

Six Myths About a Teaching Persona

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What myths about constructing a teaching persona merit review? Teachers regularly exchange general advice about how to establish an identity in the classroom. Like most myths, these contain kernels of truth, but we believe their conclusions require a critical look. What are your beliefs about teaching persona, how it develops, and the role it plays in student learning?

Myth 1: Try to be like your own best teacher: “The best way to develop your persona is by doing what your best teachers did.”

What if your best teacher isn’t at all like you as a person? That teacher created an impact on you by drawing from his or her own character traits. In following this advice uncritically, you end up trying to be like someone else. Linda had a favorite teacher who used wry sarcastic humor to comment on less-than-stellar assignments. When she tried to copy that in her own teaching, it came across as being accusatory rather than prodding. It’s better to look at our favorite teachers and ask: “What did this teacher do that made me want to learn and helped me learn?” And then, “If that’s my goal, how can I get there in a way that will work for me given the strengths I bring to teaching?”

Myth 2: Teach the course you’d like to take: “Teach the course using the approaches that motivated you and helped you learn successfully.”

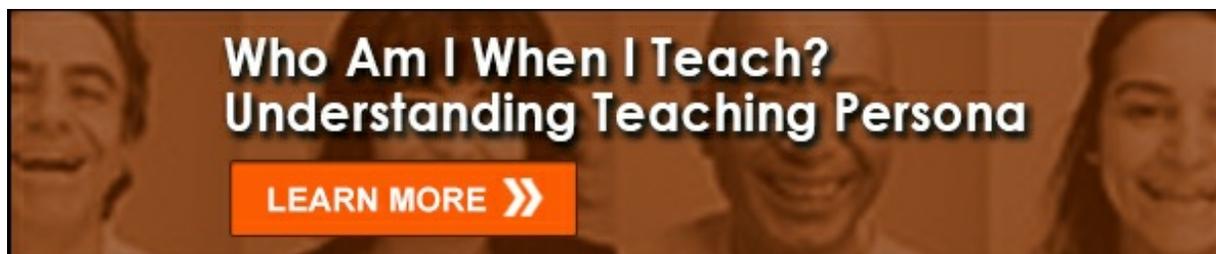
Are your classes full of students who are just like you when you were a student? We are usually teaching courses we did well in ourselves, courses with content that captured our imaginations and motivated us to work hard on mastering the material. When we choose approaches and strategies with the intent of reaching students like ourselves, we create a singular learning environment that will work for some students, but not for all. We can start with the features of courses we’d like to take, but the next question is, “What else is needed to promote the learning efforts of my students?”

Myth 3: Consider your teaching persona as a mask: “Teaching is really a performance and the classroom is a stage.”

Masks may bear some resemblance to you, but a mask is something you put on to hide who you are. We may be motivated to hide behind a mask because teaching makes us vulnerable and a mask offers protection. But masks hide a teacher’s authenticity and students are good at detecting teaching that isn’t genuine. Masks should motivate us to ask: “What am I hiding and why?”

Myth 4: Just do what comes naturally and your teaching persona will emerge: “You don’t need to worry about it. Just be yourself.”

A teaching identity will emerge out of doing what comes naturally, but will it be one that motivates and supports student learning? The classroom is not the family dinner table where “doing what comes naturally” is appropriate. Sometimes our actions and behaviors can impede learning. They confuse students and are misunderstood. Take “what comes naturally” and ask how it can be adapted into attributes that contribute to an environment conducive to learning.



Myth 5: Start out being a tough teacher; establish that you are in charge: “If you don’t get things set up properly in the beginning of the course, you can lose control, and once lost it’s very difficult to regain.”

This myth speaks to the long-held stereotype of the stern, pointer-wielding authoritative teacher who frightens students into a silent submission. Do you have evidence other than hearsay that a teacher who doesn’t establish his or her credibility in forceful ways has classroom management issues? Does this myth speak to who you want to be as a teacher or who you think you need or ought to be? This myth is often accompanied by the advice that “you can always let up on them later.” What are the consequences of dramatically shifting a persona midway in a semester? What benefits would accrue if you started class by being who you want to be?

Myth 6: Teaching persona is not important enough to merit much attention: “Teaching is about student learning, their mastery of the material and development of intellectual skills. Compared to that, persona is a trivial and unimportant matter.”

Students (especially beginning ones) identify more strongly with their teachers than teachers think they do. Teachers can easily stress students and compromise their confidence in learning. Ignoring your teaching persona can lead to unexpected consequences. For instance, even positive teacher attributes, like Maryellen’s animated enthusiasm, can seem excessive and off-putting to students taking classes at her favorite teaching time, 8:00 a.m. The role teachers play in the learning experiences of students is too important to ignore. We must continually examine who we are as teachers and what that contributes to the learning efforts of students.

How have you personalized the advice you have been given by colleagues so that it fits your own teaching persona? Please share.