"Forgit the WHY ME shit and git on to what's next": What We Can Learn from *Precious (*and *Push)* about Developmental Writing Instruction

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Sapphire's protagonist from the novel *Push*, Claireece Precious Jones, also known as "Precious," is a morbidly obese, black, pregnant teenager growing up in the late 1980s. She has been sexually molested by both parents, as well as physically and verbally abused by her mother. In *Precious,* the film version of Sapphire's *Push*, Precious's mother tells her, "You're a dummy, bitch. Don't nobody want you, don't nobody need you." Late in this film, Precious discovers she is HIV+ due to her father's molestation; she already has one child by him, a daughter with Down's Syndrome. Still, Precious does manage to believe in herself a bit. In Mr. Wicher's math class, she serves as "the polices," interrupting the kids who get out of control: "'Shut up motherfuckers I'm tryin' to learn something,'" she yells at them (Sapphire 6).[1] However, the Harlem public school system has failed her; she cannot read and write, yet she admits, "I got A in English and never say nuffin', do nuffin'. I sit in seat" (Sapphire 49). In *Precious*, we hear her voice declare, "Someday, I'm gonna break on through, or somebody gonna break on through to me." She maintains this glimmer of hope. A pivotal moment for Precious involves joining the "Each One Teach One" class for Pre-GED students at the Hotel Theresa, taught by Ms. Blue Rain. Once Precious enters the class, her life begins to turn around. She even tells us that she wins a literacy award of $75 dollars from the mayor's office, and that her class has a party in her honor (Sapphire 82).

But why . . . or what . . . turns Precious around? This young woman has absolutely nothing going for her. Her persona reminds me of what Albert yells to Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman, Goddam . . . you nothing at all" (Walker 206). Furthermore, Precious is fat, HIV+, too scared to talk to people, and a child abuse survivor. However, in spite of Precious's outcast status in both the novel and the film on which it's based, Precious--and her peers at Each One Teach One--emerge as inspirations for both students and teachers. In particular, both the novel and film have a lot to teach teachers--at any level--about developmental writing instruction. (For the most part, I will focus on the film, but I will also occasionally allude to points that the novel makes that the film does not.) Quite often, students in developmental courses see themselves as people who don't read or write, just as Precious sees herself. But if we study the classroom dynamics between Ms. Rain and her students closely, we can clearly learn teaching tips for helping this supposedly "difficult" group of students.

Small class size (less than ten).

When we see Precious first enter the Each One Teach One classroom in the film *Precious,* the door opens very slowly, and we notice that the class has only about five or six students in it. Before speaking a word, Precious walks to the front of the class and sits in an empty seat. She likely would not have had the courage to perform such an action if the class had had 20, 25, 30, or more students, such as Mr. Wicher's math class at her former school.

Then, in the scene that follows, we get to learn a bit about the students as individuals through the "icebreaker" that Ms. Rain uses in the class to enable the students to get to know each other better. We quickly learn that Rhonda is a Jamaican spitfire, Jermaine a tough lesbian, Rita an ex-drug addict who loves to dress in black, JoAnn a singer with a bouncy personality,

and Consuelo a Hispanic beauty determined to define the activity as "bullshit." After Consuelo expresses her resistance to participate, Precious asks if she can pass, too. Ms. Rain allows her to do so without shaming her into speaking and then proceeds to another activity. However, Precious changes her mind and asks if she can have a turn to introduce herself to the class. At the end of her introduction, Precious quietly proclaims that she has never spoken in class before. Ms. Rain quietly asks, "How does that make you feel?" She shyly replies, "Here. It makes me feel--here."

Through her quiet actions, Ms. Rain serves as a model to other teachers of developmental writing instruction. First of all, she attempts to build a sense of community in her classroom right away through her "icebreaker" activity, even though we know from the novel that this was not the first day for all of the students in that class (Sapphire 39-48). This activity enabled Precious to feel more included in the class, to feel "here." Secondly, when Precious asks to pass on her introduction, Ms. Rain allows her the freedom to do so without cajoling her, teasing her, or shaming her into following the rules. This action gives Precious the confidence to raise her hand to contribute anyway. Thirdly, Ms. Rain shows that she cares about Precious's feelings by asking how she feels. By asking her this question, Ms. Rain validates Precious as a human being instead of rejecting her as an object to be dismissed. We begin to sense that this is an environment in which Precious will feel nurtured rather than abused. Precious's response--that she feels "here"--indicates that she already feels that she belongs. Even Precious's classmates respect the poignancy of her response by remaining silent for a few seconds after she speaks.

