

AUTHENTIC  
TEACHING**Video 1**

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*If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it's not your path. Your own path you make with every step you take. That's why it's your path.*

—Joseph Campbell

Right now I am pregnant with my first baby. I am at a threshold, not quite leaving my old identity behind but about to take on a new one. I will no longer just be Gravity or Dr. Goldberg, but I will also be known as Mom. This has brought along excitement and fear of the unknown, fear of losing myself, and fear of not being quite good enough. One of the last times I felt this way, standing at a major life threshold, was when I became a teacher. One day I was a twenty-one-year-old college student who had spent my whole life known as Gravity, and a few months later I was walking into my own classroom where I would be known as Ms. Goldberg. I was excited about finally being in my classroom, and I eagerly anticipated meeting my new students. But I was also terrified I would not be good enough and everyone would realize I was a fraud, not quite ready to have these humans under my guidance and care each day.

What feels strangely similar between becoming a mom and a teacher are the ways others have attempted to support me during this transition. As a new teacher, my colleagues all wanted to give me advice: “Don’t smile until November”; and “Don’t let your papers pile up, do a little grading each day”; and “When the principal comes in to observe you, stick to what you do well. Don’t take any risks.” They meant well and wanted to see me succeed. Likely most of this advice had been handed down to them from their more experienced teacher friends. As a soon-to-be mom, everyone has advice too. “Take the epidural,” and “Don’t let that baby into your bedroom or you will never get them out,” and “Puree your own food so your baby doesn’t wind up living on mac and cheese and chicken nuggets as a toddler.” Do you remember all of the advice you received as a new teacher? Or maybe you’re in your first year and getting unsolicited advice all of the time.

During a recent phone conversation with my aunt she gave me the best advice so far. She offered, “**Trust your instincts.** You will know what is right for your baby. Don’t overthink it. And don’t take everyone’s advice. **Listen to yourself.**” If I were to go back and meet my first-year teacher self, I would steal my aunt’s words and tell them to myself daily. “Trust your instincts. You will know what is right for your students. Don’t overthink it. Listen to yourself.” In many ways, this book is a longer version of this advice I wish I could go back and offer myself and the advice I want you to have for yourself. It took some time for me to realize that being my true self as a teacher was exactly what my students needed. But it turned out that figuring out who my true teacher self was required lots of reflection and searching. What took even longer was my journey to actually living the practices of my authentic teacher self with all of my students. I had to take time to really own it. I want teachers to take less time than I did to get there.

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Being your true self as a teacher is exactly what your students need.

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**What do you think would help you teach more like yourself?**

## **WHAT HELPS US BE AUTHENTIC TEACHERS?**

Over the past two decades I have served as a science teacher, reading specialist, third-grade teacher, special educator, literacy coach, staff developer, assistant professor, consultant, and yoga teacher. This means I have taught students from age four through eighty. Each and every teaching opportunity helped me refine and define what it means for me to teach like myself, to take my aunt's advice, and to bring my best and most authentic self to each set of students. What I realized is that my specific teaching assignment and my students would often change, but the one constant was me and how I chose to show up as a teacher.

### **Remember That There Is Nothing to Fix**

For several decades, people have been obsessed with self-help books that popularized the research and theories of the medical and psychology

fields. The problem was, it grew out of a 20th century problem-oriented paradigm that focused on curing illness, disease, and deficits. The self-help movement that arose operated on the assumption that there is something wrong with you that you need to get help from outsiders to fix. Frankly, that whole idea always left me depleted, beaten down, and feeling insecure about myself.

Fortuitously, we are now in the heyday of a happiness movement. It started about twenty years ago when Martin Seligman championed a new branch of psychology that, studies what makes humans thrive—positive psychology. In 1990, *Flow: The Science of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi was published in the United States, and it quickly became a bestseller. The so-called science of happiness hit the mainstream with that book, and if you haven't read it, I suggest you do. Other popular books, such as *Learned Optimism* by Martin Seligman (2006), *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor (2010), and *The Happiness Project* by Gretchen Rubin (2015), suggest that the tide has turned, and the self-help movement has evolved into one of self-acceptance and self-discovery, which feels entirely different. This new movement assumes you are already awesome, with many unique talents and quirks that make you, you. Instead of anything needing to be fixed, the idea is to accept and embrace yourself and to build from your strengths. Most of the people I know feel much more motivated when they start from ownership rather than feeling like there is something wrong.

