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Past: First Year of Teaching, Present: Now, Future: Yes, I'll Continue Teaching!

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Past: First year of teaching

Present: Now

Future: Yes, I'll continue teaching!

by Diana Aguirre

Before my first year of teaching, friends told me, "Teachers have the best schedule possible! They only work 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., are off every weekend, and have a three-month vacation during the summer." During my subsequent years of teaching, knowing how hard we have to work to be successful, I told my friends that teaching is not an easy profession. But will I stay in it? Yes!

Our work hours on site may be 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., but, in reality, to be a successful teacher, there are many weeks when as much time needs to be put into lesson planning and correcting papers as in actual classroom teaching. I have often found myself working all Sunday, making sure everything was ready for the week ahead. As teachers, we are always preparing and always learning something new.

To learn new teaching strategies as well as gain more knowledge in the content area, I attend professional development sessions. These sessions are usually after school or on Saturdays, but, to improve my methodology and understand current teaching trends, those extra hours are a must. These sessions gave me ideas for developing as a teacher. They also provided me with hands-on activities for reading and many resources to use in my classroom.

How teaching can change

During my first year of teaching, students were expected to sit quietly for more than 45 minutes as I instructed them, using a PowerPoint presentation. Mondays and Tuesdays were designed for PowerPoint or Prezi lessons while Wednesdays through Fridays students would rotate through stations, reviewing what was previously taught. That first year was stressful because I was unable to finish the lessons. I would repeatedly have to stop, saying "Sit down, stop talking, put that away." Much of my teaching time was spent redirecting and getting the students' attention. That year I realized lecturing off a PowerPoint was inadequate; the students needed engagement in activities during the lesson and time to discuss the material with their peers.

In subsequent years of teaching, I have continued learning from professional development sessions and applying what I learned. I now include short turn-and-talks, where students pair up to discuss the topic given. As the students discuss, I move among the groups and listen to the conversations to ensure they are on topic. Once the students return to the whole class discussion, I share interesting things discussed in the groups. Then the different groups share with the class what they learned from their partners.

Another change in my pedagogy is my increased use of technology. Learning can be demonstrated through different technology resources like Kidbiz 3000 or I-station. These programs, along many others, help the students improve in their reading ability while having fun. I-station is a program

where students practice phonics, comprehension and vocabulary among other things. The students are given an assessment at the beginning of each month to see their progress over time. Kidbiz 3000 is mainly used for students in upper grades because this program gives the students different types of stories to read. The stories go from fiction, non-fiction and fantasy. After each story, the students have a set of questions to answer in which then receive a grade. Working with these programs has given me the chance to assign different genre stories depending on the students' reading levels. Furthermore, I can access my account and see what grades my students received for each story. These types of programs keep the students engaged while learning at their appropriate grade level.

What works?

Teaching is undeniably one of the hardest professions, but it is easier when connections are made with each student individually. What does each student like, regarding hobbies or sports or family? Learning about each child helps me choose books to add to the classroom library, which certainly help increase the students' reading engagement.

Beyond making personal connections, there are other ways to motivate students to learn. Chris Riffle's *Whole Brain Teaching for Challenging Kids* (2013) offers many ways to keep the students engaged, like the "mirror" technique. This technique has the students repeating what the teacher says until the teacher says, "mirrors off." For example, I say, "Action is everything that happens in a story," and the students will repeat, "Action is everything that happens in a story." When I am ready for the students to stop repeating, I will say "mirrors off." My students enjoy this technique because they have a chance to talk and have some movement during the lesson.

Another of Riffle's strategies is "Teach...Okay." As I am teaching a lesson and come across a new vocabulary word, I ask students to teach each other what that word is and what it means. First I will tell them the word and the meaning. Then I say, "Teach," and the students immediately say, "Okay" as they turn to their partner and teach that new vocabulary word to each other.

What's rewarding about teaching?

Now that I have taught for a few years, I am aware that I still need to make more changes. I still have a lot of learning to do, but I am able to make changes using my reflections on my previous teaching experiences. Even though I am part of a difficult profession, I enjoy it and appreciate its rewards. How is it rewarding? I am confident that I can make a difference in each child's life. Teachers are mentors, counselors, nurses, and second parents to students. Watching those students show how successful they can be makes me, as a teacher, feel proud to know I contributed to their successes.

Why should people enter this profession?

Teaching is a profession where learning continues throughout the years. Teachers work with students to help them learn and become great citizens in the community. They also make a big difference in children and leave a footprint in their lives. Teaching is the perfect profession for helping others and building relationships. I'm in it for keeps!

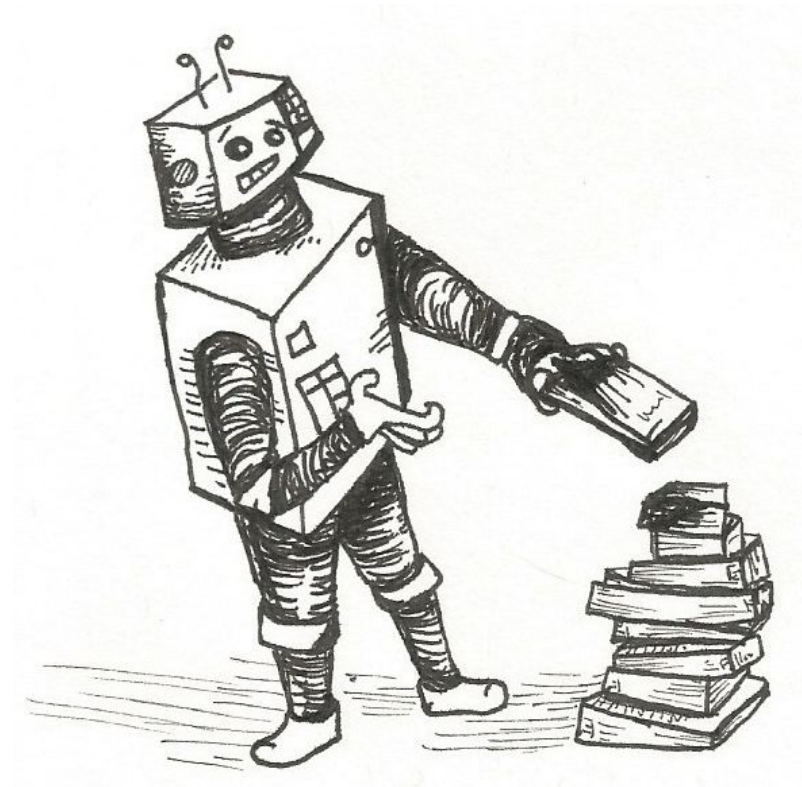
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Diana Aguirre is a dedicated first grade teacher in Houston, Texas. She is currently attending University of Houston for her Master's degree. She has been teaching for three years and loves it!



Artwork by Maggie Boyce-Blanchard