

Teacher Interview: Deanna Foust-Platt

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?

Some things that make my classroom a little unique to me, personally, is that, you know, I have kids who come in and they are a revolving door, so then we have a very good climate when we come in. They have high expectations. One of the things, also, if you were to visit my classroom again and again, you would see that there seems to be an undertone of routine, but there's always something that's a little different, whether it be the presentation or the way we are interacting as a group. All of those areas, it's uh...it kind of fits like a mosaic, kind of a piece of puzzle that matches all together.

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

I organize my classroom to maximize learning in three different ways. First, I may switch up my desks at any point, and some days they may be all in like a U, and they'll have to work in the middle, so one of the biggest things is that I will adapt my classroom to whatever our conducive learning is at that point to maximize what we need to do how we need to move throughout the...we sometimes go outside of that room. I remember at one point I was able to put up a learning wall. And one time it was for educators; it was for Teacher Appreciation Week. I did a whole wall of learning and they had to figure out who those people were and match them; I also did it for Hispanic Heritage month, and they were able to go and learn about those people and they went and did a match and find with that. And so it doesn't matter if it's inside my classroom, if it's in another computer lab, or if I'm actually doing a co-teaching class with someone, we actually just use that as our our...I will mold the room into anything that will make it conducive to their learning.

I think I maximize the learning the most with the students...first, I let them know where we are, what place they're in, what level they're in, but I also work a little bit more because I don't take from what just I have on paper. Some of the things that you get like a diagnostic test or anything that you're using, whether it be through our Study Island or any of our software/webs that we go to, I let them start where they are and we kind of work...now I do pull it in when it comes to their...sometimes they have a lack of motivation. I kind of have to whip that back into shape, too. And so we kind of do things that'll get us motivated. We do some type of co-teaching, some type of collaboration, something that's gonna work together. But I definitely find ways that kind of pull in what their strengths are. We discuss their strengths. If I have to go over reading conferences with them, I'm actually in that place right now, if we go over reading conferences, I go through the things that they are really good in. I don't go over weaknesses; I go over areas that I might be concerned with or that I want them to watch out for, places where they won't go into valleys and just continue to be on that mountain top.

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

The way that I differentiate is because I honestly have very diverse learners...at one point I tried to teach them or at least expose them to what type of learners they are. That takes a lot of your class time and that's a little difficult. If you get them the information of what type of learner they are, they are able to use that and apply that in other classrooms. But, I think, to me, one of the biggest things is to kinda let, let it take its course. I find out, or I try to dig, or get information from other teachers of what level these kids are on. I have a sweet and special gift; I have students who on their true aptitude, some of them could be in elementary, and some of them are, and I have middle grades. So some of them can be on their grade level with middle grades. I have to find some type of balance in that. There are three ways that I try to do it. One, I gain the knowledge; I take notes on who they are; I put them in their file. I go back to those if I need to. The second thing I do is I actually act out on what I am doing. I find out if they match with my teaching, and then I need to adapt my teaching to what they do, and then the third thing is, I don't just group them, but I will kind of let them think they're choosing their groups, but I will put them with different levels of people, or I put them with the same and they don't know. I mean, you know, I will be...if I have to partner with somebody and be inclusive in the class, I'll do that as well. I do say again, I have a special, sweet treat...um...we are an academy of some sort so we have a little bit of a differentiation there, but I'm very, very much so a stickler on classroom management. It doesn't mean that I want to be a dictator, but I think you have to have a certain order for it to be successful, and I think those four pieces together, I'm able to help the kids, at least manage and learn how they can best succeed and how they'll feel like their successful.

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

A-ha moments are like the true evidence; like you'll see them go, "Ok, I get it." Another way when I...and and sometimes, yes, they pull my chain and they're being sarcastic but I kinda get them; I bait them in and then they're really learning it. They'll be sarcastic and they'll say, "So Ms. Platt, well what does that mean?" and I'll say, "Well, it means this. And I get your tone, but let's look at what happens here one we get into the text." And then they don't know that they are, but I'll take their humor and sometimes their jovialness and I'll just transfer it into what we're learning. So, a-ha moments, they're moments that I see that their really intrigued. I'll tell you what else, their questions, their level of questions give me a lot of insight of what they're doing. You'll, you'll hear the differentiation between them of who's being serious in the class and who is not, and then you'll hear when the person is really learning. Their like, "So do you mean that they did this because..." and you think, "Oh my gosh! I'm getting in those layers; I can get down in there!" And you're really just trying to produce citizens and people into our society who think on a different level and think for themselves. They still think of where they come from, but they use that to the best of their ability and that's what we're trying to get them to do.

