

Optimism for Breakfast and Realism for Lunch: The New-Teacher Diet

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If you were anything like me as a new teacher, you were oozing with optimism before the start of the school year. Were you a bit nervous? Yes, but that was not really an issue, since you were so confident in your ability to relate to, communicate with, and teach a different species—teenagers. Maybe you were even bold enough to have chosen to work at a school with a “reputation.” That would not be a problem either, because *Freedom Writers* was your favorite movie. Therefore, you’re fully prepared for the attitude and deeply rooted apathy of your students. There was nothing a little tough love and creativity couldn’t fix.

However, now you are one month in, and you know both your evolution as a teacher and the learning of your students is not going to be a smooth linear progression. To prevent burnout as a new teacher, you need equal doses of optimism and reality. A great way to ensure you are getting both, is to relate your utter confusion as a new teacher to the confusion some of your students experience in the classroom as they try to adapt to the endurance race that is education.

What New Teachers and Students have in Common

I can say from experience that as a new teacher I was not aware of just how much I needed to learn until I sat with a group of veteran teachers during our curriculum planning session. As I tried my best to be attentive, I couldn’t help but notice how lost I felt. It was as if they were speaking a different language and doing so at lightning speed. As veteran teachers, they had adapted and most likely forgotten what it is like to be the new teacher trying to keep up with the plethora of acronyms tossed about casually in conversation and the new classroom strategies and methods. Trying to find research on my own that would help me get a handle on new strategies and classroom management proved to be challenging. Reynolds (1992) said it best when she claimed, “for the most part, research on teaching has been conducted by researchers interested in teaching rather than by teachers interested in research” (p. 2). Veteran teachers aren’t oblivious to the fact that a new teacher may feel lost, but they are most likely unaware of the deep confusion over seemingly simple matters. As a new teacher, rather than asking for clarification and seeming like the hopelessly confused new hire, you keep your lack of understanding to yourself. Luckily, it’s not hard to hide how confused you are because all you have to do is smile and tell your mentors (if you have any) that you are doing fine when they ask. Why risk being viewed as not well-suited for the job when you can just waste time and energy trying to do it on your own, right?

As if my personal confusion as a new teacher was not disheartening enough, I was also faced with the doubt of how effective I was in the classroom with my students. I found myself constantly questioning if they understood the lesson, if the material was challenging enough, or if it was too challenging. Considering teenagers are not known for their great communication, I did not push beyond their disinterested nods. Unfortunately, the class assignments that I received from my students confirmed my suspicion. They did not fully understand the material.

Frustrated, I thought to myself, “Why stay silent and not reach out?” That is when it hit me. I was doing the exact same thing in all my meetings. I was not being clear about my confusion. As I started to confront the reasons why I too was silent, I began to sympathize more with my students and consider what I could change within my teaching practice to create an environment that welcomes questions, encourages group activity, and puts progress over perfection.

Reflect and Test

As a new teacher I was not forthcoming about my confusion because of fear. I feared being judged, wasting time, and being a burden. I wondered if my students felt the same way too, and, therefore, opted for silence instead of verbalizing their confusion. Maybe there was an atmosphere of urgency in my classroom that hindered students from asking necessary questions, similar to the work meetings I attended. How could I help my students associate asking questions with gaining knowledge instead of wrongly associating asking questions with stupidity?

There were two things I believed had the potential to change my classroom atmosphere: I could model questioning, and I could incorporate more group activity. I imagined that in small groups my students may have an easier time taking risks by both answering and asking questions they would not normally ask in front of the whole class. I made this assumption based on the ever-growing correlation I began to see between my life as a new teacher and my students’ lives in the classroom. I considered how I would prefer voicing my thoughts, questions, or concerns to a small group of teachers simply because it was more comfortable. I decided to test it out on my students.

Group Activity Works

I found that students not only spoke more within their small groups, but some would even venture to explain things to their peers. I was shocked. Whenever one student noticed they understood something more than

a classmate, even just a little more, they were eager to help. The anonymous quote, “You don’t really understand something until you can teach it...,” was playing out right in front of my eyes. Gillies (2004) explained in his research on cooperative learning groups that when students give help, they reorganize and clarify their own understanding. This may help them to learn the material better than before.

I initially thought of group activities only as a safe space for my students, so they would feel more comfortable talking. But I could see their growth and confidence and their ability to collaborate and communicate in this type of environment. They began to see that they had something to offer. Chiriac (2014) found that, “When working interactively with others, students learn to inquire, share ideas, clarify differences, problem-solve, and construct new understandings” (p. 1). Now I could walk around and listen to their conversations and hear things I would need to address or clarify later or just happily observe as students took ownership of their learning. In discussion with their classmates, most students weren’t afraid of saying the “wrong” thing. It didn’t end there though. Now that I had gotten them comfortable and talking, the next thing to do was introduce and demonstrate the importance of asking questions.

There is No Such Thing as a Dumb Question

I wanted to demonstrate questioning strategically throughout my class time with students. If I could ask questions before the lesson, during and after the assignment or group activity, maybe my students would begin to adapt, and asking questions would become the norm. For my questioning to be effective, I had to frame my questions from two different perspectives. One from the angle of an educator who wants students to understand the ideas we discuss, and the other from the perspective of a participant, someone who didn’t already know the material. The purpose of the latter is to anticipate questions and any misconceptions students may have and voice those, so they know it is okay to ask such questions.

I would say things like, “I wonder why...,” “I don’t understand...,” and “Does that mean...?” Rothstein, Santana, and Minigan (2015) found that questions do not need to be higher order thinking questions and expecting this immediately from all students will not allow them to think divergently. When students hear these types of questions, they open up more and ask similar questions that they are quietly ruminating on in their mind but may be afraid to ask. Rob Evans, a high school teacher, also found when students join in on asking questions that teachers purposefully use later as their topic of discussion, students are proud and take ownership of their learning (Rothstein et al., 2015). When students ask

their own questions, it leads to great discussion among peers, and they feel more in control of their learning. The main purpose of my questions is to encourage my students to also ask questions. The goal is to create a classroom environment where asking questions is just as impressive, if not more so, than having the right answer. A study by Floyd (1960), as cited in Albergaria-Almeida (2010), noted that teachers ask nearly all of the questions. I may be the one modeling questioning, but I should not be the one leading the discussion. My students caused me to discover something for my teaching practice and in my personal development as a new teacher. Questions are a learner’s best friend.

My optimism had told me I would be a great teacher and that being a great teacher meant immediate results. Results were great test scores, perfect classroom management, and complete buy-in from 100% of my students 100% of the time. Reality, however, informed me it was all a process, and that I should not expect anything immediately. Although incorporating questioning and group activity was beneficial for me, things are not perfect. They don’t need to be. It is still a process. I must take everything one day at a time to properly manage levels of optimism and reality, because I continue to need both optimism and reality in my new-teacher diet.

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