Due to the small size of the group, Precious is able to develop friendships with these women; she learns to trust them in ways that she could never trust anyone before. Many scenes in the film show five or so students talking, learning, laughing, and interacting with each other. In the novel, we see the stories of each individual young woman come together in a collection of "Life Stories," in which we get to learn the history of each member of the class (Sapphire 141-177). This collaborative activity (not shown in the film) further validates the existence of the class members and enables their lives and their writing to inspire others in ways that they would have never imagined previously.

Assuming that developmental writers can already write.

In Precious's first day in the class, Ms. Rain asks her students to write, even though some of the students, including Precious herself, seriously question this directive. "How we gonna write if we can't read? How we gonna write if we can't spell?," she asks. Ms. Rain insists that spelling and grammar don't matter--all they need to do is write. In the novel, she tells Precious "'Don't say it, write it.'" After Precious replies, "'I can't,'" Ms. Rain responds, "'Don't say that . . . DO what I say, write what you was thinking'" (Sapphire 61).

Consequently, Precious attempts to write what she can: "li Mg o mi m" (61) While some writing teachers might dismiss this as jibberish or "bad grammar," Ms. Rain instead asks Precious to read what she has written out loud--"Little Mongo <Precious's daughter> on my mind." Ms. Rain then ends up writing out responses to Precious's words (such as "Who is Little Mongo?"), encouraging her to write more responses to Ms. Rain in her dialogue journal. Precious concludes from this exercise, "I am happy to be writing. I am happy to be in school. 'Thas great" (Sapphire 62).

Ms. Rain's lesson here reminds teachers of a very important task when teaching developmental writers: *get them to write what they know*. Developmental writers are often developmental because they have been labeled--institutionally, or within their families, or among

their peers--as "deficient" in their writing abilities. They are smart enough to figure out that "developmental," from an institutional perspective, is often a code word for "dumb." Even though these students may be old enough for college-level work, just as Precious is, it is probably best to think of students like Precious as working on the pre-college level. They have not, as David Bartholomae would say, learned to "invent the university," or master the discourse of academia (403-17). Bartholomae explains further: "<The student> has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (403). For these reasons, a great place to start in teaching developmental writers at any level is to have them write about they know--that's why Ms. Rain asks Precious to write what's on her mind. If Precious is writing what's on her mind, she's writing about something that matters to her, giving her some sense of agency in the writing task.

One-on-one work with students.

The film *Precious* also teaches us the importance of doing one-on-one work with students. Soon after the classroom scene in the film, we see Ms. Rain asking Precious questions about her life at home. Precious reveals to her that her mother "don't do nothin.'" Even through this brief conversation, the film reiterates the importance of talking to students, even on an informal basis, about what their lives our like. Such conversations can help deepen our understanding of why our students have the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that they do. On film, as Ms. Rain attempts to get Precious to read a picture book, we witness a montage of all the negativity in Precious's life; we overhear verbal abuse from her mother and view brief images of sexual abuse from her father. Fortunately, Precious is able to move beyond such negative messages and ultimately admits to Ms. Rain, "All the pages look alike to me." Ms. Rain pauses for a moment, and we see a tear in her eye. Still, Ms. Rain painstakingly has Precious read the phrase "A DAY AT THE SHORE," letter by letter, word by word, until Precious CAN read the phrase. Later in the film, Ms. Rain and Precious continue to use the dialogue journal discussed previously to talk to each other on paper, even while Precious is in the hospital, soon after giving birth to her second child, Abdul. "So many questions you ask," Precious remarks to Ms. Rain at one point. She does not yet understand that Ms. Rain's attempt to get to know Precious better is not an attempt to Ms. Rain's part to be nosy; it is her attempt to make her new student think critically about her life, and especially her newly-developing literacy skills.