When I realize that learning is not taking place, there are a couple of things that I do. I do kind of check with the child. I'll have a student conference, I'll pull them out and I'll talk to them. Another piece for me is that I'll look at who...what I have done as a deliverable; what did I do? How can I do something

different? What can I change or what can I do even better and give a little more information on. Sometimes you do have to reflect on the plan, sometimes you have to reflect on the support in the plan, which works for 80% of the time. There's a piece of it, though, where, you know, you take the child out, their student conference, you're able to check you as a deliverer and see what's going on. The second part is also looking at being honest with the child; going over their strengths. I was using the example earlier about reading conferences, and I would take a child and do the conferences, and we'll go over those strengths. We then don't go over weaknesses. We just discuss the concerns that I have. What are areas that are gonna catch you up? When you get really tired, what are some strategies that you can use before you get through that reading test, or take it away from the End-of-Grade test. How do we get through and really, really absorb the material that we need every day? You have 180 days. Let's soak up as much as we can as the base foundation to get us to that next grade level. Whether that be sixth to seventh, seventh to eighth, eighth to ninth. What can we do to make that better? I always look at it as we've got a strong foundation. What are the fundamental skills that they've gotten? What's our foundation that we're starting with? And that brings us back to differentiation of instruction. I'm not perfect at that at all. I am growing; I am molding; I want more; I want more, but I think that we've got to give them those levels. We've got to start off with that piece first, but...and it's a good reflection piece, too, on the student's end, on the teacher's end, and on the school's end. We need to reflect on what works and what doesn't work.

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

I hook a reluctant learner by trying to find something that they're interested in. So for two of my students, and I can use two pieces of literature. One of them is in love with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was for...it was for freshman year for me for my reading, so it was...that's...it's a little bit, you know, younger than some people who read it, but when I noticed that she did that, I knew that she had some connection with how to treat people, the connection of tolerance, the connection of understanding people. We do, especially for her class, we'll do small pieces of discussion and she actually read her speech for that class. She was a reader it was going to be tough with. She loved to read, but she didn't like class and she didn't like someone instructing her on something. So I have to pull her in, find something that she likes. Another was finding out what a child likes. *Hunger Games* seemed to be important to one young student I had. And what we did was we started off with how do we all want to be treated and how do we want to be, you know, respected and received? And I think that a large component of that is I tell them that we're each other's' back, ok. I don't get to teach the complete philosophy that we're a family because I sometimes have revolving doors of students, but I do teach that we're a community, we're a village, so we don't get to bully each other; we can take up for each other, but we gotta do it in parameters. Let the adults do certain things. Let us guide you. I really...it's not quite...it's not that families and villages aren't connected, you know, but they do come from different places; I have to give them that rub; I've gotta give them that unified piece. Then I can move into the part where we're a village. See, you're a village. Let's see you see each other outside of this school in the community. What are we gonna do? I really...I think that's your biggest connection when you build that relationship of finding out what they really like and try to give them that foundation in

that village feeling, and then you get further; it doesn't always mean 100% success, but you get so much further and it's been a true piece in testament for seventeen years for me.

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

The advice I would give to a new teacher, and you're saying two to three pieces, one is to stay as positive and true to who you are. Base yourself off of the good morals and ethics that, hopefully, you were trained with, and if you weren't, adopt those. Find some people that you can be around that are positive. Find your niche that's gonna give you balance. That's another one. I know people say that all the time, but it truly is a balance. I had burn out on two ends because I actually had another profession outside of education for eight years, and I didn't burn out on the negative side; I was on overload because I was doing so much. I was driving to Charlotte, plus I was teaching in Greensboro, teaching in Asheboro, and you just gotta find balance. Try to find that balance. It can be with your family. The third piece for the advice is soak up as much as you can. I think that we come in and we think that we know so much, and this can be an older adult who's just an inexperienced classroom educator. You've gotta come in and realize you bring to the table so much. That's my fourth piece. But my third, come in and just dig in there, get in there, learn the layers. They're coming in at a perfect place getting Common Core now. Now I know it's not supposed to be a staple and all that stuff; it's not staying, but they're coming in at a great place right now. Come in and learn as much as you can about Common Core, even if it's not that, it'll be something else. Know your material; become an expert in your area. Try things with your students because it's new and you can be as innovative as you can. The fourth thing is be careful coming in arrogant. Make sure that you, you...because you're coming in from teacher programs. You might be in a cohort. Don't come in and think you have all the answers just because, because people walk those hallways. Some have been very successful and some have been above average and average, but they've done it every day. Respect the fact that there are people whose shoulders that we stand on and be, be honest and reflective of that. Don't come in and be too arrogant. And those are the top four because what it does is it one gets us a check of humbleness; two, it gets us a check of self-reflection; and three it gives us a self-check of being an expert in your area. All of those three small pieces can make a big difference for what we're putting in to the atmosphere for our profession now, and I...The last thing is I encourage you to do what you need to do as a mentee. You're new, you're coming in to this; don't give up. We need you to stay in that fifth mark when it gets tiring, stay in there. Try it again. If it's for your health, take a break, but come back in because we need good, strong educators who are committed, and I hope that that's something that all new teachers, all mentees would do