

Tick, Tock, Teach

by Myisha Cherry, one of Fortune's dedicated teachers

Eight months ago the Education Department at Fortune decided to implement a four-hour afternoon class three days a week – a change from the usual schedule of two hour reading and writing classes followed by a one-hour math class. I quickly raised my hand to volunteer for the new role. Teaching for four hours straight could be difficult, but I was also up for the challenge of engaging my students for that length of time.

No matter the circumstances, I must make those hours productive, and the pressure to do just that for hours at a time hits me everyday. So how do I combat it? How do my students and I survive at all? These are some of my strategies:

1. Provide Structure That Is Not a Secret

I commit to providing daily schedules that my students and I know we have to follow. It looks a little like this:

- **2:00-2:30** Vocabulary Development
- **2:30-3:00** Social Studies GED Exercise Activity
- **3:00-3:30** Chapter Reading
- **3:30-4:00** Chapter Reading Discussion
- **4:00-4:15** Break
- **4:15-4:45** Math Lesson and Review
- **4:45-5:55** Math Computer Lab Activity and Coaching

This structure helps the students be productive as soon as they walk into class, because they are aware of what is supposed to happen; they immediately start copying words off the board and begin their vocabulary activity. It also helps them to stay on task, because they know how long is set aside for each activity, and when we will be moving on.

I don't provide structure for the typical disciplinary reasons. In other words, I

am not trying to teach them structure for structure's sake. I am simply trying to manage my students' expectations in order to keep our class focused and aware of the daily objectives we want to achieve.

2. Spice It Up

No one likes monotony. I get bored sometimes, and I know my students do also. So while the structure is important, I also make sure to switch things up from time to time – adding new elements to keep my students' attention. For example, I focused on philosophy last cycle, and used Thursdays as an opportunity to explore our topic through writing and film. By moving our "math time" to the computer lab, I've also provided a new environment. Occasionally changing space and method keeps students engaged.

One of my students, who was clearly tired, frustrated, and anxious to finish his mandated time at Fortune, said to me, "Myisha, you never want to not come here?" Mind you, he asked the same question four days in a row. I understood he was getting tired of coming to groups and Education. I responded by saying, "Not

everyday. Look at today, it's beautiful out. But I remember my purpose for being here - for you all." I told him that remembering why he was here would help him deal with the time. I also let him know that this was our class, and if he wanted to do something different, he should suggest it. Allowing students to offer their own ideas about "spicing it up" gives them a sense of ownership over the class and their education.

3. Reciprocal Learning and Teaching

I've learned that I am not the center of my classroom. Rarely do I stand. Our class usually sits around a table. I am a coach and a facilitator who offers what I know to students. However, it is our class that is the focus. Every one of them has unique experiences and something to teach us all. I've found that when the students feel they have something to share that is as important as what the teacher contributes, the class becomes interesting. My students teach each other during math, and during reading they help each other with vocabulary and comprehension – explaining how they arrived at a

"Education is Life"

by Jay Dalton (a.k.a Jay Maniakal)

Life in general is education: what we choose to do with life determines what exactly it is that we retain. No matter what we do, every day we learn. Whether or not we decide to "educate" ourselves is up to us. If I indulge in ignorance, I will educate myself on how to become difficult, arrogant and anti-social. If I indulge in positive, growth-filled information and knowledge, I will learn how to become intelligent, prosperous and diverse at a level where I can successfully communicate in all walks of life and be accepted and embraced with no prejudice.

Education is everywhere ...I can learn how to cut out of school and sell drugs to other truants. I can learn to live without the responsibility of school and allow the streets to educate me – which I did, exactly. But like I said earlier, what I choose to do with the

knowledge determines what I retain.

Unfortunately, the majority chooses to embrace a materialistic, negative education of no substance that results in self-oppression, depression and false pride.

I was a victim – a "product of my environment" – until I realized that I wanted my environment to be a product of me.

