

Teacher Interview: James Ford

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?

James Ford: So, I think that universal strategies are relationship building, finding ways to connect with your students beyond just content, and that's all the nuances down to how you speak to students, the kind of classroom environment you create. Be sure it's welcoming, make sure that it's safe and that it's ok to talk... to make mistakes. That's what you would expect to see from any class, but you'd see that in my class as well. A lot of humor involved but also the structure... high expectations... None of my students are allowed to slough off. I'm either hot or cold... either I'm super silly or I'm super serious and they know when it's time to joke, we can joke. When it's time to clamp down and get serious, it's time to be serious and pay attention to content. So I think the best teachers are able to shift gears automatically, you know, not manually having to control their class, but their students know what the protocol is. There are regiments and systems in place where, you know it's calcified... it's solidified in that environment and that's what I would say some of the best teachers you witness, whether it be elementary or secondary, it's embedded.

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

James Ford: It's about balance. Physically, the space is one where I can monitor every student, usually a U-shaped form where I'm not talking to them, but they feel like they are a part of the learning process. Additionally, I have also paired them up where they always feel like they have somebody that, even if they're not comfortable saying something to me, they can always kind of whisper to the next person. You know, there's somebody there to help them out. I pair them according to the demonstrated ability and the expectation is that everybody's held accountable. Also, no lesson is all one thing. I try to balance as best as possible so there might be some lecture, a minute portion of that, then there's some practical. Whatever concept I'm teaching, there's the opportunity to express that... to participate in that. And then there's independent practice. You know, the expectation that they demonstrate for me that they understand that. And those are ways I try to make sure everybody's involved. It's never all one thing... It's kind of a show. It's kind of a participatory process and I've tried to sure I can monitor and assess everybody and their process to make sure they're involved but it's as all hands on deck approach.

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

James Ford: First and foremost, you have to look at their IEP, their individual education plan to figure out what their accommodations are and adjust accordingly. You know, for some folks, it's it's as simple as keeping them in an environment where they won't be as easily distracted. For some folks, it requires more one on one time and, often times, for assessment it requires making minute alterations. Maybe

offering fewer alternatives for a particular assessment... offering supplementary resources... vocabulary development resources. It just really depends what the exceptionality is, but it has to be according to the IEP. For those who may be English language learners, try to see if you can identify somebody in the class to serve in a leadership capacity who speaks that language and offering them a confidant. Somebody who they can feel comfortable talking with... It also gives the student a leadership role as well. It helps to develop that aspect, but make sure that language accommodations are made. If you have to translate certain item, yes, but the development of English language is important well. And AIG, it's increasingly rare, I'm always excited because, you know, a lot of them want to take it higher and I'm free if you want to go even deeper. So offering them some supplementary assignments, other tasks and offering them a leadership role in the class as well... developing them as leaders in offering peer tutoring opportunities to help them lift up their fellow students is important well so those are some of the ways I incorporate.

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

James Ford: I know learning is occurring through constant assessment, formal and informal assessment. Informally, there's a look that you learn to be able to identify when students are getting it and you know when they're not. You know when something falls flat. You know the air kind of leaves the room and you know that's not hitting on it, but every lesson at the end of it, I'm always trying to make sure that you demonstrate for me that you know something... so do you guys get it? Yeah? Prove it... You know, you're going to do something where you show me that you understand... you show me that you're learning. The next morning when you come back, the warm up is always a recall of information, you know, because we can't put the next brick on until it's certain this has been solidified. So that's one way, but also actual data... every unit, every concept I teach, the next day you're gonna have to, from some small test or some small formal assessment, prove to me that you comprehend and fully understand it. I'm going to collect data on that and I'm going to be able to look at that and tell whether what I did was effective or not. If it is, we move forward. If it's not, we rehash that or repave that and both of those work in unison with each other. They can be isolated but unless you're really assessing, unfortunately you can't really determine whether somebody is learning or not. You can ask questions, it's a good way that suffices to a point, but there needs to be something tangible that lets us know. Like, as a physician, you would want to know, what's my blood pressure? You know, you can't just say you're in good health... you're doing fine... I need to see some metrics in place, so that's a part of it.

How do you "hook" a reluctant learner to your content?

James Ford: You know, you've got to build a narrative. You've got to tell them why they're here because I wouldn't be interested in learning something that doesn't apply to my life either. It's about making it relevant, you know, and that comes once again through building those connections personally. Understanding the world and the environment of your kids... It's being culturally responsive in your teaching, and that's not just dealing with racial and ethnic backgrounds. That's just understanding each of your kids and where they come from so that you bring a certain lens as a teacher into the class and that may be drastically different than their lens. So how do you connect that? That takes figuring out

who your kids are, how they tick, building those relationships and then you can be able to talk to them and say, "Hey, I know isn't the most interesting to you, but let me tell you why this is important." Building a narrative... just teaching stuff in a vacuum... that's not even enough to compel even adults.

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

James Ford: Number one, make sure you love it and that love may not be immediate. You might kind of hate it at first but make sure that you love it. This has to emanate from passion. This work is a calling and we're very special people. You know, not everybody can teach and there's nothing wrong with saying that, but for those who can, those who are passionate, you are needed in this world and this society so make sure that you love it. Two, be honest and be deliberate and intentional about your development. Folks told me that, you know, master teachers told me that you can't cheat the profession. All of us are legends in our own mind, but take that honest criticism, take that honest critique, and be sure that you are constantly developing yourself. That's the only way to reach your potential as an instructor you know and be able to fulfill your purpose in the classroom. Be sure to develop yourself, be honest and take inventory... take stock constantly and find ways to add skills.