Waiting for Godot:
A Reminder of the Young Adult Learning Experience

Setting: Typical biology classroom. Teacher at front of room. Several rows of seats or desks are filled with students.

We join a biology class already in progress.

Michael, a well-dressed young man, is holding his hand in the air, perhaps waving it—obviously in response to a question posed by the teacher.

TEACHER: Perhaps someone other than Michael (gives Michael a smile/nod and he slowly and reluctantly lowers his hand) would like to answer the question? (No response from the other students as the teacher pauses.) Maria?

Maria has her head down on the desk. Drool slips from her mouth.

MARIA: Mmmm? (Raising her head—confused look.) What’s that, Ms. Jones? I must have been dreaming.

TEACHER: The question was “Based on what we’ve studied about respiration, do you think a hummingbird has a greater rate of respiration than a sloth?”

Maria smacks her lips and tries, half-heartedly, to wake up.

MARIA: I have no clue, Ms. Jones. Puts her head back down.

TEACHER: Maria! (Resignation shows on her face. She glances around the room.) Simone?

SIMONE: (Filing her nails with an emery board and turned around talking to Akem.) … so anyway, Amanda told James who told her cousin told Tony…

AKEEM: (Cuts off Simone.) So Tony has a sister?

SIMONE: (With a warning tone and shaking her index finger.) Boyfriend …

AKEEM: Sorry.

SIMONE: Anyway, and Tony’s sister told Tony….

TEACHER: Simone! Let’s focus on respiration.

SIMONE: Yeah, Ms. Jones (Turning in her seat, slightly annoyed.)

TEACHER: I thought you might like to answer the question.

SIMONE: No, thank you. (With attitude barely in check. Turns in her seat back to Akem.) But anyway…

Ms. Jones rubs her eyes, pulls her hair, and rubs her lucky rabbit’s foot.

FRANK: (Hat on backwards and sitting somehow uniquely in his chair, with a thick accent, perhaps affected speech.) You, Ms. Uh …whatever. We obviously don’t know the answer or whatever you want, so why don’t you just tell us.

TEACHER: Because, Frankie, I think you will get more out of it if you think about it and try to draw some conclusions by yourself.

FRANK: (Snorts.) Whatever. Rolls his eyes.

Katrina looking scared. Half raises her hand—lowers it. Half raises her hand—starts to lower it again.

TEACHER: (Hopeful.) Katrina, what do you think?

KATRINA: Um … um … I don’t know. I … I was just stretching my arm.

Teacher sighs audibly.

Michael’s hand goes up.

TEACHER: (Resigned). Yes, Michael?

MICHAEL: (Puppy dog mentality.) A hummingbird because they are tiny and can flap their wings at a faster rate … Right, Ms. Jones? Right? (Imagine a panicking dog asking to be petted.)

TEACHER: (Screaming in frustration on the inside.) Yes, Michael, that’s good enough.

TEACHER: Our next review question. Fade to black.

What is happening in this scenario? The students appear to be uninvolved and uninspired. They seem to be passing time until they are released from this class to go on to the next, whether at the high school or college level. They are waiting. Waiting for their Godot. Waiting for Godot is the ground-breaking, controversial play by Samuel Beckett in which no action occurs except for the characters passing time while waiting for Godot, of whom they know nothing about. The focus of the play centers around the question of what happens to people while they wait for someone or something.

In this play, two tramps, Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) wait for Godot on a desolate road with only a rock and a leafless tree. Tired, hungry, and bored, they wait. They talk continuously but about nothing. Repeatedly the play stops and then starts again as the waiting resumes. What are they doing? Waiting. For whom? Godot. Godot doesn’t come. They talk gibberish for hours on end with punctuated remarks as “What are we waiting for?” and “Nothing is happening.”

Students spend an enormous amount of time in classes waiting. Waiting for what? Many times they wait for the end of the class. Many times they wait for the instructor to give them the answer. Many times they wait for lunch. In essence, we see the students as Vladimir and Estragon passing time while they wait for their Godot. Vladimir speaks to the mundane routine when he says “I get used to the muck as I go along. … The essential doesn’t change.” Estragon replies with “Nothing to be done” (Beckett, 1954, p. 14B).

We see Godot representing knowledge—the pinnacle of education. Some biology students would rather pass the time in short chatty dialogue, texting, or sleeping than earnestly thinking for themselves in times of academic challenge. The students just want the answer. “Just tell us what we need to know for the exam,” is often their message. In the following passage from Godot, the struggle between Gogo and Didi is evident in trying to understand the meaning of the question.

VLADIMIR: I’m curious to hear what he (Godot) has to offer. Then we’ll take it or leave it.

ESTRAGON: What exactly did we ask him for?

VLADIMIR: Were you not there?

ESTRAGON: I can’t have been listening.