

“Why I Teach”

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“You’re leaving journalism to become a high school teacher?! Are you crazy?!” It was the most frequent question I heard 10 years ago when I decided to leave my job at a well-respected magazine to become a teacher. What those questioners didn’t know is that journalism and teaching are not all that different. In both fields, you have a chance to put your beliefs into action. In both fields, you have a chance to make a difference in people’s lives. In both fields, you work with bright, creative people who have a passion for what they do. In both fields, you have the opportunity to excel if you are willing to throw your heart and soul into what you do. Teaching is better, though, because you have a chance to kindle a flame for learning – and an opportunity to shape the future.

First, my beliefs about teaching are pretty straightforward and are inextricably tied to my personal teaching style. I expect from all my students – and from myself – hard work and an open mind. I knock myself out to make my classes engaging and relevant by varying instruction, taking classes, attending workshops and conferences, collaborating with colleagues across the curriculum, embracing and testing new technologies and methods, and by listening to what my students say they need. I have high expectations for all my students and convey that to them. I expect them to take responsibility for their learning and preparation, but am ready and willing to provide either the helping hand or kick in the pants they need as they grow into those expectations. Each class is meticulously planned, varied in pacing and activity, and designed to make sure that kids at all ability levels can succeed. (Nothing is better than when the bell rings and a kid says “Already? This class always goes fast.”) I encourage students to keep an open mind about school, history, and each other; I try to model that spirit by encouraging questions and by trying to get to know a little about each student that has nothing to do with class. I also know that there is no “best” teaching style or learning method and aim to differentiate lessons and assessments to try to meet differing student needs.

Teaching is not for sissies. It is demanding, time consuming, and sometimes, emotionally draining. It produces often intangible rewards, but it is worth every minute. Nothing is better than witnessing the look on a student’s face when he/she has the “a ha” moment of understanding. You can’t touch it, but it warms you to the core and will fuel an entire month of grading essays and planning. I also take great pride when a student tells me he or she plans to become a social studies teacher because of my class – especially when it is a student that I thought was not paying attention. Sometimes the small tangible victories are the best – the kid who learns to keep a notebook organized or the one who comes to class when attendance had been a problem in the past. It is also rewarding to collaborate with bright, creative colleagues who are dedicated to teaching, willing to share their knowledge and experience, and working feverishly to find ways to reach their students.

Trying to say why I believe I am an outstanding teacher is difficult for me. I was taught from an early age that actions speak louder than words, but I believe a good teacher models enthusiasm, intensity, involvement, humor, and patience. I try to model my love of teaching and of history on a daily basis. I enjoy my students and my subject and the kids know it. I think they appreciate my enthusiasm even if they don’t share it. If I don’t know something, I try to find out – or better yet, challenge the kids to find out and tell me. I work hard to vary the methods I use in class because I know students learn differently and remember things best when it has relevance to their lives. I’m not afraid of a disastrous lesson plan because I know there is value in failure. When I make mistakes, I tell the kids (if they haven’t already figured it out). But I keep trying. There is no down time in my classes because I believe it is my responsibility to utilize every minute to engage and entice students into wanting to learn more. I ask questions of my students because I’m interested in them and in what they have to say and I want them to know that, but I’m also trying to work on their critical thinking skills. I participate in or lead numerous activities in school aimed at discovering ways to help all students succeed, but I also try to support my students in their extracurricular activities and interests. A sense of humor is essential and I think my students understand that I’m willing to make a fool of myself if it will help them learn. I have danced (badly), sung (even worse), and held yardsticks on either side of my head while lumbering through the aisles to show how a longhorn moves. Finally, I am patient with my students – remembering always that they are just kids – and trying to understand that there are myriad reasons why students succeed and equally numerous reasons why they struggle.

The factors that influenced me to become a teacher are mostly personal ones. I believe teaching is an opportunity to contribute to the greater good. I had good teachers who made me want to look beyond myself and I hope to serve in that capacity for kids today. I love that the job is different every day and every period. I believe I can make a difference.

So am I crazy? I think those people got it all wrong 10 years ago. Although there have been moments when I still question my sanity, the answer is clear: I wouldn’t trade the classroom for anything.