

How Do I Make Choices About Who I Am as a Teacher?

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Who are you when you teach? When asked this question, most of us immediately respond by describing our teaching approaches. We might say “I’m more of a facilitator now.” Or we might respond with something like “I am a learner-centered teacher” or “I’m more of a lab teacher than lecturer.” But consider this question in another way: What “teaching presence” or persona underlies what you do as a teacher?

Most of us find our ways to teaching identities without really knowing where we’ve arrived or how we’ve gotten there. We may initially “try on” a teaching persona by adopting characteristics we have seen in other teachers. But a teaching persona constructed by imitation masks who we are. The learning environment is better served when we start with our own identities and purposefully choose to draw on what will serve students learning in that environment. We can easily forget that our teaching persona is a “presence” in a course. We teach our content and our students, but we do both with our teaching persona as a conduit.

The Aim: From the one-of-a-kind combination of human characteristics that is our larger personal identity, we construct a teaching persona that defines how we see ourselves as teachers and how we expect to be seen by students. The aim is to choose the features of our teaching persona so that on the whole it invites and enables as many learners as possible. To accomplish this, our teaching persona needs to ring true to our larger personal identity. Not all teachers accomplish this goal—they create a teaching persona comprised of traits they think ought to be characteristics of good teachers and end up trying to become someone they are not. False identities are difficult to maintain and, in most cases, easy to detect.

The Choices: Constructing a teaching persona is challenging, and takes place over time and across experiences. As both accumulate and as the contexts of our teaching change, we make different choices, and so our teaching persona evolves. Deciding which parts of “who I am” belong in the classroom raises challenging questions. What are the consequences of my natural use of sarcasm in communicating encouragement or discouragement of learners? If a characteristic or trait doesn’t contribute to the learning environment, we need to ask what role it is filling. What consequences (intended or unintended) could result? Some of what could become part of a teacher’s identity (like my overexuberant enthusiasm for my content) can better contribute to the learning environment with a few modifications. In my case, I learned that my exuberance was actually sucking air out of the room and proved to be intimidating rather than encouraging for a number of my students. The question then is about making good choices—putting together a teaching persona that enables the teacher to thrive, students to learn, and the content to be communicated effectively.

Some Examples: Let’s say humor is an important part of who you are. You can make people laugh, and you enjoy doing so. Why not bring that humor into the classroom? Research has shown that although humor doesn’t cause learning, it creates conditions that are conducive to it. Humor helps students relax and see learning through something other than an onerous lens. But, of course, not all kinds of humor are appropriate in classrooms. Jokes that might get a great reaction out of friends and family in informal settings can be heard very differently by a class of students with varied backgrounds and histories.

Perhaps you are a very nurturing person—someone who willingly reaches out to support and help others. Teachers who care do indeed help students to learn. But can you thrive? Can you sustain a teaching career if you extend yourself too often and too far and to too many students?

Maybe you’re an open person—someone who is very comfortable talking about who you are, what you believe, your values, what you’ve experienced, and what you think about current issues. Being open with students allows them to

connect with you as a person. You come across as a real human being—someone who shops for groceries, struggles with ideas, and occasionally gets things wrong. Can you be too open with students? There are details of your personal life, problems you're having with the institution, and past experiences that involved destructive behavior that you may be comfortable sharing, but do they augment or impede the environment for learning?

For many teachers, the teaching persona develops more by happenstance than design. How we define ourselves as teachers can help us thrive, and to become a conduit for connecting learners and content. Who we are when we teach can, for some students, convey messages more enduring than the content we teach.

A Starting Place for Discussion: What is a characteristic you have that those who know you well would recognize as being integral to the “real” you? Is that trait present in your teaching persona? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Discover how your teaching persona, the classroom dynamic, professional satisfaction, and options for communication intersect to enhance the learning and teaching environment. Get your copy of **Who Am I When I Teach? Understanding Teaching Persona**. [Learn More »](#)
