

# Teacher Interview: Chris Weaver

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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?**

If somebody visited my classroom, they would see that the students are generally very active and that the students have the opportunity to talk to each other a lot. I teach third grade and I cover all of the content areas and I work with the same class, the same group of kids, most of the time, you know. And so we really develop ourselves as a community, and I'm a part of that community because I'm the teacher, so it's different than the middle school and high school models. Because of that, we become very comfortable with each other, we know each other well, we forgive each other, we make the most of social and interactive kind of learning. So that's something that people would see. Also we do lots of project-based learning and hands-on learning, and that would be visible and evident to somebody coming in. I think in terms of teaching strategy and teaching style, one thing that somebody would see also is that we, that I as a teacher am not serious a lot of the time, that I really like to joke around with the kids, including in the middle of direct instruction, and the students learn, too, that they really can't be sure what's [laughter] they can't be sure if I'm being serious, or they have to really think about it to see if it's a joke or if it's real content, and we laugh a lot. That's personal to me; a lot of other teachers do that, too.

**How do you organize your class to maximize learning opportunities for your students?**

Organization of the room is something that I think about a lot and I've done it for so long that there are things I take for granted, but I require a lot of flexibility in terms of furniture and format and who the kids are working with at what time. So I have, for my third grade class, I have a big carpeted area in the middle, and we meet on the carpet, we have meetings on the carpet, we can sit on the carpet in "audience style" or in a single circle or in a double circle, and our four; we have four tables that can be divided into halves. They're hexagon tables that are made of two trapezoids, those kind of typical school tables, but they're fantastic because we'll work with a group of 6 on the...at hexagon tables, but then the students themselves will re-order the room. They'll pull the tables apart and separate them, and spin some of them around to face the board, and then we call that "college style." In college style, everyone is at their table facing the screen, and the—I don't have a smartboard—but their facing the LCD screen or the whiteboard for when that's appropriate. So it's constantly...also our supplies, our rulers and scissors and pencils and all different kinds of paper are accessible to the students at any given time and they learn how to manage that.

**How do you help them become better learners?**

That's a big question, and, to me, better means critical thinking; it means self-awareness as a learner, knowing themselves as a learner; it means self-reliance, and so I try to notice those moments when their making...individually, making steps of growth or leaps of growth, and I try to empower them with some

responsibility. If a student asks me a question that their curious about, and I'm excited about their question, I'll say...I'll send them to my computer to Google it, you know. I'll try to nudge them along towards being self-directed learners.

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

You know, the most important answer to that question is that differentiation is a team...it requires a team; it requires a village, and not all teachers are in a setting where they really have a village ready to, to address that. I feel fortunate to work in a program in a school where we can collaborate a lot to meet those diverse learning needs, but apart from that, even working by yourself, if you're...if you design your curriculum in a way that is...I guess it's authentic and it's project-based, and so the students can feel successful even...they...they can feel successful by accomplishing phase one or by accomplishing a modified version of the assignment, but the assignment itself inherently can be extended for the students who are ready for it. I try to design as much as possible of the curriculum in that way, so that everyone's...everyone feels 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?**

I know when learning is occurring by the feeling in the room. By the...I can just feel it; it's like an electric current in the room, and I also, you know...I have 18 years of classroom experience and other educational experience outside of that, and so I really can tell when I can just sense and observe based on very subtle cues which areas of the room are not tuned in, and, you know, who's spaced out over there and who's whispering or thinking about something else over there and that kind of thing, so you...experience really brings that about. And I think when I...when the whole room's not learning, which happens, then I have to mix it up [laughing] I have to change something, and I do; I'll try something different, and I'll just be...I'll be honest with them, too. I'll say, "I can tell that you are not getting this, and so I'm going to try it a different way," and I'll mix it up, somehow. Break them into pairs and have them talk about it...do something to bring their engagement level up a little bit.

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

You know, that one, again, I try to imagine teaching in a high school and having 200 students a day come through my class, and I just can't imagine it. It's a different world because my answer to that is you hook a reluctant learner by knowing them and by having them develop a sense of culture and belonging for all the students from the very beginning and make that such a high priority in the way that the classroom is conducted and how we spend our time, so if I know them, then I can make a connection and if they trust me, they will go along with some of my suggestions. You know if I can make a suggestion that connects with the student's personal interest, I'll do that, but I don't do that...you can't do that with everybody with every content area. Those are sort of the gems, but basically it's all in the relationship.

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

I would say that my first year with my own classroom was the hardest year of my life, honestly, and that I would say...I would encourage new teachers to really attend to your own sense of calling and your sense of purpose in why you got...why you're here as a teacher because there are many things in the world of education that can make one forget the real...the deeper purpose, and it really is that sense of personal purpose and believing in the growth potential of every child and the spiritual calling for teaching that makes it possible...makes it doable. It really is, even after all these years...teaching is the most complex and hardest job that I can imagine, but I love it so much partly because of how hard it is, but because of how much I have to learn to do well...to do it well, so consider it a long journey; be very forgiving of yourself and of others, and don't put too much weight on... don't judge yourself for all of the external requirements that you may not be fulfilling. If you're doing your best to be as present as possible to the students and to stay with what you care about in the content and the subject matter so that that love and that passion is shared and conveyed, then you are doing a wonderful thing in the world.