

How to Become and Remain a Transformational Teacher

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Mark Allen Miller

However talented, no one is a natural-born teacher. Honing the craft takes significant care and effort, not just by the individual, but also by the school at large. Though experience does matter, it matters only to the extent that a teacher -- regardless of how long he or she has been in the classroom -- commits to continued professional development to refresh his or her status as a transformational teacher. Along those lines, even after a decade in the classroom, I don't claim to be beyond criticism -- not in the least. Still, I wish to offer some advice on constantly striving toward perfection, however elusive that goal will always remain.

Constantly Share Best Practices

As a first step, work toward recognizing that, no matter how long you've been in the classroom, there will always be someone else who's more effective at a certain facet of teaching. When I was a first-year teacher, a veteran colleague inquired how I'd engaged such strong student interest in the American Revolution, something that he'd struggled with achieving. I shared my lesson plan, which culminated in a formal debate about whether the colonists had acted justly in rebelling against British rule. Moving forward, I felt more confident and comfortable about asking that colleague for help with providing quality written feedback, which he excelled at doing.

Find a Trusted Mentor

No matter how much experience you have, it's crucial to find and rely on a trusted confidant. As a new teacher, I spent countless hours chatting with colleagues about best practices and where I feared that I might have fallen short. Not once did they pass judgment on me, or suggest that whatever I had done (or failed to do, in certain cases) was beyond repair. Instead, they offered thoughtful advice on how I might do things differently. No matter the subject, I value hearing fresh perspectives from new and veteran teachers about becoming even better at my job. Nobody has a monopoly on good ideas.

Commit to Classroom Observations

I do my best to observe other teachers in action. This year, I benefited from watching a colleague inject humor into

his English classroom to cultivate a more relaxed but effective learning environment. In turn, I tried to strike a similar balance in my history classroom, which helped students feel less afraid of sharing ideas and learning from mistakes. I'm equally grateful for observing a colleague teach French to students whom I also instruct. She possesses a gentle firmness that learners respond to, but more importantly, students know that she cares about them -- and they don't want to let their teacher or themselves down.

Change Things Up

I also observe other teachers to see how they change things up, especially when I get too comfortable in a routine. It's certainly easier to teach the same books and content each year, but it's also incredibly boring, which can lead to burnout. This summer, I'm working to revamp some of my American history curriculum to fall more in step with what students are learning and doing in their American literature class. For example, when juniors are studying the Cold War in my class, they'll be reading Alan Moore's *Watchmen* in their English class -- an award-winning graphic novel highlighting many Cold War-era fears and tensions. For both classes, students will complete a yet-to-be-determined project to showcase their understanding.

Model the Usefulness of What You Teach

In line with changing things up, I'm always looking for new ways to model the usefulness of what I teach. More than ever, I find that students want to know how they can apply what they learn in the classroom to the real world. In American history, I continue to de-emphasize rote memorization in favor of activities requiring clear, analytical thinking -- an essential tool for whatever students end up pursuing in college or as a career. On most assessments, I allow students to bring a notecard. It seems less important in the age of Google to assess how much students know. Instead, I'm significantly more concerned with how much sense they can make of all this information so readily available to them. In all of my classes, I also make it clear that knowing how to write well will play a significant role in their future success.

Caring Beyond What You Teach

To motivate my students toward success, I strive to show that I care about them beyond the classroom. I do my best to chaperone trips, watch sporting events, and attend plays and other student-run productions. I advise the Model United Nations Club, which allows me to share my passion for diplomacy and fostering change. I also coach cross-country to help students see that I value maintaining a healthy body just as much as developing an inquisitive mind. The most transformational teachers that I know have a deep understanding of how their role transcends far beyond any subject that they're teaching. Such teachers have the most lasting impact on their students long after graduation.

How else can one become a transformational teacher? I would love to hear your thoughts in the comments section below.

Become a Transformational Teacher

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