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In the field of education, however, I think we are too often operating in the old-think of the problem-based self-help movement. Coming at us from every direction are blog posts, articles, in-service providers, workshops, and even op-ed pieces that offer teachers steps and strategies that will “fix” something that is wrong with your teaching. If anyone is approaching us teachers as in need of being fixed, I end up walking out the door or closing the book because this person assumes there is something wrong. This person who never met me or my students and never stepped into my classroom thinks she can solve a problem I have not yet even articulated. This doesn't mean we shy away from coaching and mentoring. As teachers, we can constantly learn from those who approach us from a strength-based model. The teacher community does not need one more teacher-help resource that assumes we lack something or that something about our practice needs to be fixed. Instead, we need the equivalent to the teacher-acceptance and discovery model. There are, of course, many workshops and professional books that don't assume we need to be fixed and instead treat us like professionals with much to offer and build upon to strengthen our practice. Those are the books that line my bookshelf with sticky notes and highlights.

As I sit down to write this book, I assume you are already a talented educator and there is nothing I need to help you fix. You are in teaching for a reason. You're here not only because a university or teacher prep program gave you a degree; most importantly, you're here because you believe that you are supposed to be here. I do think that a bit of self-discovery and ways to consciously build from our strengths as teachers is really helpful—at least it has been for me. This means we all can grow in our teaching practice and view each day as a learning opportunity—not from a place of insecurity but instead from a place of humble confidence. We must know our strengths so well that we can leverage them and bring our best, most authentic self to our students. This book will help you discover the unique strengths and talents that you bring to the profession and, most importantly, to your students.

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**You're here  
because you  
believe that you  
are supposed  
to be here.**

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### **Stop Comparing Ourselves to Someone Else's Highlight Reel**

Many of us feel the need to fix something or change something about our teaching when we look at others and make comparisons. When I compare myself to others, I tend to paint them in the rosiest light and see only their strengths. But when it comes to me—I am the toughest critic. I focus only on my perceived faults. I have found I am not alone in this comparison game. Many teacher friends have admitted they torture themselves by comparing themselves (almost always negatively) to their peers and mentors. Of course, most books, coaches, and conferences highlight the positive practices and leave out the terrifying challenges that led to that success.

Nothing epitomizes this more than Pinterest and my preferred favorite: Pinterest fails. Pinterest posts show us perfection in just a few easy steps. My feed is often filled with pins like “10 Minutes to Washboard Abs” and “Pumpkin Baby Photo Shoot,” featuring a photo of a smiling infant stuffed inside a carved-out pumpkin with her legs and arms hanging out of tiny holes. Of course, I have never met anyone who worked out only ten minutes a day and had washboard abs. And the “fails” photo shows the reality: a baby crying hysterically and trying to get out of an ill-carved pumpkin, red-faced with snot running down her nose. No one posts or pins the thousands of attempts that were messy failures prior to the one lucky example the camera caught. Those Pinterest lessons seem so perfect on the screen but almost always fall flat and miss the mark with our students. It is easy to compare and then feel bad about ourselves, leading us back to thinking we need to be fixed.

I learned I didn't need to do so much comparing from one of my mentors at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Kathy Collins. This totally smart, funny, and talented educator shared her challenges and faults with us. She would move back and forth between self-deprecating stories of some big failure to teaching us a remarkable way to work with

primary-grade readers. She helped me embrace and acknowledge the parts of teaching and learning that are most often left out of our conversations. The fact is, lessons and ideas almost never work out the first time, and we almost all fail several times before we succeed. By bringing all of this into her workshops, Kathy modeled for me what it sounds like, looks like, and feels like to show up as her true self. Because Kathy was sharing all her experiences, not just the Pinterest-worthy ones, with us, I realized that the comparisons I tended to make were based on half-truths. It wasn't fair to me or my teaching to compare all of myself to someone else's highlight reel.

