On my first placement, I taught English to three Year 9 classes (two all-boys and one all-girls) of about 25–30 students each. Thanks to a two-week out-of-campus program in the middle of the term, I got to know students from two of the classes very well, and had a good rapport with them. Once we were back at the school campus for regular classes, we began revision work for the end-of-term exams. For the English exam, the Year 9s would have to write a text response to one of two questions based on John Steinbeck's Depression-era novel, *Of Mice and Men*, which the students had studied the previous term.

Revision work entailed re-familiarising the students with the novel's plot, themes and characters. The novel explores issues of race, class, gender, age and disability through the story of the close friendship and loyalty between two migrant workers. My lessons were designed to cater for multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993), and involved activities for the whole class, such as character mapping and discussions on the novel’s major themes. I also had individual activities, such as compiling word banks and writing sample opening, closing and body paragraphs for a text response essay. And I had competitive activities, where I would make a fairly open statement such as ‘Curley’s wife is particularly cruel to Crooks' and students would have to find passages or sections in the text that would prove or disprove my statement.

The activities worked well with the two classes I knew. However, with the third class, there were a few students who were quite disruptive (nothing too reprehensible, just talking and joking in class). I tried to begin a discussion about race, and the use and effect of the ‘n-word’ in the text – at which stage the talkative kids gasped dramatically, and one of them said, “Miss, that’s racist!” I instinctively rolled my eyes and continued to ask questions, but one student interrupted me a couple of times when I said ‘race’, by saying, “It’s ‘ethnicity’, miss.”

I paused, and gave a quick (and no doubt deeply flawed) definition of the two words – race and ethnicity – and once again tried to keep the lesson going. I was quite certain that the student’s sole intention was to interrupt the flow of the lesson and maybe to get attention. The lesson was not exactly disastrous, but it did not go as I had planned, and the students were unable to get to the independent work that I
had prepared for them (scouring the text for quotes to act as captions for the cartoons I had done of three key moments in the plot-line).

Self-Evaluation and Mentor Feedback

The main drawback of the lesson was my own investment in the structure and the destination I had visualised for it. At the end of the hour, I wanted the students to have accomplished certain goals, and to have done so through the completion of tasks that I was certain were enjoyable and instructive (if they would only get into them). Having prepared the resources, I was determined to use them – my stubbornness was reinforced by the success (as I saw it) of the lesson and its activities with the other two class groups.

My mentor, who at one point leaped in and gave three of the disruptive boys Friday afternoon detentions after coming down heavily on them, reminded me that I needed to learn to discipline my students whenever necessary. He saw the situation as a classroom behaviour/management issue, and told me not to hold back with giving out detentions. While I have to concede his point to a certain extent, I still believe that a bit more time and flexibility on my part would have resulted in a far better lesson.

Revisions to Lesson Plan – After Peer-Based Discussion

In preparation for this class, I should have factored in my lack of extensive prior interaction with the class. I should also have taken on board that since the text we were revising had been studied the previous term, the students were bound to have forgotten some of what they had learnt, and they may not have brought to the table the enthusiasm that a new text could generate. I might have:

1. Given the class a clear overview of what we were doing and why, at the start of the lesson, followed by a quick breakdown of what needed to be done by exam week.
2. Built in a reward at the end of the class for completing activities successfully and on time.
3. Thought of and implemented possible consequences for not staying on task or for disrupting the class; not necessarily detention, but something more immediate that would deal with the situation then and there, not carry over to the next class or day.

Some strategies for managing the class discussion might have been:

4. To introduce the ‘button’ system where each time a student spoke, s/he gave up a button – thus keeping the contributions from students balanced.
5. To have a Q&A session at the end of class (or have students submit questions for discussion for the next class), if time is at premium.