



TEACHING STORIES

Observations and insights of a high school science teacher in a large suburban public school system.

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EPISODE 2

TESTING, TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING

In our last episode, Marie, the new teacher, was despondent after one of her honors science exams went missing. The school's administrators were despondent after yelling at Marie because the district office was about to give them hell for letting a test leak out. And the district administrators were maintaining they were very sorry over the numbering error they made on the test (which made it so difficult to administer 1st period), but it only came about because they had reorganized the answer sheet in response to teachers' concerns from last year. I am sympathetic to Marie's error, but I am also irritated, because the well-meaning woman from the central office who made the error had the gall, in her email to the science department chairs, to hint that all this, really, is because teachers complained after last years' exams and they were just trying to improve things. (Complain, will you, you teachers? I'LL give you something to REALLY complain about!)

To my surprise, by Tuesday morning when school resumed, our school administrators were in a fairly good mood. Turns out the test went missing at the point of test collection, not at the beginning where a student might have pocketed it and asked for another. That meant that Marie was able to narrow it down to 4 students who hadn't put their name on a test booklet before turning it in. The administrators called the 4 students at home and got a confession from the student who took it home with her. What's bizarre is that she not only took the test home but also took her answer sheets home. Now, that seems really hard to do by accident on a final exam. But if she did it on purpose, how on earth did she think she would get the teacher to accept an answer sheet that she turned in a day late? Try to sneak it to another student to turn in with his class? I'm just baffled.

In any event, it was a semi-happy ending, because there has been no indication that she actually leaked the test to anyone else. So nobody declared the tests invalid, and we could happily give the same test to the rest of the students in this course.

It all went downhill from there.

First hint of the next problem was a frantic email from another teacher, Connie, to the other science teachers after the first exam of the day. "The answer sheets I printed from the district website have some kind of problem. They don't match the test. Anybody else have that problem? What did you do?" Then, a few minutes later, a private email to me: "Dan (the department chair) claims he sent an email about this problem but I can't find it - when did he send it?"

Bad, bad feeling here. I email back: Dan didn't send an email. He'd received an email from the district office, but he printed it and brought it to Marie and me right before our test so we'd know before giving our tests last Friday.

I run downstairs and to the other end of the school, where Connie's classroom is, with my paper copy of the email that Dan gave me, so she could see it before giving her next exam. By the time I got there, the chair had already apologized and told her how to fix the numbering problem. Connie was already clued in by the time I got there - and she was really, really angry with Dan.

I asked still another science teacher if Dan had told him about the problem. He answered "Yeah. I think so. But I think you told me first - you know, when I stopped by your room in the afternoon to ask you something, and you were talking about it."

No doubt the missing test put all thoughts of the numbering problem out of Dan's mind, but still...that was not good.

My husband asked me later, when I gave him a sanitized version of the day's frustrations: Don't you guys talk about this stuff? How could the two other teachers giving that test not at least have heard about it when you had the problem the day before? The answer is: There is no place or time that the other 11th grade science teachers and I ever casually run into each other - we all teach the same science course, but we're on different floors and different wings of the building. We don't even have the same planning periods, where at least we might see each other at a copy machine. Once again, we're facing structural limitations and their influence on informal communication. Of course, the technology of email should have provided fail-safe cover for those problems. It's just that technology depends on humans, and humans make errors. "Fail-safe" requires layers of fall-back communication, which we simply do not have.

And it turned out that even those of us who knew about the error in time weren't immune from further screw-ups. Two of my students have special ed plans that permit them to take their exams in the more protected setting of the special ed office. I had sent a detailed email to the head of special ed about the problem and what to tell the students to do before they took their exams, and put a reminder Post-It note on their answer sheets before sending them over. One student has an accommodation allowing him to answer directly on the test; that worked fine. I bubbled his answer sheet later based on his test booklet answers. The other just needed to do the renumbering first.

Except -- nobody ever told him about the problem. So he bubbled his answers in the wrong place. I had to call him at home and try to figure out how he'd intended to answer - in order to make the numbers match, he had skipped some problems, and I had to find out which ones, re-bubble, and hope that I got it right - not very valid because he couldn't exactly remember. That cost me almost an entire hour. But it was the difference between an E and a high C on his exam, and that made the difference between a B (what he actually earned) and a C (what he would have gotten) on his semester grade. I felt like I had to make the effort. At least I had to re-bubble only one answer sheet. Connie had to re-bubble all 30 exam sheets for her class.

But no, it's not over yet. There's more.

On Thursday, we learned that the test-gone-home in our school was peanuts compared with the leak of an Honors exam for another course. Somebody posted the short essay questions on Facebook, while exams were still going on. The district was then forced to invalidate the essay questions in every Honors exam for that course. So the teachers had to re-score the exams. Mike, a new teacher of that course, was distressed, because his few high scorers all dropped by a full grade on the exam as a result of not counting their essays in the score. So, if their scores were honest ones, they really got screwed as a result of the leak.

At least the test questions that ended up on Facebook didn't involve my course. So, that's the good news?