

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: March 29, 2016

Published in Print: March 30, 2016, as **Finding Joy in Teaching**

Bring Joy Back Into the Classroom

By Jonathan Eckert

I teach to entertain myself. For the past 20 years, I have shared this key to quality instruction with elementary through college students.

They all look at me like I am a bit egocentric and a little crazy. I don't think I am.

My own entertainment is only one ingredient of the whole recipe for a productive learning environment. But if I am not enjoying teaching, student learning will suffer. If I am bored, burned out, or beaten down, it is highly unlikely that my students will engage in vibrant learning. This is true for assessment, content, and classroom management—the three cornerstones of quality instruction.

One way to judge the quality of an assessment is: Do I want to grade it? If I get tired of assessing essays that try to persuade the principal to say no to school uniforms, I change the assessment. If I can't bear to read another policy memo about a particular topic, I change the syllabus. If I do not enjoy assessing the assignment, my students rarely enjoy completing it. The quality of the work suffers.

What about teaching the same content day after day? I taught four sections of science to 7th graders for years. Photosynthesis, cellular respiration, and asexual reproduction were not what got me out of bed in the morning. The key for me was to focus on how 100 different individuals interacted with the concepts during the labs. Suddenly, asexual reproduction became fascinating when I heard students trying to make sense of it. "How can a potato get jiggy under the ground?" one student asked.

Classroom management also has to remain fresh. I posted a magnetic Elvis Presley replete with an extensive wardrobe on the front board of my 5th grade classroom. If the class got too loud, I would remove, for example, Elvis' Hawaiian lei. This equaled one less minute of recess. A lei and the removal of his sunglasses equaled three fewer minutes, and so on. The students could earn these items back for quality work. At the end of the week, if Elvis was dressed like "the King," we had 15 minutes of recess. Eventually, I only had to take a couple steps toward Elvis to quiet the classroom.

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Admittedly, some of my techniques are a bit quirky, but that is the point. We should engage students in ways that we enjoy—a teacher's enjoyment is a precondition for student engagement.

Teaching morale has declined over the past two decades. Promised K-12 improvements, meanwhile, have included increased rigor, more testing, and "teacher proofing" a narrowing curriculum. Many of these changes have taken the joy out of the classroom because teachers have lost control of what is taught, when it's taught, and how it's assessed.

This situation should not come as a revelation to anyone who has stood in front of students recently. In the schools I visit across the country, I hear a common refrain: "Teaching isn't fun anymore." This is a tragedy for all of us.

The only way to build better learning environments is through trust. I still find classrooms where trust exists, but they are becoming increasingly rare. A fear of testing, failure, and loss of control is now the norm. We know that safe learning environments are essential for students, but they must first exist for teachers.

School improvement has to start at the classroom level. The implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act could create more-supportive teaching conditions. States and districts could reconsider accountability policies that erode trust and support. Instead, they could support professional learning that promotes expertise and differentiated roles for teachers. However, our work is more human than many policymakers grasp. And so teachers and administrators must lead the way in prioritizing learning that embraces risk, inquiry, and hard work.

Principals and teachers need to take back their schools, so teachers can take back their classrooms. Teachers and principals must be fearless. Teachers have to stop blaming others—principals, district offices, and departments of education—for what they "have to do" in their classrooms. Great teachers find what works for them and their students, and they run with it. They beg, borrow, and steal ideas and then make them their own. They find their own versions of a magnetic Elvis and take a risk.

This is the only way to grow.

Many veteran teachers repeat the following mantra to their students: "I am not here to entertain you." Maybe teachers should start telling themselves, "I am here to be entertained by my students' learning." If teachers find enjoyment in their students' learning and growth, they will never stop learning and growing themselves.



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"A teacher's enjoyment is a precondition for student engagement."

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