Why Teachers Need Their Freedom

Educators must remain engaged and autonomous in order to do their jobs well and avoid burnout.

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My co-teacher and I met in the parking lot before school and stared into my car trunk at the costumes and props we had gathered over the weekend. We were giddy with excitement and nervous because neither of us had tried anything like this before. We also taught in the kind of school where one wrong move in the classroom could lead to disastrous results because of our students' intense behavioral and learning needs.

The co-teacher, Alice Gnau, had found a book called *Teaching Content Outrageously* by Stanley Pogrow, which explained how secondary classrooms can incorporate drama into any content to engage students in learning—incorporating the element of surprise, for example, or developing role-play or simulation experiences to teach content and standards. The book inspired us to change how we taught our seventh-grade language-arts students in a high-poverty school that struggled with test scores, especially reading and math.

The sense of urgency in the building was palpable, and the pressure on teachers to increase student achievement was often overwhelming. The district required us to teach a curriculum rigidly aligned with a 15-year-old reading textbook containing outdated articles about Ricky Martin, ice fishing, and cartography in an attempt to provide relevant, entry-level reading for students. I refused to teach from this text on the grounds that it was both condescending and uninteresting. But district personnel insisted that teachers use the textbook, citing evidence that it brought up test scores.

Alice and I decided to take the risk and apply Pogrow's advice. The mandated curriculum, we decided, would never be enough to encourage our students to love reading and writing.

Which brings me back to the parking lot. Alice and I came up with a plan to integrate some of the ideas and strategies we had read about in *Teaching Content Outrageously* into a unit on *Lord of the Flies*. She would be the pilot and I was the flight attendant. We changed in the faculty restroom before school and hid around the corner by the lockers in the hallway as we watched students enter the teacher-less classroom.After a few minutes, we burst into the room with a library rolling cart full of pretend snacks and drinks. "Okay, ladies and gentlemen," Alice shouted, "welcome aboard flight 2101 headed to sunny Paraguay. The weather looks great, so we should have you safe and sound to your final destination soon. Now buckle up for important safety information." She sat down in the front of the room, pretending to pilot, while I instructed the students to sit up straight, to buckle up, and to please enjoy their flights.

Even our toughest kids lit up with excitement; when we prepared for "takeoff," they went right along until the inevitable happened and we crashed onto a deserted island. As Alice and I popped out of our seats, we morphed from pilot and flight attendant back into teachers.

The remainder of class was a problem-solving simulation in which students worked together to determine how food would be attained and distributed, how medical attention would be administered, how they would find or build shelter, and who would lead—questions the kids debated among themselves as they left for their next class. By the time we finished the novel a few weeks later, our students were either crying or enraged (or both) at the death of (spoiler alert) Piggy. They had engaged intellectually and emotionally with the text and ensuing discussions from the moment we "boarded" that pretend flight to the book's very last punctuation mark.

So began a year of teaching outrageously, a year that forever changed my practice as an educator. It also changed my students' learning experience and, arguably, helped improve their test scores. The state accountability system changed in 2011, and although schools had prepared for a drop in scores (both the district and state reading scores did indeed take a hit), the seventh-grade class at our school saw a bump of nearly 5 percentage points in reading.

Teaching outrageously wasn't just fun, it also gave Alice and I the power to create meaningful and exciting experiences for ourselves and our students—at least for that school year. The school was on the cusp of state takeover the following year, which was my last one there. Three of our four principals resigned or transferred, prompting a series of not-so-great interim principals; teachers felt unsupported, leading to many absent days and some resignations. General student chaos ensued due to a lack of consistency and support—for two weeks straight, someone pulled the fire alarm at least once a day, sometimes more. The best I could muster as a teacher most days—for my own sanity—was to slap on an audio recording of *The Hunger Games*, hand out a generic graphic organizer, and guide the students step by step through filling it out. I did not have the energy or support to teach

outrageously, or even effectively. It may have been controlled, but I was not engaged, the students were not engaged, we were all stunted in our growth. Unsurprisingly, test scores plummeted, and the school closed its doors a year later, only two years after the best year of my career.

