

# In Their Shoes

## How Rock Climbing Helped Me Understand My Students

By Jennifer McDaniel

Sweat slides down my back and clings to my already soaked T-shirt. My hands ache and slide despite the talc I've powdered them with. I reach for the next hold, a J-shaped nub of molded plastic protruding from the rock-climbing wall, about a foot above my head. When I try to lift my leg, keeping my knees bent as my instructor has so often admonished me to, my foot slips and I dangle precariously above the gymnasium floor. The hold remains just out of reach. If this were a real mountain, I'd be in serious trouble.

"Raise your left foot. The hold's right there." My instructor has been climbing for longer than I've been alive. He peers up at me, his hands wrapped around the rope—the only thing preventing me from plummeting 40 feet. I raise my foot. My arms shake with strain.

"Left! Your *left* foot." My face flushes. For what seems like the hundredth time, I've moved my right foot when I was clearly told to move the other. My instructor's tone conveys his frustration. No wonder I can't seem to make it to the top of the wall; I can't even keep my left straight from my right.

I signal that I want to descend. I won't make it to the top, at least not during tonight's class. My hands throb, and my sweaty hair falls into my eyes. As I slowly travel to the ground, I think *this is how my students feel*.

Call me egotistical if you will, but I am used to feeling intelligent and capable. I was the darling of my preschool and kindergarten classes, deemed gifted in early elementary school, and had not one but two short stories published in a national children's magazine by 6th grade. My report cards showcased row upon row of A's. In high school, my focus shifted to dating and its attendant social dramas. My grades dropped quite a bit, but I always took the most difficult classes available and even the occasional D never rocked my faith that if I *wanted* to get A's, I most certainly could. I proved myself right when I reapplied myself to my studies in college and graduated magna cum laude with departmental honors.

I speculate that among my fellow teachers, I'm not alone in this academic confidence. When it comes to our subject areas, we tend to be even more self-assured. As an English teacher, I've always particularly excelled in reading and writing. Thanks to this innate ability, I've never had the experience of reading a text and simply not comprehending it. Sure, I've found certain works challenging, but ultimately meaning has always revealed itself to me like scenery emerging from a cover of fog. This metaphor is an apt one because comprehending the written word is that natural an act for me; the cognitive strategies I use to decipher text are so ingrained that I am blissfully unaware of them.

As a new teacher, I have to admit that this adeptness has actually proved to be a handicap, though I didn't realize it at first. When my 9th graders would look up from their books and announce that they "didn't get it," my first response was inevitably to ask them to read it again. Surely, if they just slowed down and read the words a second time, the text would crack open, wholesale, like an oyster pried apart to reveal a pearl. If this second pass didn't work, I could offer graphic organizers galore, but often I ended up supplying the information myself. I could ask leading questions, too, but then I was just putting words into my students' mouths for them to spit back at me.

The problem remained that I fundamentally couldn't understand how it was possible to read something and not understand it. Sometimes my frustration built and I questioned my students' efforts. If one knew the words and their meanings, how could one *not* piece them together and understand? Maybe they simply weren't trying.

That was before I started rock climbing. My first climbing experience was during an Alaskan cruise and I'd had a blast. But that was a much smaller rock with plenty of nooks and crannies that were always where I wanted them to be and seemed to cradle my hands and feet. And because the instructors' livelihoods depended on us out-of-shape tourists having a swell time and returning to the ship glowing with our triumph over nature, they definitely made things easy for us. I'd been so excited by my cruise-ship success that I'd jumped to take the class back home and immediately found it to be far beyond my ability level.

Besides my basic inexperience with ropes and harnesses and general climbing technique, I discovered I had a sort of aural dyslexia when it came to physical commands. The number of times I raised the wrong foot or hand competed with how many times the instructor had to repeat his most basic directions. When I was plastered to the rock wall, I had to be told to bend my knees at least three times before the appropriate synapses fired and I actually did it. Having achieved this simple movement, my concentration would lapse while I tried to remember which was my left hand and I'd have to be reminded, yet again, to *just bend my knees, for God's sake*. If in theory I understood what the instructor's words meant, then why couldn't my body translate them into the appropriate action?

Adding to the embarrassment of knowing that my classmates were staring up at me miming the Pledge of Allegiance so I knew which hand to shift was my instructor's obvious frustration with me. He clearly could not understand what was so difficult about his instructions; he was telling me what to do as clearly as he could, and I still wasn't doing it. Was I even trying? When he corrected me in a tone that barely disguised his opinion that I was a hopeless case, I truly knew what it must feel like to be one of my students. I understood what a tremendous act of will it is to continue to try when even your teacher has lost faith in you.

The over-60 grandmother in my class made it to the top of the wall before I did, though I did eventually make it. Now that I understand the depth of the frustration and embarrassment my students must feel when they fail to understand what they read, I am more determined than ever to have them also experience the pride and exhilaration I felt when I finally succeeded in scaling the wall. I may not yet know all the best techniques to help them achieve at their greatest possible levels, but I will never forget how it feels to be one of them.

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