The relationship between Ms. Rain and Precious here stresses the importance of getting to know our students as individuals, not just ID numbers. If we can see them as real people with real problems in their lives, we may gain more empathy for their situations, and perhaps even challenge them more. Note that Ms. Rain did not necessarily make work easier for Precious once she found out that "all the pages look alike" for her. On the contrary, she pressed to her to *read anyway*--she continued to see Precious as a capable, functional individual in a situation when most people might be hard-pressed to do so. And even when Precious is absent--away at the hospital--she continues to make her "do her homework" by carrying on the dialogue journals with her. These individual relationships between student and teacher, as we see here, transcend the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

Hone appreciation of a student's own cultural history.

At one point in the film, we see Precious sitting at her desk studying a series of images that appear on the wall in her classroom. They include images of famous black politicians and

singers. These images are not just pictures, but video clips; one quickly follows after another, and they end up all blending to together in a collage of image and sound. Simultaneously, we see the image of a clock with its hands rapidly turning around. This moment in the film represents for us not only how much Precious is learning, but how quickly; it's all coming together for her in a relatively short time period. The hours pass by and Precious learns more and more. Most meaningfully, she is learning about her African American past, giving her a cultural identity with which she can connect. Similarly, in the novel *Push*, Ms. Rain has Precious pour through African American literature, for both Precious and her child. Precious is even compelled to create lists of all the books she and Abdul are obtaining because she's so excited to learn (Sapphire 80-81). We begin, therefore, to learn another lesson that the film teaches: give students readings and materials that connect to their heritage. When we ask our students to read, after all, they are probably most likely to want to read materials with which they can personally connect--and this is particularly true for students at the developmental level of literacy instruction. Giving students readings and materials from their own cultural background legitimizes their identities in classroom environments. It shows that their lives and experiences are worthy of classroom conversation.

Forming a sense of community.

A final key aspect of *Precious* as a film is the way it shows the importance of developing community beyond the classroom. In the film, this development takes place in two ways. To begin with, Precious develops an appreciation of lives and perspectives different from her own. For example, when she comes to understand that Catherine is Ms. Rain's lover, she initially comments to herself, "Oh my God, they are straight up lesbians!" But as she sits and talks to the women, she knows that their erudite nature can have nothing but a positive influence on her and her child. And, after all, she concludes that "It not homos who let me sit in class for years, learn nothin'. Ms. Rain made me Queen of the ABC's." Furthermore, Jermaine, the butch lesbian character in the film, comes to visit Precious in the hospital, and, in the classroom, Jermaine defends Precious's right not to work for "slave labor" wages as a home attendant. In the novel, the friendship between Precious and Jermaine is even more developed, as Precious calls Jermaine to help her read the file that she stole from Ms. Weiss's office (Sapphire 117-20).

Another way in which Ms. Rain's class forms a sense of community is through the actions of Ms. Rain herself. She takes the young women on a museum field trip early on in the film. And immediately after Precious's mother forces Precious out of her home once Abdul is born, Ms. Rain is shown on the phone, frantically trying to place Precious in a suitable living situation. Ms. Rain's efforts puzzle Precious: "Ms. Rain ain't no social worker; she just an ABC teacher," she comments. However, Ms. Rain's efforts here remind us what we ALL can afford to be with developmental writers--diligent, patient, understanding, and, above all else, willing to make an extra effort. Many of our students are not unlike Precious Jones; some have been abused or kicked out of their homes for one reason or another. While it may not necessarily be incumbent upon us as teachers to provide homes for these students, it should be our responsibility as professional people to care enough to direct such students to the right resources.

Conclusions.

Near the end of the novel *Push*, Precious makes the following remark: "I'm not happy to be HIV positive. I don't understand why some kids git a good school and mother and father and some don't. But Rita say forgit the WHY ME shit and git on to what's next" (Sapphire 139). So

in spite of everything that Precious endures, she eventually learns (from one of her classmates, Rita) to look forward into her future and not be mired down in the bog of her past. Our developmental writing classrooms can serve as positive opportunities for our students if we only let them be so. They are opportunities not just for learning to write, but for personal growth, community-building, and individual empowerment. Each class can be a gift to each individual student if we only let it happen.

Note

1. All quotes from the novel are as written just as they are in the text; also, all quotes from the film are written just as they are spoken in the film . The novel is written just as the story in the film is told-- in Precious's vernacular, not in Standard English. Similarly, the quote from *The Color Purple* is in Albert's vernacular.

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