

# Teacher Interview: Karyn Dickerson

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**Imagine someone visited your class several times, what would they say the principal teaching strategies you use are? Could you talk about teaching strategies you use that are universal, and as well as strategies that are somewhat unique to you and your personality?**

IF someone came in my classroom, they would see me operating by the principle of less teaching and more learning, and what I mean by that is that I want my students to be actively engaged in my class at all times. So some of the strategies that I use to get that engagement is really centers around project-based learning and cooperative learning groups. In my classroom, even though it's an English class, students might write a lab report based on a short story. They might spend a week re-enacting or creating a mock trial based on a work of literature that we've read where we study themes like morality. They might be engaged in a debate about racial tension or issues of gender within a text. The idea is to put their ideas at the forefront and really give them the opportunity to establish their own opinions on the text but also learn how to support those ideas as well.

**How do you organize your class to maximize learning opportunities for your students? How do you help them become better learners?**

You know, I think organization is really important and my classroom is structured so that when students come in, it's very student-friendly. When they first walk in the door, they have a student station where they can staple their papers because, I think, no student owns a stapler at home for some reason. They can staple their papers; they can put them in the turn-in tray for their work; they then go to their desk and there's a place in the back of the room where they can sharpen their pencils, collect any materials they may need for class that day. By having that established as they come in, it really helps cut back on distractions from class time, so when the bell rings, we are all ready to get started with our actual activities. I also like to have some sort of a warm up on the board that basically gets students thinking about what we're doing in class that day. Sometimes that warm up might be a grammar assignment where they have to correct the mistakes. Sometimes it's a question that they have to write about in a quick-write. Really just to get them ready to work from the very moment when that bell rings all the way until the end of class.

**How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs (EC, ESL, AIG, etc.)?**

You know, I think because my class is so structured around that project-based learning, I can differentiate with the types of assignments that I give my students, so when I assign a project, everyone can select the type of project that is in alignment with their interest, but also with their skills, and sometimes students don't know those skills, so it might take a little coaching to say, "You know, maybe you don't want to do a fully filmed video project, but there's this great website, goanimate, where you can create an animation." That might be more in line with their skill set. I really like giving those options to my students so that they feel like they are also taking ownership of it. They don't feel like I'm saying,

“Well, you can’t do this.” Instead, they’re thinking, “Wow! I get to do this!” I think that’s really important. I also consider the type of assignment and the length for some of my students, so for some of my ESL students, for instance, their essay might not be as long as one of my native English speakers, and really working with those students and accommodating for those differences is critical in making sure that each student grows at their own pace, and hopefully by the end of the year, is where they should be in terms of proficiency.

### **How do you know when learning is occurring and what do you do when you question whether learning is taking place in the classroom?**

I am constantly assessing my students and that occurs not just through formal assessments, but also through informal assessments. So, during a class discussion, asking students if they understand, giving me a thumbs up or a thumbs down, having class seminars where I step back and let my students discuss with each other, and I actually take notes of what they say during that seminar and that gives me a quick feel for what they understand and what they do not understand. The same is true when they’re working in small groups. I go around to each group; I ask them guiding questions; sometimes I even play devil’s advocate to see just how deeply they’ve thought about a topic, and that allows me to know where they are at that moment.

Now when I see that students *don’t* get the material, then we just have to go back and reteach it. For instance, last year, in my IB class after I received the first round of student essays, I realized that their writing was not where I would have liked it to be at the beginning of the school year, so I decided to modify my long-term planning and we spent a week doing writing workshops, reviewing how to write a strong introduction, what a good thesis statement needs, how to support your argument in an essay, and by taking that time to reteach those skills, my students were then able to kind of catch up to where they needed to be, so we could continue to grow throughout the school year.

### **How do you “hook” a reluctant learner to your content?**

I think that student-based learning really does help hook them. I do make a concerted effort to put myself out there. Sometimes I might almost humiliate myself by singing lyrics from their favorite songs and keeping engaged with what’s going on in their lives and in sort of...pop culture, but also in just having activities that they care about. When you make literature more than just a book that we’re going to read and you make it relevant to their lives, then you hook them. And I really think that literature should serve as both a mirror that reflects the lives of my students, and as a window out of which they can see a world they never would have experienced outside of the pages of the book, and if you focus all of your lessons on providing them with that sense of self, but also a sense of others, then it stops being just an assignment, and they’re immediately hooked.

### **If you were to give advice to a new teacher in North Carolina, what 2-3 learnings would you share?**

You know, I think for new teachers there are two things that are very important, and that comes down to relationships and reflection. So you have to establish relationships with your students. They have to feel like you value them as individuals, but they also understand that you are still the adult who is in

charge of that classroom. You also have to establish relationships with your coworkers. You need for those relationships to help you in the classroom through collaboration, but you also need those relationships just to serve as a support system for when you have days when you might feel like you might have struggled, you need someone within that school you can talk to and who can say, "You know what, I've had days like that, too, and it happens, and tomorrow's going to be a great day." So those relationships are critical.

After you have those relationships in place, you also have to reflect on your own practice, and a big part of reflection is being willing to admit when you make mistakes and find ways to change it in the future, and that comes down to being flexible in the classroom. I think a lot of new teachers come in and you have...I did this...I had these great lesson plans and I thought, "This is going to be the best class ever!" And when I got up in front of the students, I realized, something wasn't clicking, and that goes back to that re-teaching component. So I had to reflect on what went right? What didn't go the way that I wanted it to go? And then create a new lesson to make sure my students got those skills that they needed.