

Raise Your Hand: What's Teaching Taught You?



Teaching has allowed me to take a hard look at my perfectionist tendencies because I cannot possibly be perfect for every student, every day. In a related way, teaching has highlighted to me the value of humility and honesty. I now strive to listen to students' complaints or issues with an open heart and mind instead of being defensive. This is still a challenge for me. I try to be transparent about ways I am working to improve and errors I make in pedagogy and content. When I admit missteps, I find students become more trusting and more willing to do the work that I ask of them.

– MARY CHIN, SENIOR FELLOW

Teaching has taught me to learn about my strengths and weaknesses as a professional and as a person, and it's taught me that working collaboratively is much more productive and effective than working alone. It's forced me to face

what I need to work on (such as avoiding confrontation) and celebrate what I'm great at (such as generating super creative ideas!). I've learned to listen to others for advice and feedback, and have seen greater outcomes from collaborating with my colleagues than I would have produced alone.

– **KRISTIN MONGELLI, SENIOR FELLOW**

Teaching requires an extraordinary amount of emotional resiliency. In order to be an effective teacher, I need to show my students that I care and that I'm invested in them. As a result, I get more student buy-in to what I'm teaching, but I also have become a sounding board for students' personal struggles—suicidal thoughts, self-harm, bullying, perceived injustice, you name it. We have protocol to follow to help these students, but recently I've been learning the importance of understanding how these student traumas can take an emotional and physical toll on me as a teacher, as well as how to cope.

– **BEVERLY STUCKWISCH, SENIOR FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me that our system is not necessarily set up to value the whole person that each of our students is. Because of this, we have to be intentional in showing our students that we value who they are inside and outside of our classrooms. This communication may not always be verbal, often is very subtle, and requires consistent reflection. I have to continue to ask myself: What messages am I sending with my daily choices? Are they consistent with what I say I value? Not easy.

– **ALLIE WEBB, SENIOR FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me to ask for help, and that to do so is a strength rather than a weakness.

– **SARAH SPECTOR, 2016 TEACHING FELLOW**

Teaching has made me realize that behind every student there is a story. No one makes the decision to miss class, stop trying, or sleep through a lesson without a reason. I am learning the importance of understanding students' stories before making judgments based on their actions in class. Before I can help students understand the beauty of the Pythagorean Theorem, they need to be safe and fed and feel cared for. While I can't always personally make sure these needs are met, understanding this allows me to feel empathy for students who might feel difficult to work with. I know I am a better teacher when I acknowledge their needs and find a way to meet them.

– **EMMA VIERHELLER, SENIOR FELLOW**

Emma's answer made me realize there is a story behind every teacher, too. The teachers that go on their phone during class instead of interacting with students have a reason for doing so. The teachers that seemingly try to sabotage collaborative efforts, like common labs and assessments, didn't start teaching with that goal in mind. In many teaching communities, it's a crime to bad-mouth students, but it seems perfectly acceptable to assume our colleagues are incompetent, malicious people. One of the biggest privileges of being a teacher and not an administrator is that I don't have to decide who gets tenure and who gets fired. Therefore, since I can't control who I work with, I get to control my approach to working with them. I choose to assume that all teachers have positive intentions, and I view it as my job to uncover and understand them.

– **LYUDMILA SHEMYAKINA, SENIOR FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me the importance of language. Every decision we make about how we communicate—structure, diction, tone—has an impact, positive or negative. Optimizing the positive potential of language requires constant analysis of our own language from an empathetic lens towards our audience. While at times it is a terrifying task, when done appropriately, teachers have enormous power for good.

– CHRIS LIPSKI, 2013 TEACHING FELLOW

Teaching has taught me to ask. Are students not doing what you want? Ask. Are your colleagues struggling to collaborate effectively? Ask. Do you feel like your administrators are over- or under-managing your department? Ask. Are there opportunities you would like to take advantage of to grow? Ask. In need of fresh ideas? Ask. Do you just want a really long hug? Ask (an adult). Assumptions can not only be harmful, they also take away your power to make change. There's nothing harder to deal with than a lack of personal agency in a job that requires so much of your time, energy, spirit, heart and mind.

