

Joy in January: Accessing Classroom Energy



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In the dead of winter, on a gray Monday afternoon, a class of freshmen could be forgiven for being sluggish; the sun hadn't penetrated Delaware clouds for several days. But rather than succumb to a case of "the Januaries," my III Form students hooked into the reading for that day, a scene from *Macbeth*. Thanks to some outrageous lines by Lady Macbeth – she said she'd do *what?! – suddenly everyone was involved*. What did this line mean, exactly, and was Lady Macbeth completely flipping gender stereotypes? Students weighed in, tested their ideas, and encouraged each other. For a while, I just listened, marveling at the exchange around the table and the energy in the room. These students generated such curiosity and collaboration in a 40-minute discussion of Shakespeare that I was launched into a joyful mood for the rest of the day.

In senior English, students themselves design and shape these collective, engaging moments; they write discussion questions and invite one another to build the conversation. One of our most illuminating classes happened on an icy cold winter Saturday morning just before the holiday break—again, not a time of day or year one might expect teenagers to be ripe and ready for intellectual epiphany. Nonetheless, the class dove into an exploration of the ending of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz, testing hypotheses and interpretations and building a lively exchange about the implications of the final chapters. Just for fun, discussion leaders Alex Hopkins '18 and Avery O'Brien '18 ended class with a trivia quiz; Akeem Martindale '18 claimed a clear victory, and we left class laughing about an elusive, telling narrative detail—Yunior coaches *baseball!* Of course!

These moments make me thankful for the classroom culture that drew me to St. Andrew's as a student and continually delights and motivates me as a teacher. Our students so clearly take joy in each other, in the stories and issues we study, and in the enterprise of learning and collaborating. In January, although it's chilly and grey and any of us might be tempted to feel dragged down by a head cold, our workload, a lack of sunshine, or other grumpy topics, at St. Andrew's we're also very likely to be buoyed by collective moments of immersion and discovery. In a way, this January paradox makes sense; we've been building toward these moments all semester.

I've been reading a collection of poems entitled, simply, *Joy*, in which poets like Ted Hughes, Craig Arnold, and Wislawa Szymborska describe moments of simplicity and intensity: the pleasure of hearing an old tractor roar to life, of peeling and eating grapefruit—"so sweet / a discipline"—or even of writing. For these poets, taking pleasure in a simple moment or intricate task connects people to one another and gives meaning and purpose.

These poems help me put my finger on how it feels to be in a St. Andrew's classroom, where students are investigating, noticing, hearing others' thinking, and connecting with each other. In January at St. Andrew's, our students generate contagious energy and joy, even at the most unpredictable times.