

The NYC Campus

"Like Landing on the Moon"

By Julia Emig

International Community High School (ICHS), a member of the Internationals Network for Public Schools in New York City, serves recently arrived immigrants from all over the world. Five members of ICHS's current faculty graduated from the MAT Program at Bard College: Jen Minnen and Justine Haemmerli (literature); Stephanie Lane and Matt Parker (biology); and Elise DeBoard (history). Minnen, Parker, and Lane met with literacy education professor Julia Emig to discuss what it is like to work in a newcomer high school and what they continue to find valuable from their classes at Bard.

What is it like to teach at International Community High School?

Minnen It's like landing on the moon—a friendly moon, but a moon. You quickly realize that the ways you were taught and the ways that you think about things no longer apply, and you need to learn how to breathe a different atmosphere. You learn how to teach and convey, sometimes with or without language, at the same time that you build language, and you realize that breathing in this different atmosphere is possible.

Parker I've come to think of it as beautiful chaos. There are so many disparate elements all over my classroom. It's about finding the connections between these elements—psychologically, emotionally, personally, intellectually—and somehow getting them to fit into the context of literacy, both in science and in English. It is a beautiful challenge and a wonderful challenge, but one that has a lot of entropy inherent in it.

Lane This is a magical place to teach. When I first walked into my classroom and did a language survey, I realized that there were approximately 10 different languages spoken. A majority of my students had been in the country for less than even a week. One had arrived from the Dominican Republic the day before. At first, I was really nervous. I didn't know how this was going to work. But it does. It's magic.

For example, when I had a class work with the scientific concept of diffusion, all of a sudden everyone was surrounding these buckets, playing with food coloring and water. There was noise in many different languages, calling and describing across the room—lots of energy. After that, everyone understood what diffusion is. I feel like we're all in this big machine together and it requires every hand on deck, every resource, every picture, every book, every everything that you can possibly muster, and magic occurs. At the end of the day, it works.

Would you say that this experience you're describing is unique to a "newcomer high school," or do you think you would feel this way in any high school?

Lane I worked with English as Second Language students in more traditional settings, and the atmosphere was different. The atmosphere in this school is one of joy. We talk about our students' abilities to go to college, and about their wanting to have careers. When I taught in a more traditional ESL classroom, the fact that the students were English-language learners was seen as a disability. Here it's always seen as an ability. I tell my students, "You're so lucky that you already know more than one language. You're much further in life because you can understand more, and you have more life experiences than a lot of other people." In the other classrooms it was, "OK, you need to learn this way, and if you can't follow the standard American model, then you're not going to succeed."

Minnen I would say that the biggest difference is that the kids here dream before they can speak. Before they're able to write a sentence in English, they know the word university; they know the word college. At this school we recognize that language is just one aspect of their learning. My students may not be able to express themselves fluently in English, but they have said profound things about what they have seen and experienced. I recognize that my students have had a lifetime of experience already, and we are giving them another tool: language. It wasn't seen that way when I taught newcomers at other high schools, where the attitude was closer to "You are a blank slate, and we're adding language to you." That's not how it is at this school or with these kids. They have experience, and we're simply offering them words to articulate it.

Parker I think the biggest difference is the freedom we're allotted to create our own curriculum, our own way of getting the students where we want them to go. In more traditional high schools, or even as I saw last year when I was teaching English in Japan, there is a prescribed way to go: this is how you teach; this is the material you use. This is where they're going; this is how they're going to get there. Here, there are simply too many languages in the classroom, and too many cultures, and too many thought processes, and too many sets of experience—disparate, incredibly different experiences—to have any one simple way of going about getting them anywhere, let alone where we want them to go. At times it's a little intimidating and difficult, because I have an infinite number of options, and all those possibilities, like that blank space in front of you when you start to write. Until there's ink on the page, there's no real direction. The direction comes as we go. You come in with a lesson plan, and more so than anywhere else I've ever been or even seen, that lesson plan needs to evolve very quickly, with the moment. Over time, your lesson plans evolve, and what you end up actually doing in your classroom evolves too. That's what's unique about this situation.

If you were to go back to a "regular" high school such as the one where you did your teaching apprenticeship, would you teach in a different way?

Minnen Yes, hands down, simply because these are good pedagogical practices. I don't think they're unique to teaching language learners—any school you go to is an artificial environment. The way that you're expected to speak and act in school, or at work, is not the way you speak with your family or your friends, no matter what type of public school it is. In any school you go to in the Bronx, you use academic speech. It's

like a foreign language.

But I think you should have that blank space in any school. If I went to another school, I'd look for the same blank space, where kids create their own learning in contrast to me standing in front of a room saying, "Open your books to page 39, read it, and answer the questions." So much of the methodology that I learned from Bard's MAT Program is playing out for me here, because thinking about your discipline is thinking about empty space and trying to go beyond the system that confines it.

In what other ways have you thought about what you learned at Bard?

I think also that the problem that we see in the classroom as a language barrier is, in fact, also a benefit. The students can't speak English, so we get to be creative, flexible, change our minds, have hands-on activities. We get to do all those things because of that blank space that Matt Parker's talking about. We can't tell the kids, "Open your books and read."

Parker I'd say in two ways. To be authentic as a scientist and to make my students be authentic as scientists is crucial to their understanding of what science actually is. Everything I do is rooted in that principle. It's what I learned at Bard—to study my discipline as a real scientist would.

Also, I think the idea of engaging literacy in my discipline is something that's crucial to any kind of success I'm going to have in the classroom.

Lane I also see it as a twofold influence. There are concrete things that I use from Bard, such as the literacy strategies. Every day I go through that course binder and pull out the one that fits. And I still rely on the backwards-design lesson planning—I use those templates. Those are both very concrete.

