YOU CAN BE YOURSELF

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN TEACHING STYLE

When I first started teaching, I wanted to be a combination of all the movie and television teachers I'd seen over the years. I wanted to be noble and inspirational like Sidney Poitier in *To Sir with Love*. I wanted the steely determination of Jaime Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*. I wanted the combined toughness of Joe Clark in *Lean on Me* and Debbie Allen of *Fame*. I wanted the unconventionality of Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*. And I wanted the lovable, goofy sense of humor of Gabe Kaplan in *Welcome Back Kotter*. I thought the combination would make me a master teacher.

So I went to work each day trying to shape myself into the image of my ideal teacher. I planned quirky lessons in the name of being innovative. I created unreasonable requirements in the name of being tough. Because I taught high school and looked younger than most of my students,

I dressed like an old school marm—sensible heels, skirts that came almost to my ankles, frumpy blouses, and glasses. My sister started calling me Miss Crabtree.

I wanted to make a difference, so I threw myself into my teaching. I applied all the theories I had learned in my methods classes. I wrote lesson plans every day and spent every weekend grading papers. I faithfully followed the curriculum. I posted and enforced classroom rules. I created elaborate differentiated lessons designed to tap into each student's learning style and multiple intelligences. I used technology. I collaborated with my colleagues. I applied cooperative instruction, inquiry-based learning, multiculturalism—you name it. In short, I tried to become my idea of the perfect teacher.

Soon, however, I realized that there was a stark difference between my ideal classroom and the one I was actually running. That assignment I spent hours planning fell flat. That really cool strategy I couldn't wait to try failed to engage my students. At first, I thought it was just a matter of accumulating newer strategies, better lessons, different approaches. So I devoted myself to learning as much as I could. I read the "happy teacher" books that made teaching seem so easy. I watched master teachers smoothly handle their students. I developed a great grasp of the facts of teaching and worked harder and harder until I burned myself out. But despite all this hard work, some of my students were still disengaged, bored, and barely learning.

For a while, I even blamed my students. They were lazy. They didn't care. Their parents were bad parents. Sometimes the blame even came in the form

> *⟿ My dreams about the kind of teacher I would be were more about serving my own ego needs than serving my students.*

of more acceptable excuses—they were too impacted by poverty, they had really short attention spans because of so much television and social media, this generation just doesn't have the same values—but the bottom line was that I was not as effective with them as I dreamed I would be.

It took me a long time and a lot of frustration before I understood that the problem wasn't my students. The problem was my *approach* to my students. I realized over time that my dreams about the kind of teacher I would be were more about serving my own ego needs than serving my students. I wanted my students to do well because that would mean that I was a good teacher. I wanted them to tearfully thank me at the end of the year and tell me how much I had changed their lives. I wanted to recount stories of the difference I had made in the lives of my students to my awestruck friends at the next dinner party. I wanted my students to grow up, become famous, and thank me in their Nobel Prize acceptance speeches. I wanted someone to make a movie

about *me*. In fact, many of my dreams about teaching weren't about helping my students at all. They were about me.

Once I came to that very painful (and a little embarrassing) realization, I shifted my focus away from me and my own twisted ideals to my students. I stopped trying to manipulate them to learn and showed them *how* to learn. I stopped trying to get my students to serve my own ego needs and started serving theirs.

The difference was almost immediate and so radical that I never turned back. For the first time in my teaching career, I felt free. In trying to become my idea of a master teacher, I had failed miserably. Once I shed those ideas, focused instead on my students and their needs, and relaxed, I was able to just teach. As a result, over time I become the very kind of teacher I'd always dreamed I would be.

You wouldn't be able to make a compelling movie about the changes that happened in my classroom. There were days when my lessons soared, and other days when they tanked. There were days when my students loved me and days when I just got on their nerves and vice versa. But by simply focusing on teaching well rather than focusing on becoming the perfect teacher, I found my own teaching style, my own version of mastery, and I promise you that you can too. Here's how.

GO AHEAD AND BORROW A FEW TRICKS, BUT REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

I don't know about you, but when I first started teaching, I felt a lot of pressure to have a "bag of tricks." I copied every exciting lesson I found, and I visited other teachers' classrooms and "stole" their handouts, activities, even their bulletin board ideas. I kept files and notebooks of cool things I had seen others do. Whenever I planned a new lesson, I would reach into my bag of tricks and pull out someone else's strategy, someone else's lesson, and try to make it work in my classroom. Sometimes I succeeded. Most of the time, however, I was barely able to pull it off.

