

# How I Spent My Holiday Break

[Peg Grafwallner](#) December 14, 2015

## Culturally Responsive Teaching

Rest. Relaxation. Rejuvenation. We look forward to our holiday breaks as a way to refresh ourselves mentally, physically, and spiritually. We look forward to spending time with our families and staying at home adjusting to a new routine of no alarm clocks, no papers to grade, no lessons to plan.

When we come back from our holiday break, we're ready. We're going to begin a new unit plan, or we've adjusted an old one, or our guest speaker has been scheduled. The point is, we're ready to be with our students and begin again.

Why then did students seem so tense, so anxious before their most recent holiday break? It wasn't a sense of impending joy they were feeling, but more a sense of impending doom.

I noticed that many students' trepidation was on overdrive. About a week before our scheduled break, I stood outside my office during passing time. But this particular morning I noticed the hallway language. Sure, every once in a while one might hear a curse word said by a negligent student. But, one "bomb" after another was exploding in my little corner of the world. I found myself encouraging students to be aware of their language, be courteous to their peers, and be on their way to their next class. When I mentioned to a colleague that something must be up, he quipped, "Just a full moon."

However, as the days wore on, it became evident there was more to this than just a full moon. The students were surly and fretful, and some were downright sad. While I was looking forward to all the wonderful things that come with time off, what could some of my students be looking forward to? I

began to wonder.

As much as our students might complain about school, about teachers, and about homework, let's not forget about all of the things that we do provide, things that can't be measured in data-driven reports and standardized tests. Schools provide a routine, a scheduled haven from life's curveballs. We provide directions, both written and verbal, on what to do. And let's face it, on some days that may be all a student can do. We provide socialization, the opportunity to see friends and catch up on the latest news. We give students a reason to get up in the morning.

Therefore, the holiday break could be a stinging slap of change from the warm embrace of their reality. Their routine has now changed. A routine created by a bell system now allows students to do whatever they want; they are making decisions and perhaps allowing temptations too challenging to overcome. Directions are no longer clear to them, and it's quite possible that no adult is home to offer important directives. Now the student becomes the adult taking care of siblings and in charge of household chores. Finally, socialization is cut off. Being at home may be a stressful—it may be a violent place where basic social skills are nonexistent.

As we move into second semester and into third quarter, I know another break is looming in the not too distant future. I can't help but feel a little worried for some of them. How can one offer a sense of calm before what could be considered a storm of change?

I don't have all the answers; none of us do. We don't have control over our students' parents, their households, or their friends. But we do have power over our words and actions. Here are some suggestions to help our students slide into a smooth transition that may not be too jarring or too sudden.

First, don't oversell the break. Are you consistently referring to time off? "After break," "don't forget about the break," "when we get back from break." Perhaps too much "breaking" will cause our students to break

beyond their limits. While we might need to refer to the time, let's try to put it in the proper perspective.

Next, let's offer students a list of pertinent websites or movies that they might enjoy reading and watching during this time. Appeal to your students—after all, you know their likes and dislikes. Also, offer students some hopeful, inspiring films you think they may want to watch. A positive message lets them know you care.

Also, the value of reading could allow them to escape to another time and place. Offering some contemporary poetry anthologies to take home sends the message that you'll be thinking of them.

Finally, a brief handwritten message offers a sense of belonging and connectedness. Let them know that you will be thinking about them with a personalized note.

As we move on toward third quarter, excited over all the possibilities of progress, we know how quickly time moves. Let's take a few moments to reflect on those students who won't be fortunate enough to enjoy what some of us might take for granted. Be mindful of our language in creating a sense of departure. Create those lists and compose those notes.

Hopefully, instead of hearing curses in the hallways, we might hear a joyful noise. What was once anxiety might be replaced by a sense of assurance that we will be together again, very soon—rested, relaxed, and rejuvenated.

*This piece was originally submitted to our community forums by a reader. Due to audience interest, we've preserved it. The opinions expressed here are the writer's own.*

## **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Many teachers are working to bring in books that provide students with windows and mirrors. Once the books are in the room, what's next?

November 1, 2019

By now, most of us in education are familiar with the term “windows and mirrors” in relation to children’s literature. Originally applied to curriculum as a whole, the term was famously used by Rudine Sims Bishop to discuss the way books and stories can act as windows in which children see a world outside of their own or mirrors in which they see a reflection of themselves in the world. Providing both windows and mirrors is critical in the development of individuals who will grow up to be caring and compassionate citizens of the world.

Luckily, there are many great resources to help teachers and principals find books that can be windows and mirrors for students. A Google search for “diverse book lists” will lead educators to [collections of worthy books](#) to share with students, and to organizations such as [We Need Diverse Books](#) that not only donate books to schools but work with publishers to ensure that previously underrepresented stories are told.

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