

Philosophy of Education

I believe that learning is predicated on a safe classroom environment, and that the teacher plays the primary role in creating that community of mutual respect and openness: initiating open and frank discussions, modeling inclusive and empathetic behavior, and showing respect to the opinions and backgrounds of the students. This safe classroom is both a microcosm of and a refuge from the world, a place to engage the external, but also view it from afar, a small window to a larger field of vision. Our students' lives outside of school may be chaotic, but when they step into the classroom, the teacher needs to try their best to let them know that they matter.

I believe in a student-centered classroom, one that acknowledges the importance of a teacher in modeling a lesson, but that furthers students' independence and intellectual curiosity through independent and group work, not a lecture.

I believe in differentiated education that acknowledges that no student comes into our classroom as a blank slate, but rather represents a conglomeration of his or her socioeconomic, cultural and educational background. Those backgrounds affect immensely who our students are and how they learn, and that by ignoring or sidestepping them, students lose the opportunity both to learn about their similarities and differences and to use their circumstances as catalysts for learning.

I believe that the best teachers do not teach, but rather empower their students to learn, thus creating lifelong learners. A culture of learning is enhanced by hands-on, interactive, and engaging lessons that reflect a student's interests and recognize the importance of a student's voice. Lifelong learners are more confident, independent, and better citizens. They are proud of their academic achievements, but are not defined by them. To do this, teachers must themselves be passionate about learning—not just in their own subject area—and model intellectual curiosity themselves.

I believe class management should for the most part stay in the classroom, that “outsourcing” discipline should be a last—and very rare—resort. A class runs smoothly and independently when the teacher sets high expectations for students and follows through on them, uses clear structures and positive reinforcement, and develops a strong rapport with students as a class and individually. Most important, if a teacher wants students to be respectful, he or she needs to treat each student fairly, as a person. Only by modeling the behavior expected of the students will a teacher actually earn it from the students.

I believe that English Language Arts is interdisciplinary at its core, its texts drawn from the entire media spectrum, its subject matter relative to, derivative of and integral to every other branch of learning. English is not a body of language and literature frozen in time—it is constantly evolving, constantly adapting and constantly making direct connections with our world. By encouraging students to actively engage the text, through unbridled reflection, dramatic activities, student-led discussions, and strong text-to-self connections, they come away with a better understanding of the text, the world, and themselves. When students engage a text, it becomes theirs, not just the author's.

I believe that teaching is an art that is never perfected, a high-wire juggling act that balances realism and idealism, education and politics, the demands of the class as a whole and the needs of the individual. The best teachers are always juggling and finding new ways to walk the wire through constant reflection, adaptation, and flexibility. The best teachers will do whatever it takes in time and energy to push a student to be successful, both academically and emotionally.

Biography

I cried the first two days of kindergarten. Bawled, in fact. Yet despite that inauspicious start, I've wanted to teach ever since I was old enough to play "school" with my siblings in my backyard. The past ten years have reflected that passion.