At first I felt like a bad teacher. After all, other teachers had used this lesson or that worksheet successfully. Why couldn't I? It wasn't until much later in the year that I realized the problem: I was trying to make other people's lessons work without really understanding why they chose this material or that strategy. I was trying to shoehorn myself into other teachers' lesson plans instead of figuring out

> *I was trying to shoehorn myself into other teacher's lesson plans instead of figuring out whether their lessons would work for my students and my teaching style.*

whether their lessons would work for my students, my teaching style, and my learning objectives for my students.

It's okay to take ideas from other teachers. We all do it. But you must always keep in mind who you are, who your students are, and what you want to accomplish with your students before you choose to use another's idea with your class. What works for one teacher may not work for you. What makes sense in one classroom may not be a good fit for yours. So go ahead and beg, borrow, or steal, but do so with discretion. Take time to examine why the lesson worked so that you can adapt it for your purposes later on.

LEARN FROM OTHERS, BUT DO WHAT WORKS FOR YOU

When I first started teaching, I did things the way that others showed me because I didn't know any better. While I learned a lot, some of the systems I'd been taught didn't work for me. I found them clunky or cumbersome. Although those systems worked for the teachers who showed them to me, I needed something more efficient.

For instance, each marking period, several teachers in my department used to issue "incompletes" to any student who was missing an assignment. They did it because they felt it would help students to turn in their work. Once report cards were issued, students had ten days to turn in

any missing work or their "incomplete" grade turned into a failing grade.

Because this was the way that things were done, I followed along. But soon, I began to question this policy. It just didn't make sense to me. Most students turned in the missing work but they copied it from other students or rushed through it. I hardly graded it, just slashing off 50 percent (according to the late work policy at the time) and recorded the grade in my gradebook. Those students who were failing either didn't turn in the work because they were going to fail anyway, or worse, did turn in the work in hopes of not failing and still failed. Students thought the policy was a joke, and soon, so did I.

And yet, two more marking periods came and went without my saying anything. Finally, I mentioned to another teacher that I thought the policy did little to prevent missing assignments, and he secretly agreed with me. We decided that we weren't going to do it anymore and went to our department chair to discuss it. She strenuously protested, but since the policy was not a district one, she couldn't force us to comply.

The next marking period was a revelation. I didn't have any more missing work than I normally had. But my students and I

Don't accept every informal policy as gospel. Figure out what works best for you and your students.

weren't stressed out at the end of the marking period. Instead, I worked with them throughout the quarter to get their work in on time, and by the end of the year, I had developed a late work policy my students and I could live with.

It's easy to just do what everyone else is doing when you first start teaching. But don't accept every informal policy as gospel. Figure out what works best for you and your students.

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT   I know, I know. You don't *have* any time. Yes, I get it. But this one is important. It is the only way I know for you to become your best quickly. In fact, this is the secret to much of my teaching success over the years.

Early in my teaching career, the pressures of state tests, earning tenure, and just making it through the day in one piece were taking their toll on me. I had fantasized for so long about having my own classroom and teaching my own way, and yet I felt trapped by the demands of my job. Teaching just wasn't as fun as I'd hoped it would be.

I shared my concern with a trusted colleague, and she assured me that it would get better. I asked her when it got better for her. Her answer? Three years.

Three years? I wasn't going to make it three years. I was working my butt off trying to twist myself into what I thought was a master teacher, and I was weary. The summer

after my first year of teaching, I decided to take a course on teaching writing through the Maryland Writing Project. It was an intense summer, but what I learned in that course saved me. The first day we arrived, we were asked to write for half an hour about whatever came to mind. In fact, we spent much of our time over the six weeks writing, reflecting, and thinking about our teaching. It wasn't all we did, but it was a huge part of the process, and it was transformative to my teaching. During that six-week period, away from the noise and pressures of teaching, I reconnected with who I wanted to be as a teacher, what my goals were, and what difference I wanted to make for my students. Doing so reignited my passion, and I swore I would never let that flame go out again. I thought about what worked, what didn't work, what I needed, and what my students needed to be successful. I paid attention to my own teacher voice, and started right then to construct my own teacher self.