As her student, I trusted her and wanted to soak up every moment of learning with her because she was so human. She took risks, laughed at herself, was thoughtful and reflective, and viewed each moment as a chance to learn more. The more Kathy was herself, the more I could show up as myself too. Because I didn't just see her highlight reel, I could see how she refined her practice, considered alternatives, and carried a growth mindset into her work. I could do the same.

This pattern proves true no matter the age of the students. When I watched Kathy teach first graders, they hung on her every word, took risks in their learning, and spent time sharing reflections with their first-grade partners. It was remarkable how much these five- and six-year-olds were able to do because of Kathy's modeling. When teaching a reading mini lesson, she didn't make her reading look easy or magical; she made it look real. She showed how she worked hard and tried a few strategies. I saw student after student go back to their seats and have the confidence to try strategies themselves because they were not comparing themselves to a magical reading lesson but instead to an authentic one.

### Focus on What We Can Control

When we teachers walk into classrooms as ourselves and share our stories, our learning process—warts and all—it gives permission for our students to do the same. When we silence our challenges, hide them from our students, and play the “teacher role” it sends the message that students should play the “student role.” Then we are all playing school instead of digging into the learning.

“Doing school” (Pope, 2003) refers to the commonly expressed experience of high schoolers who see school as a game that must be played. The students focus on how to get the best grade, get teachers to like them, and then get into the best colleges. In his book *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz (2014) explains how common it is for college freshmen in elite colleges to suffer from anxiety, depression, and self-destructive behaviors as a result of doing school and feeling pressure

to be perfect. Further, Dr. Peter Gray cites research by Twenge and colleagues (2010) that students today are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than previous generations of kids due to a decline in students' sense of personal control over their fates and shifts toward extrinsic goals and away from intrinsic goals. Gray (2010) states, "Intrinsic goals are those that have to do with one's own development as a person—such as becoming competent in endeavors of one's choosing and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Extrinsic goals, on the other hand, are those that have to do with material rewards and other people's judgments."

Put in the context of doing school, many students today feel pressure to fit the ideal and make the grades (extrinsic goals) and are consumed with fears of failure or perceived failure by others. Gray (2010) explains, "To the extent that my emotional sense of satisfaction comes from progress toward intrinsic goals, I can control my emotional well-being. To the extent that my satisfaction comes from others' judgments and rewards, I have much less control over my emotional state." The theory of Twenge and colleagues (2010) is that when people feel they have no control over their lives and how they are measured, it can lead to anxiety and depression. When our brains are anxious and depressed, we cannot fully show up as ourselves, and we cannot be fully present to learn.

As a teacher, when I focus too much on external goals—evaluations, test scores, and formal observation feedback—I become anxious. My brain swims with "what-ifs" such as these: What if this lesson is not good enough? What if I didn't do a good enough job preparing my students? These what-ifs can send me spinning down a rabbit hole of trying to control everything in the classroom. This controlling mode takes me out of myself, and I end up playing the teacher role that I think the external evaluator will approve of. It is totally and utterly exhausting to try to control 20 to 100 students a day, how they will respond to my lessons, and how outsiders visiting my classroom will perceive and judge it. The truth is, I actually have no control over others, and it wastes my time and energy to focus my attention there.

What I've found is that the more I focus on my own definition of success and my intrinsic goals for my students, the better it works out for everyone. For example, if my goal for students is for them to use many strategies we have learned and apply them to a complex, multistep problem without giving up, I beam with pride after a few days of seeing this in action. Or if I set a goal for myself to sit side by side and get to know each student in my writing class as individuals, at the end of the week I can reflect with satisfaction on my

accomplishment—knowing my students a little better than the week before. These intrinsic goals are set by me and evaluated by me. In reality, the only thing I have control over are my own intrinsic goals and the choices I make toward them. When I model this for my students, we all learn the importance of our own locus of control and we combat the anxiety-producing “doing school” behaviors. Where are you placing your locus of control?

