

# Teacher Interview: JoAnna Massoth

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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?**

Well, I teach sixth grade dual language, which means I teach half the day in Spanish, so I have language arts and science in Spanish, so I try to look for a variety of ways to include culture and language into the activities when we're, especially learning grammar because grammar's kind of boring anyway, so I try to look for ways to make it exciting, and there's this website called Zambombazo where they have music, and in the music lyrics, they have spaces where the grammar constructions are, so if we're studying like direct objects or indirect objects, you'd walk into the room and you'd see the music video or the music playing and you'd see kids working on a grammar activity and talking to each other and talking about grammar and language, and the exciting thing is that when we have class and grammar, kids are talking to each other and actively engaged in grammar instead of it being like a boring practice activity. So I think if you walked in to the room, you'd see kids looking at a lot of visuals because we're learning in Spanish, we're not just learning Spanish, we're learning in Spanish. I try to make sure there's a lot of visuals around the room: posters. A lot of times where they can hear people speak in Spanish with other accents. We listen to the news from Spain and from Mexico City every Monday, so kind of like in a social studies class you'd listen to CNN Student News. In my class you'd come in and you'd see us watching RTVE, which is from Spain, and watching noticias...Noticiero from Mexico City, so I think you would hear a lot of language when you walk into the room and that would be something that's really distinct. It's not a quiet room. There's always language and activity going on.

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

Well, to organize my room, I have the coveted tables. It's taken me four years and as any middle school teacher will tell you, desks are usually what you have in a classroom, especially if you are new to a school, and your goal in the next several years is to swap out those desks to get tables because it's much more easy to have kids collaborate when you have tables, and especially if you teach science, you want to have a room for lab activities, so in order to have kids collaborate, you're trying to acquire tables, so I think physical organization of the room is important. Kids are able to collaborate more easily. I have separate spaces for kids who do need more space, and personal space to work, or who need it a little quieter because my room isn't always that quiet, but I understand that students do need some time to work quietly, especially kids who are easily distracted. I organize the room so that there's a nice soft area to go read a book. I have book cases in a certain area. I organize so that students know where to turn in work. They know where to get work back from. They know where to find out what we're doing for the day. They know where to get activities where they've missed, so I've set up kind of a space where they know the expectations for the class, and so kids very easily know what we're gonna do, how to get what they need and how to progress with the lesson. I try to make students independent or I try to help students become independent. When they come to sixth grade, a lot of times they're still used

to being elementary schoolers where if they're missing an assignment, they'll wait until the teacher tells them, or if they need a pencil, they'll wait until something happens where they need a pencil, so I try to build on The Leader in Me that they use in middle school and have them be proactive and learn how to be independent and have students learn...figure out what they need to do to do an activity, to be problem solvers and critical thinkers, but to mostly be independent and to be intrinsically motivated, and for them to care about what they're doing in class and what the results are of that.

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

So throughout the years, I've had students of varying abilities, and because I teach in another language, I'm always working with students who have different levels of language proficiency. Also, I've worked with students who have learning difficulties, but with differentiation, I make sure I have materials available at a variety of levels. I have a student who just came recently from another country and has never been to school before, and is in sixth grade, so I'm teaching her to read in Spanish as she learns how to read and write in English also, so I have materials at a variety of levels, and I've been trained in differentiation. So I have materials at different levels; I have expectations for each individual student; and I know what each individual student needs to do and to work on and I've communicated that to them, and they know what they need to work on. The students in their binder have a sheet that shows exactly which grammar activities and reading proficiency goals they're working on and students do activities that meet those specific goals and they cross them off on a sheet and they mark them off on a spreadsheet, so kids are keeping track of what their goals are and what they're working on.

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

So I can tell when students are learning and understanding when they're actively engaged, when they have an expression on their face that shows they're excited because they understand and their satisfied because they are able to successfully complete the activity. Again, because I teach in Spanish, it's really easy to look around the classroom to walk around the classroom, to hear their conversations, and if there's not a lot of talk, a lot of times that means they don't understand because nobody has asked questions yet. They're not talking to each other; they're not actively engaged in it, but if I walk around and all the students are talking about the activity, then I know they're understanding it. I do a lot of formative assessments. A lot of times I'll walk around with a clipboard with a spreadsheet on it, and I have all their names on it, and I'll just write at the top like "biotic" and "abiotic," and as they're doing an activity where they just classify something in science, I'll walk around and I'll check off what they're doing on a spreadsheet, so I have ways of doing formative assessment that allows me to know that they're understanding what they're doing, and for students who don't understand, I then know who I need to go back later and target for more additional instruction. What do I do when it's not going well or if they're not understanding? Having taught a while, it's easier to kind of...when the lesson is just exploding, it's easier to kind of stop it in the middle and go back a few steps and figure out at which point you need to reteach, so many times I've done activities where halfway through you realize they don't have the vocabulary they need, or they have the vocabulary but they didn't understand the

instructions well enough or I didn't explain it well enough, and it's easy at this point after twenty some years of teaching to just stop and say, "Alright, let's just take a minute now and take a break and let me re-explain it" and have the kids explain to me that they understand what their supposed to do and then continue with the lesson, because I'm not afraid to bomb the lesson as long as it's a teaching moment and I can stop it and go back, or even sometimes at the end of a lesson when I realize it didn't go well, I'll just say, "I'm really sorry about that. I'm going to go home and look at what we're going to do and we're going to try this again tomorrow." And then the next day, we'll try something different, which...which usually has a lot more success.

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

See I teach middle school, and I get to do that every day, and it's actually really exciting because when you teach in Spanish, it's fun to find activities online like the music videos to catch them with grammar, the books that we can find that are...and sometimes translations like *Divergent* is written in Spanish now, so I can find materials they're excited in. If they read it in English, a lot of times they'll read it in Spanish. Just my level of energy. I try to be excited about what we're doing, even if it's something that I personally find is not one of my favorite topics, I try to find a way to make it exciting for everybody. I try to make sure throughout the day they are reading, writing, speaking and listening, not just because it helps their proficiency, but because it keeps kids up, active and moving. We also walk the trail once a day and we talk about things as we walk the trail because I think exercise throughout the day helps keep kids motivated. Also, a lot of times as a reward, we'll go out and play soccer for a few minutes, so just having kids have a target to work for and the idea that if we get through an activity there's something that they want to do, some choice time on the other side I think helps keep the kids engaged and keep them interested in the activity.

### **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 say is stick with it. The first few years really are difficult. It's a lot of work. It's...it's exhausting. I understand, but stay with it. It does get much easier. The second thing, find a person at school who is kind of like the inside person. I know they'll assign you a mentor and that person will give you lots of wonderful advice, but sometimes there's another person at the school who like knows where the secret stash of colored paper is or how to get the photocopier fixed quickly, and it's good to find other people at the school who can help you with that. And the third time is it really is important to take time for yourself. You really need to set a certain time of the day where you stop checking email, you...you have to be finished enough and ready for the next day that you can actually take a breather and reset and be ready for the next day because otherwise, you're just going to be exhausted, so you've really...they say take time for yourself, and a lot of people don't, but you really do need to set a time each day that you have time for yourself just to reenergize and get a good night's sleep.