

TEACHING WITH HUMOR, COMPASSION AND CONVICTION

Helping our students become
literate, considerate, passionate
human beings

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Introduction

Laughter and joy should be a part of every class. That doesn't mean you need to turn your classroom into a stand-up comedy club where you are the featured headliner. Far from it. As literacy teachers, our goal is to teach our students how to read, write, and communicate clearly and articulately so that they can understand others and make themselves understood. You could do this in a classroom where students are required to be serious, keep their heads down, and work, work, work all the time. But why would you want to? I'd rather have dental surgery than teach in a classroom like that. (That was an exaggeration for the purposes of the story. Please do not tell my dentist.) During the school year, we spend the majority of our waking hours at school, and so do our students. That's way too much time to waste being miserable and stressed out. We owe it to them, and ourselves, to make our classrooms places of joy.

In order to help our students, we need to help ourselves first. As flight attendants remind us in their safety message before take-off, "Please secure your own oxygen mask first before attempting to assist others. You will be no help to anyone if you are not breathing."

So, are you breathing? How are you feeling today? Take a moment and really think about it. Are you healthy? Happy? Ready to give your absolute best self to your students? Or are you stressing about the pile of marking you need to do, the student you just can't seem to reach, or the administrator who has dropped yet another pile of paperwork on your already overflowing plate? Perhaps your stresses are coming from home. Are you feeling pulled in too many directions? Unfortunately, if you're not engaged and enjoying yourself, chances are, neither are your students.

Teaching is a challenging profession. And no one understands those challenges better than other teachers. That's why we need to stick together and work together and enjoy the roller-coaster ride that is education. You know how, when you go to a conference or a professional development session or sometimes even a staff meeting, most of the time it's not what happens in the meeting that's most important, but what happens in the breaks? What's important are those conversations you have with fellow teachers during the quiet times, the conversations that linger with you long after you've lost the handouts and forgotten the name of the expert who was brought in to save the day. It's those chats with other teachers, the ones who are living the same life as you, solving the same problems, coming up with new ideas, trying to meet the needs of a diverse population with fewer and fewer resources.

This book is *that* conversation. It's not full of pie-in-the-sky ideas that sound really good on paper but just don't fly in the classroom. It takes into account that both teachers and students are (*gasp!*) real people, with real lives, real families,

Teachers need to be well so that we can deal with all the things we might face in the classroom. We need to be strong so that we can help our students be strong. And we need to be literate so that we can model the love of literacy for our students.

and real feelings. It acknowledges the fact that most of us are doing the best job we possibly can to make school a positive experience for all of our students.

I'm a teacher just like you. And I know. I know what it's like to love your students so much that you cry over them at night. I also know what it's like to be so frustrated and tired that you'd almost rather jump out the window than teach the next class. But one thing I know for sure is how lucky we are to get to work with young people every day. Our students are funny and curious and interesting and have much to teach us, at the same time we are teaching them.

We all need different things in order to be productive, healthy members of society. And, let's face it, we are all better teachers when we are at the top of our game. We can never underestimate the power we wield in the classroom and in the lives of the children we work with every day. I have kept this quote with me at every school I've worked at because it sums up the importance of using that power for the good of all of our students:

I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized. (Ginott, 1972)

This book is broken into short chapters that you can read in succession or on their own:

- Chapter 1 is the sciencey-part of the book. It's where I look to the experts to prove what most of us already know to be true—that learning without engagement is not real learning at all. We will look at the science surrounding the importance of engagement through humor, compassion, and conviction. It is also about how we can create a healthy classroom climate. This means getting to know our students and setting up our classrooms so that everyone can learn and grow to the best of their ability. Every year we get new students with new gifts and new challenges. Getting to know what those are is important if we want to reach kids where they're at and challenge them to grow, both as literacy learners and as human beings.
- Chapter 2 is where we get started on those three elements of literacy teaching, starting with humor. The chapter looks at how and when to use it, along with hands-on activities that use humor to engage students in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
- Chapter 3 deals with the importance of compassion. How do we teach compassion through literacy? We do it by reading aloud from texts, both fiction and nonfiction, that inspire feelings of compassion. We do it by guiding our students toward books they can relate to and we know they will love. We do it by giving them the freedom to create fictional stories in which characters demonstrate compassion (or not) and the chance to write through things that are personal and difficult. And we allow for a safe, supportive space where everyone can share their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in a respectful manner.
- Chapter 4 is the call to action. It's where I discuss the importance of helping our students explore their interests and find their passions. It's about helping them figure out how to express their opinions respectfully, so that they will

be listened to and respected back. And it's about helping students act on those beliefs through the development of their literacy skills.

Finally, we'll end where we started—with you, the teacher. Our jobs are amazing, always changing, never boring, and, at times, completely overwhelming. But we do it because we love it. We care about our students and want them to lead happy, productive lives. In order to help them do just that, we must help them develop the intrinsic desire to read and write and communicate clearly and articulately, so that when they leave our classroom, they are able to interact with others in way that is positive and life-affirming. It's a big job, but I know we can do it.

Let's get started, shall we?

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