Since that summer, I have never been the same. Simply taking time to reflect helped me listen to my own voice and make sense of my own teaching. Although I never had a solid six weeks again for that kind of learning and reflection, I have found that, sometimes, I just need a quiet hour over the weekend, or a morning during a school holiday, to take time and think. Sometimes, I have even gotten up thirty minutes earlier (and I am no morning person, trust me!) and spent time reflecting before a particularly

stressful day ahead. Even today, when I start to get over-whelmed with all that I want to accomplish, I take time to reflect. It is my number one way to figure out my own teaching practice, make dramatic leaps in my expertise, and develop new and better ways to do what I do.

YOU'RE ALLOWED TO EXPERIMENT   When you first start teaching, you want to do everything per-fectly. We all do. We're so afraid to make a mistake or do some-thing wrong that we stick to the book. But you'll never figure out

> *The only way to find out what works for you is to try a lot of ideas until you find the ones that fit.*

your own teaching mojo if you do. The only way to find out what works for you is to try a lot of ideas until you find the ones that fit.

Once I started experimenting, I was able to find my own way. In fact, some of my best teaching ideas started as experiments in the classroom. Even today, experimenting is the way that I develop new and better teaching strategies as a consultant. Along the way, I've learned a few lessons on how to experiment successfully:

1. **Always start with a problem you are trying to solve**. There is no point to experimenting for experimenting's

sake. Instead, root any experiment in a problem. That way, you'll know whether your experiment was successful by whether it resolved the problem.

2. **Focus on the root cause**. Once you identify the problem you want to solve, try to figure out what the root cause of the problem is rather than get distracted by some of its symptoms. For instance, my students weren't responding to the comments on their papers and improving from one paper to the next. It would have been easy to think that they weren't responding simply because they were being lazy, but that would have been a superficial analysis on my part. The real reason they weren't responding to my comments was that they didn't know how. Once I realized that was the root cause, I could come up with a solution that would really make a difference. If you are unsure of the root cause, spend some time reflecting on your challenge either in writing or with a trusted colleague. Alternatively, ask your students to tell you what they think the real problem is.

3. **Do your research first**. Now that you understand the root cause, look around to see if anyone has already come up with a solution. Check with your colleagues, online, and in books, or visit the educational research. Perhaps you can alter something you find or use something you find as a catalyst for creating your own solution.

4. **Try something and see whether it works**. Now you're ready to experiment, but your experiment is more likely to yield fruit because you have thought things through ahead of time.
5. **Reflect**. After your experiment, think about not only the effect if had on your students but how it felt to you as well. Were you comfortable? Did it fit in with your emerging teaching style? Did it feel right? Do you need to tweak it somehow? Reflect either alone or with a mentor or other trusted colleague and record your thoughts.
6. **Make adjustments and try it again**. Once you've taken time to think things through, tweak the parts that didn't quite work, throw out the parts that utterly failed, and save the best parts to combine with other teaching strategies or use on their own. Then, as soon as you can, try it again and repeat the process until you have something that works for you.

So go ahead. Experiment. You won't break anything. Sometimes your experiment will be a smashing success. Other times it will be an abject failure. That's okay. That's how you figure out what works for you and your students. The beauty of teaching is that if your experiment fails, there is always tomorrow. You can try again.

—◦◦◦—

I know everything feels a little awkward right now, but trust me: You will develop your own teaching style over time if you commit to being yourself. I know that you are probably feeling pressure to immediately morph into a master teacher. I know that you have an idea in your head about how you *should* teach, *should* behave, and the amazing results you *should* have. What's more, you are probably getting pressure from the outside (colleagues, supervisors, mentors, parents, and even your students) to be perfect right away. But mastery takes time. This awkward stage you are going through right now is absolutely necessary if you ever hope to become a master teacher. In fact, it is critical. It is the only way that you are going to figure out your own teaching style and what works for you.

Finding your own teaching style is the right work to be doing right now. You can never be as good at being someone else as you can at being yourself. The good news is that mastery isn't dependent on having a certain personality or doing things a certain way. Mastery isn't based on a prescribed list of behaviors. It's based on a simple set of principles, and as such, it can and will look different for each person or personality who applies them. That means that you can be yourself and still be masterful. In fact, it means that you absolutely should.