### Share Our Gifts and Talents

When I graduated from Boston College with a teaching degree, I was eager to be just like the teachers I admired. I had sixteen years’ worth of their influence, and I believed I could take the best of each of them and become a hybrid version. I would inspire like my twelfth-grade English teacher, I would build student curiosity like my third-grade teacher, and I would have high expectations like my student teaching cooperating teacher. I believed I could sort of paste them together to form my own teaching identity. While it is totally natural and helpful to lean heavily on mentors in our early teaching days and to remember that experience is the best teacher, nowhere in that plan did I consider what *I* believed and what *I* could offer as my own gifts and talents.

During the first few years of my teaching I was like many new teachers, walking the line between excitement and fear. I was excited to try a new lesson or method and see what my students did. I was also terrified I was not good enough and that I was not doing what my students really needed. There were more fears, too, if I am totally honest. Did my principal like me, and did she think I was doing a good job? Did my students like me, and did they leave each day wanting to come back the next one? Did I know enough about math or science to teach it well? Was it my fault that some students just didn’t get what I was teaching? Should I ask for more help from my grade-level peers, or was I already asking too much of them? The list could go on and on. I guess another line I was walking was between confidence and self-doubt. I cried on some days and met friends out for drinks on good days when I wanted to celebrate.

I did reflect a lot, usually with friends on long phone calls or in journal entries. Much of what I realized was that the days I cried, I almost always second-guessed myself and did something I knew just didn’t feel right. These were the lessons I tried to copy from someone else or when I tried to be someone else. I tried to be funny like Deb, or serious like Tom, or perfectly put together like Mary. These colleagues of mine were funny, serious, put together, and great teachers, but they were not me. It never really worked to try to be anyone else as a teacher. At the time, I didn’t



believe I could just be me, and I didn't understand really what that even meant. The stories that follow illustrate how things changed for me and my students when I learned to be more of myself in the classroom. See if any of these stories resonate with your experiences, feelings, and insecurities as a teacher.

During my second teaching year, I taught third grade to an extremely energetic and diverse group of students. I was learning a new phonics program and using the teacher's manual to help me. I held up phonics cards for my students to read aloud, I read a sentence for dictation as they wrote it on their papers, and then I guided them with the exact prompts from the manual to code the spelling patterns in each word. I got halfway through the dictation portion when I noticed several students stopped working. I got annoyed and told them to pick their pencils up and start writing. Even my "best student" just stared at me. Finally I asked, "Why aren't you writing?" One boy spoke up and said, "It doesn't make any sense. What are you talking about?" I looked at their papers to see what they had written so far and realized I left out key words and inserted a word so that the sentence made absolutely no sense. I hadn't even been listening to what I was saying, and instead, I just read what was written in my plans. My face turned red, and I apologized to my class. That night I decided I was going to use the program as a guide, but I was going to write my own sentences for dictation. The ones given to me just felt so disconnected from me and my students. I wanted them to write about topics they cared about and I could talk about. This one change made all the difference. Students looked forward to hearing the sentence each day and then discussing what it meant and why I chose it. It became a puzzle for them to solve rather than a mindless activity to survive.

During my third year of teaching, I was so psyched about teaching writing workshop. It was my favorite part of the day, and I spent the most time planning and preparing for each day's lesson. I wrote daily in my own writing notebook, modeled strategies, and spent time sitting side by side with students having conferences and giving them feedback on their writing. I showed my vulnerability to my students by making my writing process visible, by explaining how I struggled to come up with ideas, how I second-guessed my decisions, and how I tended to write about what felt safe and easy at first. I showed them an entry in my writing notebook about how great my cat was (a safe and boring entry) and then how I pushed myself to write with more honesty about the time I had to say goodbye to my dying dog (a risky, real, and raw entry). That year, my students groaned when the writing period ended and asked if they could take their writing notebooks to recess to keep writing. Really ... they wanted to write at recess. The athlete in me said no and explained

that they needed to run around and play too. But I knew something was working when it came to my writing instruction.

