

Teacher Interview: Maria Topliff

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?

Okay, so, I teach online completely. I teach for North Carolina Virtual Public Schools, so if someone were to come to my classroom, they would have to login virtually to see it. Important strategies to me for teaching would be building relationships, differentiating, and student-driven learning. I first and foremost try to build relationships with my students. Even though I don't ever really meet them, I really feel I get to know them on a personal level. I talk to them through messages; I learn about their likes, their interests, their dislikes. I also work with a co-teacher in the classroom with them and I learn their learning needs through her, and I'm able to differentiate based on those needs.

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

I keep a log...a log book for all my classes, and it has every student's name, and I keep detailed notes on all that they do, their interests and likes, as I said before, as well as their learning needs, and I also keep data on how they do in the class. I have charts that show if they're progressing, if they're making high grades, if they're making low grades, what they're class average is for each student, and then I work with the co-teacher and I talk to her and say, "what's going on? You know...did they not understand this concept?" And that log book really is what **spurs** my teaching for each day. I don't know what I'm going to be working on the next day until I know how they're doing the day before. I grade within 24 hours, so I know immediately what they need and we go from there.

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

I work for the OCS division at NCVPS so my students all have learning needs. They're all disabled. Their disabilities range high and low. I work with a class that's completely deaf. I have a deaf teacher I work with as well. I work with autistic kids. You name it, I work with it. So that's pretty much how I keep my student-driven teaching the foremost. I always try to figure out what they're doing. I give audio feedback if it's needed. I do all I can to differentiate, and like I said before, using that log books is extremely beneficial for that.

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 know learning is occurring just by...because we grade within 24 hours, which I think is so important to grade quickly and be able to give students feedback. I'm able to see if they understand concepts immediately. Also, I put announcements up every day, which is what we call our learning blocks where our instruction goes, and in those announcements I ask students to send me messages, to answer

review questions or tell me what they learned in the presentation I posted, and I'm able to informally assess if they are learning. That's where I figure out what we'll need to work on for the next day.

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

Like I said before, I always like to find out my students interests, so say Sally loves Beyoncé, she's going to login and she's going to have an announcement dedicated to Sally who loves Beyoncé, and there's going to be a Beyoncé dancing picture with a Beyoncé song and a Beyoncified presentation and I'm going to connect Beyoncé to irony somehow, and I...One, it gives them that real world connection and two it gets them excited because it's Beyoncé and three, it motivates them to logon each day. It's amazing to see students getting excited about learning because you're talking about stuff they like.

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

Get to know your students. So important building that relationship because they're not going to work for a teacher they don't like, so, you know, you need to learn your students well, you need to get to know them well. You may not like all of your students, but you need to love them. Secondly, shadow a veteran teacher. They are more valuable than gold [laughter]! They can tell you everything you need to know and help you set up a routine, and thirdly, take some time for yourself. The first year is the hardest. I mean, you're trying to figure out how to...how you best teach and how your students best learn. You can spend a lot of time, and so, you know, go home [laughter] eat; go home at a decent hour. Go for a run or a walk; like have a life outside of school because it's really hard to your first year of teaching.