs out of her eyes and adjusted the waistband of her sweatpants. "Humph", she moaned as she placed both hands on her hips. Defeated, she gave up and decided that putting the desks in groups of four would suffice for now.

Sweat beading on her brow, she paused to take a swig of a Diet Coke. The condensation on the can dripped onto her Eagle t-shirt. Feeling the need to complete something, the next obstacle that Jane decided she felt up to undertaking would be checking her cabinets to ensure there was an ample supply of paper and pens for the beginning of school.

This duty was actually a favorite of Jane's as she had somewhat of an office supply fetish. Next to Barnes and Noble, Office Max was her Mecca. Sorting through blue and red pens, colored printer paper, post-it notes, and highlighters, Jane checked off her inventory list. As planned, all supplies were neat and in order. Quantity was perfect. No ordering would need to be done.

Having finally checked something off of her list, Jane felt up to a more tedious challenge. She pushed her padded rolling chair over to the wall of dull, rusty file cabinets. The putty gray exterior of metal was juxtaposed against the bright colorful folders inside. Every year Jane had a new way of doing things, usually brought about by the latest educational book she read or seminar she attended. While keeping current is good, it also became an annual frustration to Jane as she continually had to update her system of filing. Other teachers would saunter in tanned from a beach vacation only a few days before the start of class, copy a previously made syllabus, and begin the same lectures as had been handed down from generation to generation. Jane, on the other hand, tried to stay fresh. In an effort to keep students interested, she tried to stay up with the current trends. They called her "the cool teacher".

Today she was anything but cool. In the stuffy classroom, the daunting task of sorting through British literature files loomed. As the hours continued to tick by, Jane felt as if she was wading through mud. Half way through her sorting she had forgotten the format she was using for the sort. Jane slammed the file drawer. She was irritated by her inability to complete yet another item on the list.

Cleaning out her desk, she assumed, should be an easier task to complete. Like the junk drawer in her kitchen, much of the desk's content was useless; however, a situation could arise at any moment and require that one unique gadget. She tried to simplify, tried to toss out items that were not used last year, and tried to convince herself that downsizing was good, but her schizophrenic conversations with herself only added to her aggravation.

About to give in once again to the springtime feelings of the need to escape, Jane instinctively opened the bottom drawer of her desk. This drawer was where Jane's

sacred chocolate stash was kept. Expecting a creamy concoction to be waiting to ease her stress, Jane was dismayed. She remembered that at the beginning of the summer, she had been required to empty the drawer to avoid a feeding frenzy by the tiny mice that inhabited the rafters of the school. Having previously been so dependent on the content of this drawer, Jane fully expected her counselor to be there waiting for her. To her chagrin, no food of any sort remained.

There, upside down under a pile of pens, she saw it. She had placed it there on purpose knowing she may need it someday. It had been an unexpected gift. Offering hope and affirmation had been its mission. As she cradled the cream-colored envelope in her palm, she pulled out the note.

Thanks Ms. Jones for making class fun. You really tried to understand me and help me when things weren't going so good. I will miss you. Erika.

Slipping the note back into its fragile container, Jane placed it back into her drawer. Jane's thoughts once again filled with anticipation and excitement as she remembered why she was a teacher. She not only taught English, but she showed love to many who found it nowhere else. Is there a better job than one where the love you give is returned to you over, and over, and over again?