My principal observed a writing lesson, and in our debrief meeting she commented, “You really bring yourself into your writing lessons. You show your students what you do and how you do it. They hang on your every word.” I nodded in thanks for her positive observation. Then she said, “What if you brought that level of ownership into your math teaching too?” That brief “praise high” faded as I realized she was right. At that time, my math lessons were uninspired. I simply went through the motions of what I had seen my colleagues do, my own math teachers, and what I thought a math lesson was supposed to look like. She followed up by asking, “If you could teach math the way *you* wanted, what would it look like?” I responded without even thinking, “It would look like the way I teach writing.” She smiled and said, “Then go do that.” What my principal knew was that I was still learning that the best teaching and learning come from having ownership.

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Later in my career, while serving as a coach to teachers, I met a fourth-year middle school teacher, Barb, who requested support in her classroom. She met with me to discuss what she wanted to work on. Barb explained that she inherited her curriculum, liked some of the units she was supposed to teach, but that she found many of the lessons and assessments burdensome and frankly not that connected to her own vision of what she wanted her classroom to be like. She wanted to make some changes but was afraid of what her more experienced colleagues would say. Barb and I planned some shifts she wanted to make and I pushed into her classroom to model lessons, co-teach, and then coach her as she tried the new moves. She began to feel excited and could see how these shifts were positively affecting her students. But . . . Barb was still afraid to share her new ideas at the department meetings. She worried she would “be in trouble” with her colleagues for not using the workbook they passed down to her.

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**The truth is, even with years and years of experience, we all can benefit from reminders of being true to our own teacher selves.**

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Barb and I made a plan to collaboratively share how the changes helped her students. We brought student work samples and showed our colleagues how much students were learning. When they asked how this happened, I smiled at Barb, and she explained some of the new things she was trying out. Instead of being angry, her much more experienced colleagues asked if they could hear more and come into her classroom to see how it was going. Barb was beaming when she left the room. I simply said to her, “Because you were willing to take a risk and teach like yourself and not just teach like your colleagues, you modeled for your team how they can teach more like themselves.” The truth is, even with years and years of experience, we all can benefit from reminders of being true to our own teacher selves.

### What Helps Us Be Authentic Teachers?

- ★ Remember that there is nothing to fix.
- ★ Stop comparing ourselves to someone else's highlight reel.
- ★ Focus on what we can control.
- ★ Share our gifts and talents.



What gets in the way of you being your most authentic teaching self?

### SHIFTS THAT HELP US TEACH MORE LIKE OURSELVES

While everyone—you, your students, and your colleagues—benefit from you teaching like yourself, it can be really hard. I've had many days when I felt like an imposter and second-guessed myself. I have copied other people's lessons. I have done something just because my colleagues were

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**A good portion of learning to teach like yourself is the trial and error that time and experience bring.**

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doing it, even when I didn't believe in it. A good portion of learning to teach like yourself is the trial and error that time and experience bring. That being said, I found three main challenges on my own journey to owning my teaching:

- Thinking I needed to entertain my students
- Changing the way I predict student outcomes
- Blaming students rather than acknowledging my role

I'll share a few stories that show what I learned from each of these fairly common challenges and offer you space to reflect on your own challenges.

### **From Being Interesting to Being Interested**

Many times in my early teaching career—and, if I am honest, later on in my career too—I believed I needed to entertain my students and be super interesting. I believed I had to use gimmicks and talk fast or show crazy images and examples to capture my students' attention. I thought they wanted to be entertained. On my most energetic days I could pull it off, but it was totally unsustainable to entertain students all day long. The older the ages of my students, the harder it became to entertain them too. I was confusing entertainment with engagement.