– SARAH BERGER, 2013 TEACHING FELLOW

Teaching has taught me that I don't truly understand what our society expects from education. I had a clearer view of what I thought the purpose of education was before I became a teacher. Now I see more of the nuances. I see the underlying principles behind our policies and standards as educators. I see how some students fail to fit that mold. I see how school structures, built to align with our vision as educators, can support or exclude students. I see that teachers are gatekeepers and coauthors of our students' progress in life, and what a hefty load to bear that can be, and what radiant hymns ring out when they surpass our expectations. As a scientist, I am uncomfortable with the amount of subjectivity I bring to my job everyday, but as a human being I am equally uncomfortable with the amount of objectivity my profession requires.

– KATRINA JONES, 2015 TEACHING FELLOW

Teaching has taught me to have more patience and understanding for my students. Many students have so many challenges to overcome at home that they need care and concern to succeed at school.

– **KIM LINTKER, SENIOR FELLOW**

I've learned that there are some core psychological needs as a teacher-human that impact student learning. Two of these are control and consistency. If we think of these two needs along a continuum, they can be hindrances when expressed on either end of the spectrum. Extreme control can stifle student agency, but at the opposite end, chaos can ensue. While being consistent provides students with a set of clarity and predictability, it can lead to monotony. Balance is key.

– **ANDREW WILD, SENIOR FELLOW**

People matter more than ideas. Ideas matter more than things.

– **DAN VOSS, 2016 TEACHING FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me that students are incredibly perceptive. Students come to your classroom every day, waiting for how you're going to interact with them. Are you going to treat them like they have to be there, or are you going to treat them like you want them to be there? A student can tell and feel what you are thinking—and respond accordingly. If you treat students like you want them to be there, then in both your minds they will want to be there. This makes for an enjoyable, positive and productive student-teacher relationship.

– **ANTHONY TEDALDI, 2016 TEACHING FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me how much there is still for me to learn. I suspect there are few professions as humbling as teaching. Every time I feel like I truly have something figured out, my students, my classroom, or my school throws a wrench into the mix and makes it clear I am still at the beginning. Every little challenge met leads to bigger more interesting problems to solve. Luckily this fuels me, especially when I get to tackle challenges in a team while learning from my fellow

teachers and my students.

– **HEATHER BUSKIRK, SENIOR FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me to stop being an adult all the time and to not take myself *too* seriously. “Yes, I’ll eat that awful-looking blue donut you made for me! Yes, I’ll wear those awkward school polo shirts every Friday. Yes, I’ll dance to Fergalicious for your silly spirit day.”

– **BEN GRAVES, SENIOR FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me to be patient. I won’t always connect immediately with students, students will need directions repeated, and I will spend time in meetings. There is much to wait for, but waiting will pay off in the end.

– **ERIN OAKLEY, 2016 TEACHING FELLOW**

Teaching has taught me that there is far, far more going on in the lives of my students than I can see or anticipate when they walk into my classroom (or than I was remotely aware of when I was in high school). Sometimes things (friend drama, a social embarrassment, etc.) that from an outside adult perspective seem inconsequential are all-consuming to the teen in front of me—and no less real for their temporary nature. Other times students return from things that, again, from an outside adult perspective, seem soul-crushing (loss of a parent to suicide, accident, cancer, or murder; a sibling fighting leukemia; an abusive home life) with such remarkable resilience that it both humbles and amazes me. I have learned how hard it is to find the balance between being understanding that this background tapestry can make it challenging for some students to succeed or even focus in my classroom—and maintaining my standards, expectations, and consistency (or, looked at differently, that to remove my standards, expectations, and consistency is often not the kindness it might seem). I have also learned that I cannot ignore my own background tapestry; I cannot let teaching be so all-consuming that everything else starts to unravel, because this in turn will impact

my teaching (in addition to my mental health). I haven't struck this balance, but I've acknowledged I need to work towards it. First step, right?

– **KATRINA CORNELL, 2014 TEACHING FELLOW**

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