National Conference Center, Washington DC; ©Stacey DeAmicis

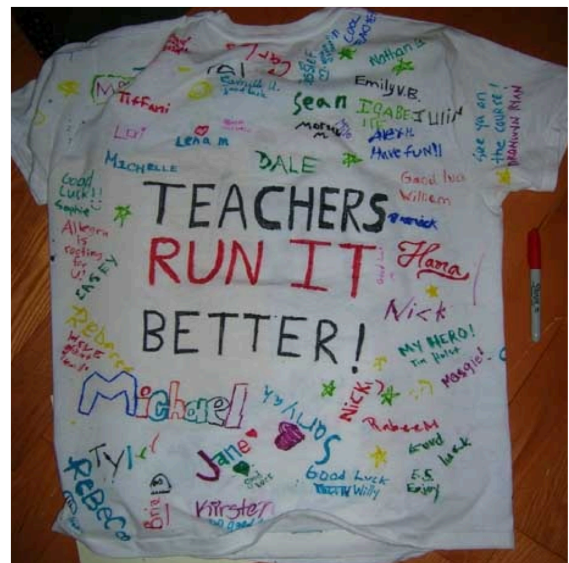


I spent the majority of my life in California, but in 2005 I made the leap to New York because, I told myself, if I could teach in New York City public schools, I could teach *anywhere*. Yet that notion didn't prepare me for my first day in front of the class in January of 2007, a green teacher fresh out of graduate school, replacing an experienced one who had left mid-year because the students had been too difficult for her. That first month was by far the hardest of my teaching career, and I constantly questioned myself. Yet by the end of the year, I had discovered my innate strengths as a teacher—patience, empathy, high expectations for my students, and a passion for the job that I do.

One of my greatest strengths as a teacher—developing a strong rapport with my students—was honed long before I stepped in front of my own classroom. I grew up in an “untraditional,” chaotic family, which imbued me with

endless patience and, even more important, the passion to connect on a deep level with students going through a myriad of issues, to ensure that *my classroom* is a refuge from the outside world. As a counselor for incoming UCLA freshmen and transfer students, I supported students who were battling depression, anorexia, homophobic families, or simply standard first-year jitters. As a teacher's assistant in a self-contained, special day classroom, I worked one-on-one with students with conditions from mild dyslexia to severe autism, which greatly increased my flexibility as a mentor, my ability to differentiate in my lessons, and my empathy for students struggling with concepts. Thus today, when I have my students write in their biweekly journals, they learn very quickly through my comments that I genuinely care about what they have to say.

While living in New York, I was also active in the comedy scene; even in Spain, I organized many multilingual open-mic nights so I could continue performing. The skills developed on stage have helped me immensely in my classroom,



Shirt I used for New York Marathon, signed by students

not least of which by helping me think on my feet. Whether I'm doing a read-aloud with various voices, responding to a student's question with a comparison between Romeo and Ted Mosby, or writing a song on the guitar to explain dialogue punctuation to my students, if my students aren't laughing and engaged, then I'm not doing my job.



Amazon Basin, Peru

Aside from teaching, the past ten years of my life have been largely defined by another passion. Anyone who's talked with me for more than five minutes knows that I am a *viajero*—a traveler. Eleven years ago, having never been abroad, I decided I didn't want to start teaching students about the world if I had never experienced it myself. Since then, I have traveled through thirty-eight countries and six continents. In addition, I've spent a summer in Oxford, another living and volunteering in Kenya, and taught in Spain for the three years. While

traveling, I write narratives that I share with friends, family and students. The experiences I've had abroad have made me a more patient, open-minded teacher, and have given me a plethora of stories and lessons I can impart to my students.

When I talk about revolutions with my students, for example, I can relate what the Egyptian taxi driver said to me a month after Mubarak resigned. When we discuss poverty, I can describe the dirt-splotched boy in Cuzco who checked for change in the phone booths on his way to school, or the refugees in Nakuru who made soccer balls out of trash. When we examine the human experience, I can recount the old men playing dominoes on the sidewalk in Argentina, the Vietnamese girl clinging to her father during a funeral procession, the family singing by the railroad tracks in Thailand. When we discuss what it means—and takes—to be happy, I can relate to them the simple fact that the orphans I lived with in Kenya are to this day the happiest kids I've ever met.



Last Day ☺ ; Nakuru, Kenya

Eight years after I stepped in front of that classroom, I am still passionate about what I do—teaching is still my dream job. Eight years later, I still want to impart to each of my students the same passion for life and learning that was instilled in me by my teachers, to show them that they are much more than what statistics dictate to them. A teacher once told us, "If you're not passionate about what you're doing, then you shouldn't be doing it." I agree, and no matter where I teach, my future students can expect from me a zest for learning, a passion for teaching, and an unyielding drive to effect meaningful and positive change.