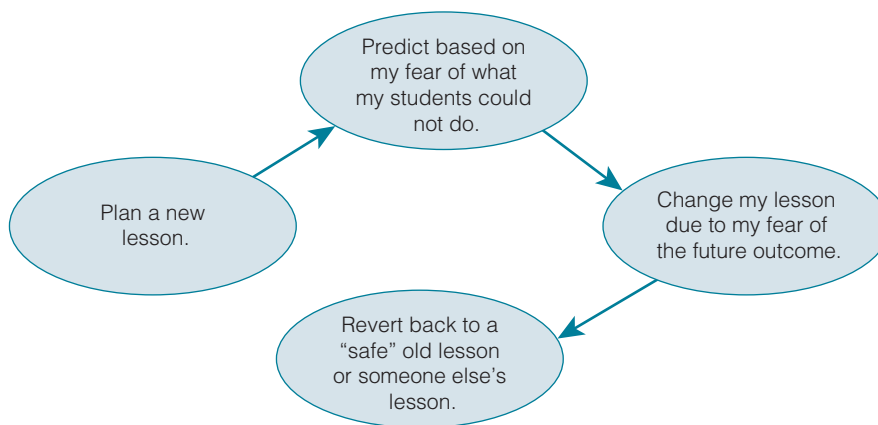
While I could get and keep students' attention for a good fifteen minutes if I showed a crazy science video or I told a shocking story, it didn't actually mean my students were engaged in any meaningful learning. I began to shift my focus from me having to be interesting and entertaining to becoming interested in my students. When I asked them questions, listened closely to what they had to say, and followed a bit of their lead, it changed everything. I had more energy. I got to know my students better. Students showed up engaged and eager to show me what they could do and what they wanted to learn about.

While teaching in a self-contained special education class, I had so much trouble getting every student's attention (and there were only seven of them). So, I began sitting side by side with students. When I sat down next to a student that first morning, I didn't even know why I did, but I was trusting my instinct. I asked the student, and then the others, what they knew a lot about and what they could be teachers about. I was about to start a unit on teaching students how to write informational books, and rather than focus on the content, at first I decided to focus on being genuinely interested in my students. As I had conversations with each student, I learned that Myles was obsessed with Batman and that Juan knew so much about an animal called a Gila monster. The next

day, when I began teaching students how to plan out an informational book by making a table of contents, I modeled with a topic I cared deeply about: running. Then I asked students to create their own table of contents about the topic they cared and knew the most about. As the days went by and students drafted their books, I modeled strategies for writing, but equally important, I asked a lot of genuinely curious questions I had about their topics and their writing. Every time I got curious about my students, their level of engagement rose, and I ended up feeling more energized and less depleted than the days of thinking I needed to entertain my students all day long. The truth I learned from this challenge is that true engagement comes from being interested in our students, not from providing them entertainment.

### From Predicting Failure to Building on Success

A common, not so helpful habit I used to be stuck in was predicting what would happen in a lesson and what my students would not be able to do. Whenever I went into predicting mode, I stressed myself out and usually underestimated my students. The same is true for my colleagues. If I predicted how they would react to a new idea I wanted to share, it would usually psych me out from actually sharing it. My habit, I found out from other teachers, is quite common. It goes like this:



The real impact of this predicting habit was that I was often not that accurate in my ability to predict the future. With all the gifts I have, future-telling is not one of them. I think this is due to my fear of the messiness of the learning getting in the way of trying out something new. When in doubt (which was often), I ended up predicting my students would not be able to do it, and I played it safe.

Psychologists call this the Pygmalion effect (Achor, 2010), when our teacher expectations affect actual student learning. From several studies, we know that when teachers believe their students can achieve, their students will rise to the challenge, and when teachers set much lower expectations and believe their students cannot do something, students only meet those lower expectations. Basically, what we believe about our students ends up coming true. While at first this finding can be a bit scary—we have so much power—it can also feel like a long, deep breath. If we predict our students can learn something new and challenging, it is much more likely to happen.

I began to shift my planning away from predicting and instead focused on what my students could already do that I could build upon. I would begin my planning by looking at student work and naming what they were learning to do. For example, I noticed that many students could accurately read math problems with more than one part and that they could choose a mathematical operation that matched the problem. They had strengths I could build upon to plan the next steps of computing correctly and double-checking work. This felt good and much better than the negative predictions. Then I asked myself, “What is the next step these students are ready for?” By building from strengths, I was still making a prediction of sorts, but it was what they were ready for and it was based on their actual current work. This shift made me happier, helped me appropriately challenge my students, and led to much more student growth.