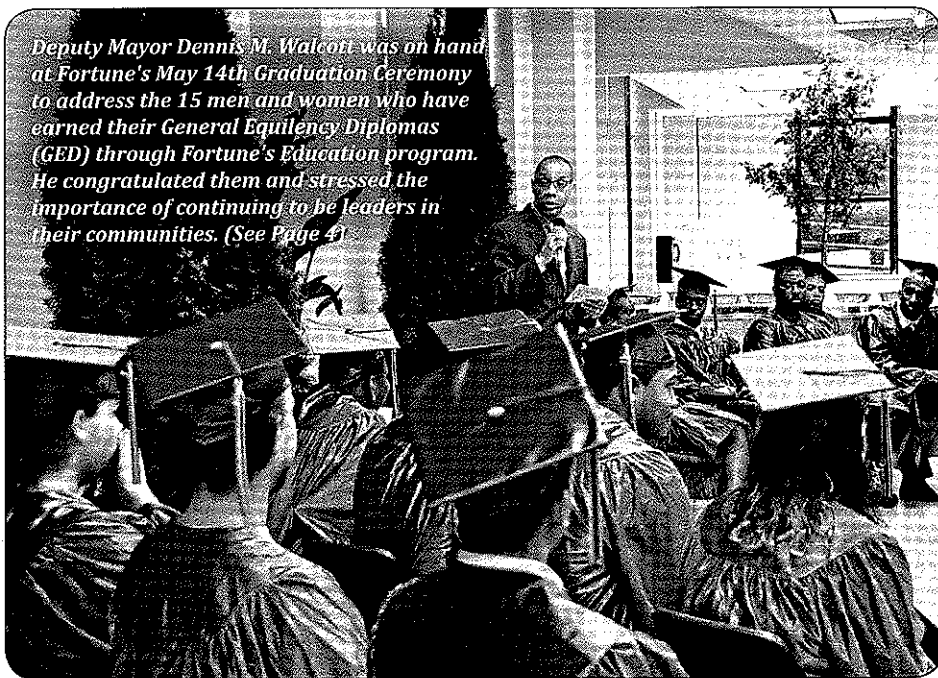
Today I am a successful owner of a business in commercial tattooing and music production. My past "education" to make easy money still lingers, and today – for 8 months – I am paying the price for allowing myself to fall victim once again.

But every day I learn, and grow.

And everyday I am educated more and more. Knowledge is knowing how much you don't know, and some day I will be able to say that I am wise. Today I am comfortable and proud of my education and look forward to learning more and more every day.



Deputy Mayor Dennis M. Walcott was on hand at Fortune's May 14th Graduation Ceremony to address the 15 men and women who have earned their General Equivalency Diplomas (GED) through Fortune's Education program. He congratulated them and stressed the importance of continuing to be leaders in their communities. (See Page 4)



particular answer.

Recently while engaging in a social studies assignment, a student who was recently released from several years in an upstate prison mentioned that he was related to James Cheney, the civil rights worker who was killed during Freedom Summer while trying to register African-Americans to vote. He then gave the class a history lesson about what's happened with the family in the decades since that tragic event. As a history geek, I was blown away and hooked. Now I knew why he chose to focus on the civil rights movement for our US History assignment. It "ran in his family."

I count on my students to be the experts I know each of them is. I take it when they correct me. I tell them to "trust themselves," because sharing oneself requires confidence in what you know. I listen when they teach me about themselves, their past, their present, and their culture. It is this feeling of "I have something to give and not just to take" that makes four-hour classes fun and active.

4. Make It Relevant

The term "relevant" is subjective, and I realize that I cannot really know what is relevant to my students unless I ask them.

Therefore, I dedicate the first two weeks of class to asking them what they want to learn, what areas they consider weak, and what they would like to focus on. I've learned that when students say, "This is boring," it usually means they can't connect to the topic, or that it isn't grabbing their interest.

One of my students uttered such a sentiment in the middle of class one day. I responded by letting him know how that wasn't a positive response to the moment, and also how it made me feel. I then said that it would be better if he could think proactively about what he would find more interesting, and how we could learn about it as a class. Only he knows what is relevant to him. And I need his ideas as much as he needs my teaching. But to make it relevant we need an equal exchange and positive responses, not mere negative or assumed ones.

5. Be Creative

I am an artist and a kid at heart who just happens to have a desire to share my intellectual gift with the world through teaching. So in my classroom I use games, technology, films, computers, and a thematic teaching approach to engage my students. To review math, my students and I play PowerPoint Math Jeopardy.

Introducing new math concepts, which all of my students always proclaim as hard, can be less intimidating when presented as a game. When we pursued philosophy – a subject that is often perceived as difficult to understand – I used film to get the point across. For example, when we discussed the subject of ethics and moral decision making, we watched the movie "John Q" together, and then debated about it. This gave the students practice taking and defending moral positions. The debate was something to see. Their use of critical thinking was brilliant.

In addition, I run each cycle like it is a college semester. Each is thematic. My first cycle was called: "Justice and Equality: An Interdisciplinary Journey." My second cycle was: "Jumping Into Genres: A Literary Journey." My third teaching cycle was called: "The Thinking Life: A Philosophical Film Journey." These themes give students something to look forward to, and they also reinforce that the content of our class is constantly evolving.

6. Have perspective

Students are not robots. Some days they will be tired or just zone out. When moments like this happen, I challenge them to "be with us." If it gets to be too much, I ask them to take a walk and get some water. I understand their fatigue, but I challenge them to stay present. Some days, students will not be active at all. I adjust. I understand human moods and behavior, but I also make it my mission to coach them back into the moment.

Although the moment is made up of 240 minutes, we try to maximize it. Based on test results, as well as class comments, I believe we're succeeding. My challenge is to come to The Fortune Society and keep my students active in learning. It's a journey, but I believe I'm getting there.

Myisha Cherry is an Instructor and GED Coordinator at the Fortune Society Education Program. Before coming on board at Fortune, she was an Education Coordinator at the Children's Aid Society and Family Literacy Instructor at the Brooklyn Center For the Urban Environment. She currently also teaches in the Philosophy Department at York College.

