

## FEAR OF BORING

By Vicky Lim

James Joyce fussed with the overhead projector. He rolled it forward, then backward, then side to side, then twisted the stiff knob, hoping to enlarge the sentences on his sheet of transparency, which had been reduced to the height of a fingernail.

After a brief dance with the projector, Joyce, defeated but determined, turned it down and finally pushed it aside. He turned to the class and asked them to go back to their textbooks. He stood there. It was early September, and 27 students looked back with blank eyes.

Joyce, 23, has a tough job. It is his first semester student teaching at Jones College Prep High School. At the same time that he is a student himself, in his final semester at UIC, he must also teach his own class of students. He sympathizes with their lack of interest, but feels the pressure to engage them with enthusiasm.

“It’s one thing to be afraid of boring people,” Joyce says. “Most of the time I’m not even opposed to doing it. In fact, it feels terrific to bore some folks. But to be in a situation where you have volunteered yourself as entertainer, *and then be boring*, that’s one of the most depressing and discouraging things you can encounter.”

Joyce was explaining punctuation to a class of first-year students. “We were working on colons,” he says. “Or rather, I was supposed to be teaching them colons.” And given that the English language comes to Joyce as “an ugly second nature,” colons didn’t seem like a big deal—until the students sighed at their desks. Joyce paced the room. He sweated under his shirt. He called out names.

“Of course, no one knew the right answers,” he says. “Of course, I didn’t have the teacher key so it took me an extra fifteen seconds of mumbling to respond and correct them.”

For Joyce, the secret of success comes down to establishing a trust that he, as a teacher, knows what he’s talking about and that there is something to gain from student-teacher cooperation.

So when he prepares his lesson plans, Joyce tries to suspend himself as a teacher in order to enter the mindset of his students, to consider what they could possibly take away from a reading. Sometimes writing a lesson plan can take up to four hours.

“It takes time to change your way of thinking,” Joyce says. “It took a while for me to change my approach, and I have to ration myself several hours a day for fumbling around with my anxiety before buckling down and getting [the lesson plans] done. Most of the week I’m a jittery mess, but this seems to be the general consensus for most student teachers.”

In between those hours, Joyce averages about five hours of sleep each night. A typical day lasts from 7:30 in the morning until 4 o'clock or later. If he remembers to, he will take a nap once he bikes home, or he will have to wait for the Saturday afternoons when he can wake up feeling whole again.

“A big thing is getting sleep,” he says. “I had slept in once and missed the entire first period and I thought I was going to get fired.” Luckily he didn't.

Also contributing to his workload, Joyce gets involved with extracurricular activities, such as tutoring at the writing center, advising the student team that publishes the literary magazine, and trying to revive the school newspaper that disappeared two years ago.

“I realize that by being in the classrooms I'm taking away valuable teaching time from the real instructors,” Joyce says. “So I try to give back to them outside of the class by helping out with school events and groups.”

“Joyce has been a wonderful asset,” says Benjamin Dipman, English teacher and director of the Jones writing center. “Despite taking classes, [he] comes to school every day ready to confront the challenges that teachers face.”

One of the challenges is to handle the role of an authority figure. Joyce will tell you that he does it poorly. To help himself look like a teacher, he recently spent about \$300 on

new clothes. Recollecting that, Joyce points two fingers to his head and pulls an imaginary trigger.

“It helps to look the part,” Joyce says. “Or I wouldn’t take myself seriously either. I had to buy three new pairs of dress pants, five dress shirts, two pairs of shoes: brown and black. Ties. It’s an investment.”

After failing a couple math classes, then becoming an art major to “evade” any other math classes, then realizing his attempt at art was a waste of a semester, he decided teaching English was the most practical thing he could think of that coincided with his interest in literature.

“[But] the field isn’t for everyone,” Joyce says. “I think teaching and the English major in general sometimes attracts a lot of slackers. I don’t know how this happens, but I take pleasure in seeing the lazy dopes struggle with it. Nobody likes to see their interests polluted with half-wits and mopes.”

Joyce, who hopes to work for the city like his father, finds that his chosen profession is close to ideal. Interacting with a younger generation will keep him in a constant state of development, he says. Tucked beneath his arm is a paperback copy of *The Undiscovered Self* by Carl Jung, which he is reading in preparation for an upcoming lesson plan.

In the midst of a day's tasks, when Joyce has a few quiet moments, he will appreciate the architecture of the school, which is built like a maze; the well-lit interiors, and the student artwork that hangs on the walls. Looking outside of the windows, he can see the busy criss-cross of State and Harrison and farther ahead, a view of Grant Park.

"It's really surreal," he says. "I just hope that no one sees me drunk, that no one sees me running across the street when it's not a green light. I have to start being an adult, which I'm not very good at."