### **From Their Challenge to My Challenge**

This shift is a difficult one to admit. There were several times as a teacher when I found myself saying something like, “My students just don’t get it.” I was blaming my students for not understanding and learning. When I began blaming, it was like a tidal wave took over and engulfed me with a hopeless feeling. It often stemmed from my own insecurity about my knowledge or teaching. It could also turn into the blame game where I could point fingers at everyone else out of pure frustration and think, “The parents don’t do enough” or “My colleagues gave me the tough class.” When I look back at these beliefs, I cringe and want to run and hide from shame. Often, I would go into blaming mode when I felt pressure to meet an expectation or when I was disappointed in how a lesson or experience went. At first it was easier to look outside myself than to take some personal responsibility for what I could have done differently. It took some honest reflection and time to realize that blaming was not helping anyone.

The times in my life when I was blamed for something, I shut down, got defensive, and disconnected from the person pointing the finger.

These are the same behaviors I saw in my students and my colleagues when they felt they were being blamed. Blaming makes someone the enemy and creates a chasm in the relationship. It also leads to mistrust. Authentic learning and relationships cannot flourish in an environment where people shut down and disconnect.

In some cases, students accept the blame and then take on a negative identity. I've seen it with a class of seventh graders who were sadly labeled as *low* and how they took on the identity and then sat passively in class waiting for a teacher to do the work for them. The self-blame can lead to low self-confidence and a fixed mindset. On the other hand, when no one is blaming themselves or the others in the school community, each person can develop a healthy identity with a growth mindset.

One experience as a graduate student really helped to shift my thinking about blame. I was taking a really hard class that involved lots of reading and research. I bombed my first few assignments and went in for extra help. Instead of offering tips or teaching, the professor began blaming me for being too busy teaching to focus on my coursework. I couldn't even get a question out of my mouth because she was talking at me with her mind made up. I went home and looked carefully at the midterm exam and realized that at least one third of the questions were on topics we did not even discuss in class. The irony, of course, was that this was an educational methods course, and she was not modeling what she was having us read about. Many of the readings advanced research and theories about student-centered curriculum, yet it was clear that she was more invested in the content than in getting to know us students. I was doing all of my readings, meeting with friends to study, and putting in so much effort.

One night, while talking (really, venting) to a nonteacher friend, she offered these questions to me: "Is it your problem or your professor's? Who is really struggling?" I answered, "I think she is. Or at least we both are. When I talk to the other students, we are all so confused, and no one is doing well." This conversation led me to stay up all night thinking about my own classroom and my own teaching.

Whenever I blamed my students or their parents for not doing their part or not understanding or not putting the work in, I could be looking back at myself instead. What was I doing to address the challenge? After more reflection, I realized that all those lessons that students did not understand were really the part of the curriculum that I did not know how to teach well. I was confusing where the real challenge was—it was often in my own teaching and not just in my students' learning. I learned that whenever my students are struggling, it does not help anyone to start

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**Authentic learning and relationships cannot flourish in an environment where people shut down and disconnect.**

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blaming, and instead, I now begin looking at my own teaching practice to see what the real challenge is for me. Identifying and owning it as my challenge allows me to do something about it. Teaching like yourself doesn't excuse us from taking responsibility; it actually means taking more personal responsibility for what happens in our classrooms.

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**Teaching like yourself doesn't excuse us from taking responsibility; it actually means taking more personal responsibility for what happens in our classrooms.**

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#### Shifts That Can Help Us Teach More Like Ourselves

- ★ Be genuinely curious and interested in our students instead of trying to gain their interest with entertaining teaching.
- ★ Build from students' current strengths with high expectations, rather than predicting what they would not be able to do.
- ★ Take responsibility for our own teaching challenges, rather than blame our students, their parents, or our colleagues.



**What shifts might help you teach more like yourself?**



## FIVE PRACTICES FOR TEACHING LIKE YOURSELF

Writing a book about teaching like yourself is a challenge because I can't simply tell you what I did and suggest you do the same. That would really be missing the whole point of being your true self. So I can't offer you steps or tips. What I can offer are the practices I have witnessed in myself and countless other teachers as we've come to really own their teaching in truly powerful ways. What follows is a brief description about each practice. Know that each practice also has its own chapter, with examples and ideas to help you step more fully into teaching like yourself, and is part of the larger Teach Like Yourself Manifesto (see Chapter 7). Think of this like a sneak peek.

