

## What the Best NC Teachers Do – Transcript

Teacher: Jill Francis

**Question 1 – 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 are somewhat unique to you and your personality?**

**Jill Francis:** I teach science; I teach high school biology, AP Biology and AP Environmental Science so I'm a strong believer in inquiry-based education. If someone comes into my classroom, they are going to see students actively inquiring. They are going to be doing hands on models, experiments, group discussions... all around the idea of trying to discover and understand the science concepts. My personality is kind of introverted... soft spoken... Many of my former teachers are surprised that I became a teacher, so you won't see me standing on a desk or singing... doing anything really out of the ordinary, but my students learn to respect me and they form relationships with me. So I have a really strong ability to make those interpersonal relationships and I think that is unique to my personality, whereas the inquiry based strategies are more universal, to science teachers especially.

**Question 2 – How do you organize your class to maximize learning opportunities for your students? How do you help them become better learners?**

**Jill Francis:** Because I teach science, I have lab tables in my classroom. So students sit by twos at tables. Often, they are working as partners to discuss things that we are talking about in class. Many times, they'll turn around and put two tables together, so they're in an automatic group of four. That makes breaking into groups really easy and streamlined. From day one, I assign their seats so that I can learn their names. After I get to know the students, their personalities, their leadership styles and abilities, I will specifically assign groups at later times in the semester. Sometimes I group by ability, sometimes I group by personality, and sometimes I group just so that people who are really different get to work together with people they wouldn't normally choose to work with. I really think that group work helps all kinds of learners. It helps higher level learners explain things to others and it helps the ones who are struggling because they can hear it from different perspectives, not just the way I choose to explain it.

**Question 3 – How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs (EC, ESL, AIG, etc.)?**

**Jill Francis:** Since I teach High School, some of the students are automatically grouped by ability. It's self-chosen groups. We have an open-access policy so anyone who wants to take an AP class or an honors class is able to do that. In general, you will have your higher level academically gifted students in the AP classes and honors classes and students with special needs, learning disabilities, and language learning disabilities will be in the general level biology classes. Even within those classes, there's a wide range of abilities. I think it's tempting for teachers to teach to the middle of the class, so I really try hard to identify the top performing students and plan instruction for them, then provide the scaffolds for

students below. Some of the strategies for helping struggling learners are good for everyone. Graphic organizers, hands-on demonstration, active learning... things that help them visualize and hear things in multiple ways also help the high level students as well. High level students are able to turn around and share what they've learned. A lot of times, just by speaking what you know, you identify your own misunderstandings or it helps you cement what you've already learned. Those groups play lots of roles in my classroom. My school district also has a 1 to 1 laptop initiative and that tool makes differentiation very easy. I can always add extra links to high interest topics so students can choose what they want to read more about. They can choose to do animations or they can choose to do virtual labs on their own time. So students who are really interested and want to go beyond and finish assignments ahead of others, still have more opportunities and deeper things to explore.

**Question 4 – How do you know when learning is occurring and what do you do when you question whether learning is taking place in the classroom?**

**Jill Francis:** During labs and groupwork, I am constantly circulating through the room and I can listen in on the discussions that the students are having. They'll all have a common set of questions they're supposed to be answering, and I can hear the questions that they are asking each other, and I can hear the explanations they are giving to each other. I can easily identify misconceptions in many students at one time. When you have a whole class discussion, sometimes you just hear from the student who knows the answer. The ones who don't know kind of slide through the cracks. By taking the time to go around through those small groups and listen in on their discussions, they can ask me questions and I can do mini-lessons to meet the needs of each group. Then we can come back together and share as a whole class what the small groups had discussed. That helps me to identify. If every group is saying the same thing and it's all wrong, then I know I need to go back and revisit that topic with the whole class. Or, maybe I know that I need to find another activity or video to address the particular misunderstandings that I've identified in those discussions.

**Question 5 – How do you “hook” a reluctant learner to your content?**

**Jill Francis:** Teaching science, I have many reluctant learners. A lot of students come into my classroom with the idea that they are not good at science. They think it's really hard and they can't learn it. On the first day of class, I tell them all that we are starting with a clean slate, that I don't know anything about them and that I am holding the highest expectations possible; that I am expecting everyone in there to be successful. Then I make sure that, on those first few days of class, that when other teachers are going through all of the rules and procedures, that we are doing a hands on activity to teach them procedures while doing the activities. They leave the first day with a good feeling about my class. I have parents tell me that their kids say that was their favorite class because they did something. A lot of times, my reluctant learners are those who've never experience success before and so, they will tell me that because they are active in my classroom and up and doing things, they don't have to sit at a desk for 90 minutes, that it makes them want to come to my class. My first goal is to make them want to come to the classroom and then to make the learning interesting and engaging and then, they are hooked.

**Question 6 – If you were to give advice to a new teacher in North Carolina, what 2-3 learnings would you share?**

**Jill Francis:** First of all, some of the advice that I was given was to stay out of the teacher's lounge. I think that I took that to heart a little too much. I was so worried about being influenced by negative attitudes that I stayed in my classroom and thought I had to do everything on my own. The first piece of advice that I would give is to stay away from the negative conversations, but on the other side of that, look for the positive people in your school. There are plenty of teachers with positive attitudes toward education who are there for the students and there for the right reasons. If you can attach yourself to those people, they have so many great ideas to share and encouraging words to give you and have been through trials. They can help you in those situations. I wish I had taken advantage of that more when I was a beginning teacher.

Another thing that is really good advice is to try to find balance in your life. Teaching can be all-consuming, especially if you want to do it well. You become so attached to your students and you want to do anything you can to help them learn, but if you do that to the exclusion of your own family and your own health, then you can't be an effective teacher as well.