

# Teacher Interview: Melissa Gillespie

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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 are somewhat unique to you and your personality?**

I think if someone were to walk into my classroom, consistently over a month time-frame, they would see that learning is incredibly student-centered, that they are active in part of the learning that occurs in our classroom. Not only is it student-centered, but often times they help me choose the direction our curriculum is going to go into. So, for example, I give them all of the objectives we must master, say for Civics and Economics or even American History I or II, and then they see where we need to go forward, and maybe they get to choose the topics we do first and what they want to analyzed about those different perspectives, and definitely making it relevant and help it connect to their life.

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

I think that's very difficult to answer how I maximize my classroom to make sure they are all effective learners because every classroom is so unique and it's very different, so your learners change from year to year and from block to block, so I really have to look at the strengths and weaknesses of the students in my classroom before I can determine how the classroom best suits them, so it's always different and that's one of the exciting things about education is that we can always change the different things that we do, but when I really talk about how I make my students effective learners, and to own and have leadership within their own education, I really help them analyze their strengths as a learner, and they can make those strengths part of their successes in the classroom, but also part of that is helping them acknowledge their weaknesses, and as their weaknesses, they need to help within their learning style learn what will be most effective for them. So I would like to think I help my learners understand how they learn as opposed to, "This is how you need to do it."

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

Actually, I teach quite a few students with instructional needs and obviously you have to make reference back to their IEPs and their 504s and their accommodations, but once again, I look back to their learning style and see what works best for them, and so I try to focus on what is my process, will I differentiate my instruction based on the process I give them? Any my product, what do I expect them to show me that they've actually accomplished the curriculum that I need them to.

**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 would hope that learning is occurring in my classroom when the students are excited and I can see their eyes light up and, "Oh my goodness! I've mastered this content knowledge!" And I can see it

through formal and informal observations, when they can talk to me in detail about what they've learned. They can answer simple questions about what I've needed them to master for that day, and, you know, if it's not working, we have to go back and address that in different ways. Maybe something as simple as re-teaching a concept, or just being incredibly honest with the students and saying, "Hey, this is something we did not do very well on. We need to go back and see how we can do this a better way. What did you not understand about it? What maybe did I not do that wasn't helping you become successful?" And I think it's important, even as a teacher, for me to acknowledge that part of this might have been my weakness, too, how I presented that information to you, and it's nice to have their feedback in that process as well.

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

Well, I've always said that the key to a positive education is creating positive relationships, so I try very effectively from day one to create relationships in my classroom where they feel a system of trust. I always say that students don't necessarily like...I mean...learn from people they don't like and that's definitely important in the classroom, so I try to build those, you know, relationships from day one. If it's a student where I cannot build a strong positive relationship with, I really try to connect the content to their life and make it relevant so they can see what we're doing in this classroom will help you outside of the classroom. It's part of a bigger picture. We're not just isolated in room 233 in Wilmington, North Carolina. It really is part of a bigger scheme.

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

Well, the first thing I would give and I tell all of our beginning teachers this, is that you need to know your content very well. You need to know your content so well that if you stepped in on that day you could talk about it because when we don't know our content well, it often leads to a lot of discipline problems in the classroom and the students can see that and they will use it as a target against you, so definitely always know your content well. And then at the end of the day, be honest with yourself, be honest about your strengths, be honest about your weaknesses, and you've got to have the ability to self-reflect on that. If I come back in here a decade from now, are you still doing what you were doing year one? Because if you were, you're not being a self-reflective practitioner. And those would be the two biggest pieces of advice I would give them.