Does a top-down trickle of scripts and mandates detached from students' day-to-day lives really improve a teacher's effectiveness?

After dozens of my peers and I left the school, the state audit team conducted a diagnostic assessment of the school through surveys, observations, data collection and analysis, and stakeholder interviews. Among the final report's conclusions: Staff struggled to build a cohesive school team due to high teacher turnover, and most teachers "delivered traditional lessons with limited opportunities for students to think critically, participate in group discussions, or collaborate with their peers." These shortcomings joined the myriad factors that led to such a drastic change in teacher motivation and student achievement.

A body of research illustrates the self-evident reality that students' interest in what they're learning is critical to their achievement. And student engagement, according to various studies, is often a direct result of teacher engagement. When Alice and I decided to teach outrageously, our attitudes about our work improved, which data suggests improved our students' attitudes.

Teaching outrageously, it seems, also put us at a decreased risk for burnout because it allowed us to take control of our craft. One of the biggest reasons teachers quit, contributing to the increasing teacher shortage in the U.S., is a lack of autonomy in the classroom; indeed, overall teacher perception of autonomy in instruction has decreased since 2003. The upshot? As a lack of autonomy helps push more and more teachers out of the profession, children are often left with a steady stream of young, inexperienced educators who lack strong ties to the school.

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Teacher engagement and autonomy aren't a cure-all, of course—some teachers are simply ineffective in their jobs and need additional support to improve their craft. Some ought to leave the profession altogether. Given that teacher effectiveness—the degree to which they hold high expectations for students, successfully manage their classrooms, design lessons that lead to mastery, and so on—is the single best indicator of student success, it makes sense that schools would exercise caution when determining how much control teachers have over the classroom; letting an ill-equipped teacher do what she pleases isn't smart policy. But does a top-down trickle of scripts and mandates detached from students' day-to-day lives really improve a teacher's effectiveness? It could have the reverse effect, forcing educators who might otherwise gain a real knack for teaching over time to rely on others to make decisions for them and become stunted in their ability to improve.

Teacher autonomy is not necessarily incompatible with administrative support. When I was a student teacher, I'd often go to my mentor, Renee Boss, with off-the-wall ideas for the classroom. I wanted to have an "I Love the '80s" theme day when I was supposed to be teaching students about the Baroque period. I wanted to show the introduction of the film *Desperado* because it was a good example of storytelling even though it was violent and riddled with the F-word. And at one point, I wanted to teach debate by organizing a game of kickball outside. Renee listened to these ideas with patience and curiosity. She asked me pointed questions about my reasons, my plans for implementation, and my backup plans for when these ideas inevitably flopped. Each time, I found myself sitting across a table from Renee, breaking down and discussing what worked, what didn't, and how to get better. She let me take risks. Occasionally, she would talk me out of something (*Desperado* was a no-no), but usually she found a way to help me turn my crazy ideas into effective lessons that improved my students' learning and outcomes. My career might have been very different had Renee handed me a binder or a dusty textbook and told me to follow it from beginning to end.

Recently, I guided some educators in a brainstorming session on creating more exciting, student-centered lessons. I asked them to consider the possibility that the full lecture they planned to give, the chapter they hoped to cover, or the worksheet they printed from a cookie-cutter curriculum is as precarious a teaching tool as is, say, a kickball game. If kickball fails at teaching kids about debate, they lose a day in the same way they would have lost a day if they went through the motions of a lesson that bored them and their students. The lecture might feel safer, but safety doesn't achieve anything if kids leave without learning anything new. Maybe the kids don't leave kickball learning anything new either, but the approach has an advantage over any hackneyed teaching tool: As an outrageous teaching idea, it gave the teacher an opportunity to create something new, to develop as a professional who thinks about and experiments with pedagogy, and to reflect thoughtfully upon her work. It also allowed her to build trust with students, who desperately want to feel hopeful and engaged at school.

I finally did teach debate kickball effectively after six years of trying to get it right. And I dare anyone to face off with my former students in an argument now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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