



UNCONDITIONAL BELIEF

By Samantha Groess

Teaching is the engineering of learning. The art and science of teaching weave together the science of the brain, best teaching practices, content standards, rigor, student motivation, informal and formal assessment, differentiation for every student—all 165 of them in my case!—all day, every day. Just writing that makes me feel simultaneously tired and proud to be an educator.

There have been times in my life where I have felt like "just a teacher." I am married to an engineer. He works in a lab with expensive fancy equipment and finds concrete answers to complex problems. He can trust science to find definitive answers. While I can trust in the science of teaching, I also have to hone my *art*—to reach students.

The art of teaching is where things get tricky.

In my twenty-six years in education, I have taught over four thousand students. Doing anything four thousand times should give some measure of street cred and make me an "expert" on the subject. Only, it doesn't. Each year is different, each student is different, and each student has different needs academically and emotionally.



Before I ever became a teacher, I knew from a young age how to impact learning. Or rather, I knew what influenced my learning the most. It was in 5th grade, and it was just a simple book talk. Only it was so much more than that to me.

I was a student who did not want to be noticed for any reason by anyone. I was painfully shy and, for lack of a better way to describe it, surviving my childhood. I'm not sure how much of that was outwardly apparent. Considering I have tried to forget most of my elementary years, the fact that this memory is stamped on my brain says something.

We had silent reading time, and my teacher asked me to tell her about the book I was reading. It was *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. It was mine, and I remember loving it because it was mine. I don't know where I found the book—perhaps at a garage sale, as we were not a literature-rich household. The book was old and had a fancy leather cover, which is probably why I selected it.

I was nervous about having to talk to my teacher. I don't remember the questions she asked about the book, and I don't remember what I answered. But she said something about it being a hard book, and she was very impressed I'd selected it to read and seemed to understand it.

What I mostly remember was the *feeling* after our discussion. I felt smart. For the first time in a very long time, she made me feel special, valued somehow. I left that conversation feeling hopeful - that maybe school was a good place for me, and maybe I had something to offer.

As the year progressed, I looked forward to going to school. And while I don't remember learning anything in particular, school became my escape. My teacher eventually convinced me to read the morning bulletin over the PA system. She even selected me for hall monitor, a job reserved for only the most trustworthy. She had a way of making me feel special, gifted even. She believed in me, and because of that, I began to believe in myself.

From that point forward, I "did" school. I certainly had other teachers along the way who encouraged and inspired me to go further than I ever thought possible, but this one little book talk made all the difference in my world - and I'm sure my teacher had no idea what that moment meant to me.

"I felt smart. For the first time in a very long time, she made me feel special, valued somehow. I left that conversation feeling hopeful - that maybe school was a good place for me, and maybe I had something to offer."

I often compare that memory to the parent/teacher conference I had in 3rd grade. I was a new student to the school, living with my dad for the first time, in a new state and with a new stepmom. I missed my mother terribly.

At the conference, my reading rate—how quickly I could read words as they flashed across the screen at a specific rate—was the only issue addressed. Reduced to a simple test score, it isn't a big surprise I was not motivated to become a better reader. In fact, I left reading alone for a while. While I am sure my teacher had valid concerns and the best of intentions, those concerns made me withdraw further into myself.



I share these memories because they have influenced my teaching practices profoundly. I can see the talent of my students before many of them recognize it for themselves.

Students are not the total of their test scores. Students have multiple opportunities to show growth or mastery of a skill. We practice using growth mindset language. I do my best to create a warm and welcoming environment for all, even if reading and writing are on par with cleaning toilets for some of my students. Students don't need to love literature to feel valued in my class, nor do their grades determine their worth. Every student is valued when they walk through the door. In short, I believe in them unconditionally, even before they believe in themselves. My students have gifts they bring to the world, and it is my job to remind them of that every chance I get.

But how do we do that? This is where the nebulous “art” factor kicks in, although I have broken it down into my top ten more tangible components:

Create a welcoming and safe environment. Smile. Say hello. But don't stop there. Talk with students about stuff that isn't necessarily related to your class or content area. It doesn't have to be deep, or it can be. Ask how they are doing. Use an online form occasionally to check-in. Let students share what they need to, and follow-up with a few when needed. Let them know you read what they write.

“Every student is valued when they walk through the door. In short, I believe in them unconditionally, even before they believe in themselves. My students have gifts they bring to the world, and it is my job to remind them of that every chance I get.”

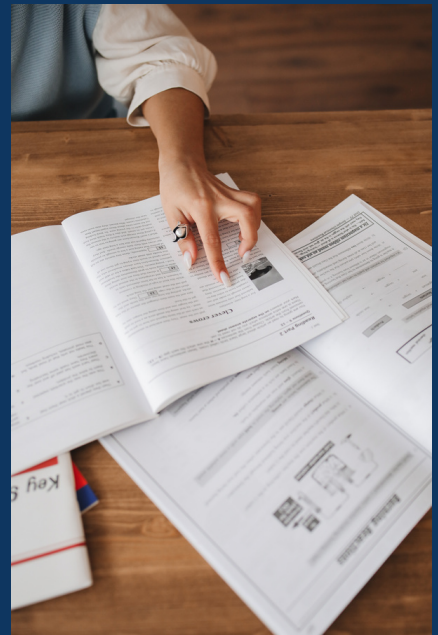
Treat each and every day as a new day. Each day is a fresh start with the student who seems to have a never-ending supply of random food, and even the student who manages to bring a whole pint of Ben and Jerry's to class yet forgot to do the homework.