There are also abstract lessons. For example, from my Bard science courses, I learned that by playing with science, I actually understood larger, harder concepts better than I ever had. So I bring that element of play into my classroom, that element of simply allowing time for science experiences. It's allowed me to think about the space my students need in order to come up with and answer their own science questions.

Minnen In my classroom, when my students write their own stories, everyone is engaged. They're figuring out how to tell their own narratives. It's close to what my Bard professors told me I could expect: if you do it, they will learn. Here, I've found that when I am authentic, I will engage. It's almost ironic. We don't have the shield of language. Most people aren't authentic in their disciplines because they can speak English. Well, I can't do that here. If I try to tell them to do something that is not authentic, they look at me like I have three heads. What is Miss talking about? But if I tell them to do something in an authentic way, it's in the real world and they understand that, and they can do it here. Here authenticity is a necessity. You have to do something real or the kids won't be engaged, because the abstraction of language is impossible.

Lane The wonder of it is that they don't even realize that they're learning. They're sitting around watching, observing, and taking things in, and all of a sudden they've built their own foundation on which we can then add the story. We can come back to the story that they've just spent hours playing with, or dissecting, or building. It lays a great foundation because it's something that they have internalized.

Is there anything you would advise current MAT Program students to think about as they study to become teachers?

Lane One of the most important things for me was that I looked for a job in a school with a faculty that still wanted to explore, wanted to study and try things out and work together. I'd tell them to look for a school with faculty that still want to talk about what we're doing as educators.

Minnen For MAT students who are thinking about working in the Bronx, I would suggest reading kids' picture books, which can be incredibly savvy. Looking at things that are graphically rich is a way to move towards thicker texts. I think we forget that everybody likes to be read to, and everybody likes to see a story. This will influence how you teach. It will bring you to a sense of play.

Lane If I have the materials, then I will play. But it's so hard in your first couple of years of teaching to spend your time collecting resources, while you're learning how to teach and planning lessons. But if I have a stockpile—in a science class, it's straws, chart paper, balls of clay, and all the little things that you may or may not need right away—I can use them. I've gone through so many brown paper bags, for instance. There are many ways a good science teacher can use a brown paper bag.

Parker Absolutely. Straws, brown paper bags, boxes, shoeboxes, toilet-paper rolls. I have two thoughts about that, one abstract and one concrete. The abstract would be to not let academia and where you are now serve as a safety net in any way imaginable because, believe me, there is no net once you begin to teach. In that same vein, try to find some place where you can feel safe, actually safe, but not comfortable. Whether you're student teaching, or you're taking courses, try to find something that pushes you. Because you will be pushed really hard on the job, and if you're not used to that, it can be jarring, and you may falter more than you'd like to.

More concretely, along the lines of the toilet-paper rolls and straws and all that, don't underestimate the amount of time, energy, and sanity it takes to manifest things. For every course you take at Bard, leave it with some sort of binder or folder—something that you can open up and have in front of you and hold. Don't just think, "Oh, I know that," because knowing something doesn't mean anything if it takes four hours for you to get it out of your brain and onto a piece of paper for someone to hold. So leave with as much in your hands as you can gather. Boxes of things.

Minnen It goes back to authenticity and discipline. If I am real with the students, if I bring my own book into the room and read with them, and we all read, then they say, "Oh, this is reading. Let me read also." Or tell a kid, "I like this book because it scares

me.” Or, “I like this book because it makes me think about 50 years ago.” I bring what I really read into the room.

There’s no way for me to stand in front of them and be a strict schoolmarm—it’s not possible. You have to bring the things you love, along with your own sense of self. When you’re teaching, it’s so hard to find your own voice. But it’s the most important thing, because if you speak with your own voice, it’s authentic, and the students will listen. If you speak with a this-is-what-a-teacher-says voice, forget about it.

Lane It’s also important to allow students to have their own voices and to allow them to not be afraid to detour sometimes. Especially in our classrooms, the kids always have questions. They’re curious about almost everything, so it’s OK, at times, to detour away from what you had carefully planned to what they’re asking about at the moment.

In one of our classes today we were supposed to be looking at the diffusion of oxygen molecules from the alveoli into the capillary. Instead, we talked about whether all dead people are buried in New Jersey, because someone had a family member who died recently. And then we were talking about where the graves were—they didn’t know if there were cemeteries here, and then they wanted to know how long, in our culture, do we bury people, and if there are buried people in New York City. It was fascinating. Everyone wanted to talk about what happens to dead people. It was a really useful conversation for me—it allowed me to study their oral language. It allowed me to engage in what they were interested in. Sometimes these moments, these detours, are necessary.

Minnen Any small school where the faculty are engaged at the level of inquiry, and also in running the school—any place where you have autonomy of thought and action—is a place where the things we learned at Bard apply. I use the literacy strategies from your course every day. I also use the ideas that we talked about in Michael Sadowski’s class, such as how do we learn, how do I learn. I’m aware of that process, and aware of my experience as a student. All those things play out here at our school—you have to be aware of these things because it’s small, and it’s open; because it’s a blank page. You don’t have the safety net of other people understanding what you say. In fact, when I hire folks for the English department here, I don’t give two shakes if they have an ESL license. I ask, “What are you reading right now, and would you share it with students?” At Bard, I was ingrained with this idea that I was going into a profession where it’s important to dream, and to love what you do, and to love your discipline. Ultimately, I feel that the kids learn because you love the subject you teach. Because I love Henry James, they’re going to learn to read. If Bard continues to give that message to MAT students, we’ll continue to go in the right direction.