

Being Okay with Imperfection in My First Months of Teaching



It's early October. My teaching coach is in my classroom, again, as my students work in groups to prepare presentations on various types of natural selection that are apparent in the present day. One group discusses the sickle cell trait and is curious about its inheritance; another student explains to me how HIV medications stop working as the virus evolves. But my eyes dart around the room—one student is wandering from table to table, several students have their cell phones out, and three groups are calling for me to come help them. I rush around the room, hurrying through each interaction without really engaging with my students or encouraging them to explore their questions. I feel frantic and frustrated that not all my students are engaged, and only half did their preliminary research, which had been assigned for homework.

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on my last? This self expectation is not only unrealistic, but also discredits the knowledge and expertise that veteran teachers have and develop through years and years of trial, error, and growth.

Later that week, I meet with my coach to discuss the lesson and my teaching goals. “It seems that you are so stuck on the few things that are going wrong in your classroom that you aren’t seeing the many things that are going right,” my teaching coach writes after this evaluation. This line sums up much of what the first few months of teaching have been like for me. I’ve been a high achiever for as long as I can remember. Despite my awareness that teaching was going to be challenging, it’s proven much more daunting than I had expected. My usual “hard work equals success” formula hasn’t played out, and I’m left feeling defeated and hopeless in my job for the first time in my life.

It’s early November, and my Advanced Placement (AP) seniors are frustrated with the gene database we’ve been using to investigate evolutionary relationships. Students are in my room, rushing to turn in late work before I jet off to the airport. I’m on my way to Denver for the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) conference, overwhelmed as I have been since early September—this time because my grades are due Monday morning and I will be busy all weekend. Despite my stress, I’m excited to learn from so many impressive and experienced teachers.

I check in at the conference information desk and begin to notice all the biology displays, teaching supplies, and people meandering around the big conference hall. I slip the lanyard they hand me around my neck. It says biology teacher under my name, and I feel proud to own that title. I'm met with hugs and stories from other teachers as soon as I arrive, and we quickly begin mapping out our workshopping plans for the next two days of teacher professional development. I want to learn more about aligning AP standards and curriculum, using scientific practices, and creating student-centered lessons. One workshop talks about math computations and enzymes, and I fail to see how I could use what the presenter is saying in my classroom without designing myriad scaffolds for my seniors. Two other teachers propose literacy strategies for increasing student comprehension and making thinking visible. It makes so much sense that I gather up all the resources they've brought to share. In every presentation, I jot down notes and leave with scrawls of ideas, unsure of how I will implement them all on Monday morning.

Similar to many of the teachers attending the conference, I approach my practice of teaching with a growth mindset, recognizing that there are always ways to improve my pedagogy, classroom culture, my relationships with kids, behavior management, my use of scientific practices, assessments, scaffolding—the list goes on. I've never had a problem listing the things that I'm not yet good at, the things that I should do better, the things I should work on. As I stroll from workshop to workshop, the list of "things I should be better at" grows longer. I can't help feeling overwhelmed by the new ideas and the reality of implementing them in my own classroom back in Boston. On my way to yet another informational session, I get caught up in the hallway chatting with Jim Clark and Samantha Johnson, two veteran biology teachers whom I can only aspire to be like one day. Both of them interviewed me during KSTF's interview weekend. Our discussion starts conversationally, as they ask me about my new job, teaching AP Biology, life in Boston. I begin to describe my struggles teaching AP Bio, my lack of confidence, my plethora of failure.

It doesn't take long for Jim to offer a kernel of wisdom, as he often does, to our conversation. It's perhaps the most important takeaway from the entire conference: "Well, you shouldn't be a good teacher yet. It's your first year. It takes 10 years to really know what you're doing," he states quite candidly.

It takes me a moment to really process the mixed reaction I have towards what he

is saying. I want so badly to be great right now, and to give my students everything that they need to be successful, but that's not really the way learning works, even for teachers.

Why is it that I expect to be as good a teacher on my first day on the job as I would like to be on my last? This self-expectation is not only unrealistic, but also discredits the knowledge and expertise that veteran teachers have and develop through years and years of trial, error, and growth. Learning to accept my imperfection as a teacher, and to strategically learn to grow, fixing one or two dilemmas at a time, may be the only way that I will make it in this challenging profession. And, honestly, the ability to grow and improve is one reason why I'm called to this profession; accepting that I'm not perfect yet is part of this equation.

After a long weekend away from my students, I am excited to greet them Monday morning as a slightly less hypocritical teacher. One who is willing to do the same thing that I ask of my students—to try, to fail, and to grow because it's okay to not be perfect. In fact, imperfection may even be integral to the process of learning. This perspective gives me a new hope for the teacher I might be one day, not tomorrow, or next year, but 10 years down the road, when maybe I'll finally know what I am doing.

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