### Name Your Core Beliefs

Part of being yourself is naming and knowing your own core beliefs about teaching and learning. By naming these beliefs, we create our framework and foundation to which we can come back over and over again. This feels like the heart of our teaching. Every other choice we make stems from the beliefs just like all our organs are fed from the blood that pumps through our hearts. By writing down our beliefs, we can revisit them, remind ourselves of them, and revise them as we gain more and more experience with students.

### View Your Teaching as a Practice

Another part of teaching like yourself is connecting your teaching to your beliefs. This means examining teaching choices to see whether they match what we want for our students and what we value. By viewing our teaching as a practice, we can adjust, change course, and rethink our teaching choices on an ongoing basis. We can see that each class, each student interaction, and each lesson offers an opportunity to craft our practice. Doctors have a medical practice and lawyers have a law practice; really, everyone hones their craft, from carpenters to hair stylists, and we teachers can do the same. The term *practice* also reminds us that we have never learned it all or arrived at perfection but always have more to learn and develop.

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### Build Balanced Relationships

Teaching like yourself doesn't mean shutting your classroom door and becoming an island. It actually means cultivating the kinds of professional relationships that nurture and sustain you. When we begin to take the risks to be ourselves as teachers, it gives our colleagues permission to do the same. After all, none of us can have any true and

lasting relationships with each other when we are all pretending to be something we are not. The same goes for our student relationships. According to the Quaglia Student Voice Survey (2016), students who have a sense of purpose, believe they can be successful, and are supported by their teachers are seventeen times more academically motivated. Students learn more and better from teachers they like and connect with. Teacher credibility, an outcome of student and teacher relationships, is one of John Hattie's (2016) top qualities for effective instruction with a 0.9 effect size. By building strong, real relationships with everyone in our schools, we are more at ease, more effective, and frankly have much more fun.

### Drive Professional Growth

Teaching like yourself does not mean being stagnant and stopping your learning. It actually means the opposite. When we know ourselves well—our strengths, our blind spots, and our insecure parts—we can begin to seek professional opportunities that will help us grow. This used to mean signing up for workshops. While I am still a huge fan of workshops, we don't always get permission from administrators to leave the building or there may not be a budget. We can also seek professional growth opportunities for free or next to nothing. Getting on Twitter and joining professional chats, viewing webinars, and reading blog posts and articles are all great ways to develop in an area you want to learn more about. Reading professional books with colleagues in book clubs is a way to both build relationships and develop and grow. In fact, there are so many learning opportunities for teachers today, the challenge is choosing what you want to focus on.

### Take Care of Yourself

This final practice is much more than just being yourself as a teacher; it is about making sure you are taking care of your whole self so you can show up healthy, happy, and ready to teach. So many teachers I know (including myself at times) run themselves down, skip lunch, don't get to go to the bathroom, and respond to e-mails late into the evening. We stay up too late. We have trouble saying no. We put ourselves last. As teachers, we are not just modeling how to read, or solve math problems, or synthesize historical events; we are also modeling how to take care of ourselves. Plus, when we get sick or exhausted all those other intentional practices go out the window. We take shortcuts because we can't possibly handle being our best selves. Getting fresh air, drinking enough water, saying no to things you can't possibly handle, and creating healthy boundaries are all a part of teaching like yourself too.

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**There are so many learning opportunities for teachers today, the challenge is choosing what you want to focus on.**

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### Five Practices for Teaching Like Yourself

- ★ Name your core beliefs.
- ★ View your teaching as a practice.
- ★ Build balanced relationships.
- ★ Drive professional growth.
- ★ Take care of yourself.



Look at the description of the five practices for teaching like yourself. Which one stands out to you the most? Why? Which do you think you already do well? Which are you excited to learn more about?

As this chapter ends, I'll remind us of that helpful advice from my aunt: Trust yourself. You will know what is right. Listen to your instincts. In Chapter 2, we'll dive into the practices that will help us do exactly that—let's begin by naming our core beliefs.