Actions are not people. Actions are choices people make that have consequences. People need second chances, or third, or fourth chances.

Offer multiple ways and several attempts at demonstrating mastery of a skill.

Providing multiple measures of assessment shows you care about what students learn. Providing several attempts to demonstrate learning shows students that they are all different and learn at different rates. Life gives do-overs for a lot of things: driving tests and marriages, to name a few. When you think about it that way, a second chance at *The Great Gatsby* seems like a no-brainer, doesn't it?



Provide support, including targeted, differentiated support. Support can take on multiple forms, but for me, it can be as easy as scaffolding for an essay or targeted small-group instruction. Providing specific support for students shows you care. Not only do you know what specifically students need help with, but you are also giving them a way to access that help. You care about what they know and don't know, and you will help them improve.

Create opportunities to interact with students either one-to-one or in small groups. Create time for lessons like book talks, learning centers, station rotation (yes, high school teachers, this is possible). The more you can engage with students and not let them silently pass through your classroom, the better. Be careful in how you engage, though. Engaging with students does not mean calling on students publicly with popsicle sticks. Engaging with students means creating a safe time for a human-to-human conversation about something academic in your class. Help students to see that even though they may not love your content area, they have a unique view or gift for seeing something different from the rest.

Use all the tools at your disposal. Play music. Use aromatherapy. Dim lights. Have a snack drawer. Keep lessons engaging. Build in fun when possible. Remember everything you learned about lesson design. Engagement and exploration make learning fun.

Care. I don't mean this sarcastically at all. Sarcasm has no place in education. You can go through the motions all you want, but students can spot a fake a mile away. Take all the classes or professional development you want, but students will know if you don't genuinely care about the humans in your room.



“Sarcasm has no place in education. You can go through the motions all you want, but students can spot a fake a mile away.”

Apologize if you need to. Sometimes we "lose it" with a student. Sometimes a student is gone for 25 minutes to the bathroom or throws mini weapons of mass destruction across the room. Also, you covered your colleague's class on your prep because there's a substitute shortage and you haven't had a break. It's 6th period. Oh, and there's a staff meeting. Teachers are human, and we make mistakes. Own it, apologize for not handling things better, and let the student know you care about them, no matter what they do. Students are forgiving and learn from your example. When you apologize, you've modeled for students how to own their behavior.

Give students genuine praise. Students live up—or down—to our behavioral expectations of them. Constantly praise the behavior you want to continue, even if it's the smallest little thing. Students respond to genuine praise far more than being reprimanded for negative behavior. Praise sets the tone for your class. My one class rule is to behave in a “nice, kind, and loving manner,” and that includes myself. We call each other out when that is not the case.

Remember that you may never know how you have impacted students' lives. Sure, a few will connect with you on social media years later. And someone will probably name their first child after you. But the vast majority may never be able to pinpoint a pivotal moment in their academic lives and link it back to you. They may just remember your class fondly, or they may not remember you at all. But keep the faith. If you can show students you believe in them even before they can see their own talents, you've made the most significant impact you could on a young mind. You have done your job.

You might be thinking, Not another social-emotional learning article! When do I get to teach my content? Where has academic rigor gone? There just isn't enough time for this. Now I have to be a counselor too?

But here's where the science and art of teaching combine into the engineering of learning. One without the other doesn't work. They cannot be mutually exclusive. It's not feel-good all the time without rigorous content, nor is it rigorous content without realizing our students are humans with emotional needs. As teachers, our mindset needs to be ‘both/and,’ not ‘either/or.’ Keep your rigorous content goals, but also keep connecting with the humans you teach. It's when you can do both that you realize the incredible job description of being a teacher: changing lives for the better.

“As teachers, our mindset needs to be ‘both/and,’ not ‘either/or.’ Keep your rigorous content goals, but also keep connecting with the humans you teach.”

My 5th-grade book talk could have gone two ways. I could have left feeling that my teacher didn't like me, that I wasn't reading fast enough, or that I was weird for not picking a book like *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. It could have left me sinking further into the hole that, while lonely, felt safe. Instead, my teacher's connection with me opened the door to education and a lifelong love of learning. Most importantly, the time she took to connect with me that day helped me view myself as someone worthy in the world. So, off you go, teachers, harness your power and use it wisely. Be a superhero by showing your students the beauty and talent of what lies within them.

Samantha Groess is currently a high school English teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has taught at the middle and high school levels for over two decades and also spent years as an instructional coach and mentor to preservice teachers. She has delivered professional learning on educational technology, and standards-based instruction to educators across California.

