

The Teacher I Want to Be When I Grow Up

Chris Lipski



Highlighting the best practices of senior teachers.

I sit at the teacher desk in my otherwise empty classroom. Calling this past year a challenge would be an understatement, but it was not without its positive moments.

As I reflect, I can't help but think of my colleagues. Their actions not only pushed me to be a better teacher this year, but inspire me to continue in the profession for many years to come.

Below are just a few examples of the teachers I hope to be when I grow up.



The goal of this morning's staff meeting (over Zoom) is to give teachers strategies to help engage students and promote their social and emotional well-being. Prior to this morning, I took a socially distant walk with my colleague who helped to plan this meeting. I know she has done a lot of work thinking about how to engage students over a digital platform; she teaches ninth-grade students who have yet to step foot onto our school's campus.

Interestingly, though, I don't see my colleague share any of her strategies during this staff meeting. Instead, she has introduced a few of the presenters, praising

them for sharing. The spotlight is never on her; rather, she has convinced members of our staff that rarely speak up to share. We hear a mix of voices, some from teachers who have been on staff for more than a decade, some who are first-year teachers. As the meeting continues, it becomes clear that she has carefully planned this meeting to both give ideas for engagement but also to model how the "teacher" can step back and allow the "class" to speak.

This isn't the first time I have seen my colleague "lead from behind." She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



It's a few weeks into the semester. Teachers are back on campus, but students still remain at home. Another chemistry teacher comes into my room after third period to let me know that, somehow, he managed to put his computer in airplane mode during class. Technology has not been his friend this year, or really ever since I've come to work at this school. He's not angry per se, already moving on to finding the situation humorous.

It's clear my colleague was frustrated by the setback, but he relays that he was able to turn his internet back on and rejoin the Zoom meeting. I imagine how, after a moment of panic, he managed to restart everything and try again. The highlight of the situation is that his students had all patiently waited in the Zoom classroom for him to return. It was a moment that he could easily have gone beyond mild frustration; instead, he chose to persevere.



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I realize just how often my colleague does this. Presented with ever-changing instructional technology, he has always tried out new things and kept a mostly positive attitude. When my colleagues and I ask him to try out a new strategy he is always game, and afterward he will focus on what he has learned from the experience rather than complain about how hard it might have been. He is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



Drawing chemical structures or formulas on Google Docs is not a straightforward endeavor. It's late in the semester, and personally, I am very tired. This means that, instead of having students create these (important!) responses on their own, I've opted for the easier multiple-choice type responses.

Early in my career, I believed multiple-choice to be the "old way" that was more common among senior staff members. Now, it's my more experienced colleague coming in with innovative assessment strategies while I'm resorting to what I consider to be bad habits. She excitedly announces during our chemistry PLC meeting that she has discovered an easy add-on that allows students to construct the responses in their online documents. With just a few clicks, students can easily create their own nuclear equations with correct formatting.

As I think back to before this year, it's clear to me now that she so often comes to our meetings with new solutions to issues on which I had just decided to "take the easy way out." The obvious implication is that she has thought deeply about an issue, explored the possible solutions, and then come back to our meeting to share. She does this knowing we might not use it, or that we might come to her for more help with figuring it out.

My colleague is constantly looking for ways to improve the "small things" in our curriculum and freely sharing. She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



I'm in (yet another) Zoom meeting, this time with chemistry teachers from around our district. The facilitator is no stranger to me; I was her student teacher when I first joined this profession. I can attribute much of my teaching philosophy and strategies to my time with her.

Today, my colleague is pushing our district team to think about how we can bring science phenomena into students' homes. The logistics and cost of large take-home lab kits are daunting, but she has excitedly shown us how we can use some water, straws, and pH indicators to demonstrate the effects of CO₂ in water. She knows even this will be hard to get to every student, but she stresses to us how important it is that students get at least some hands-on experience this year.

I am reminded of the year I worked with my colleague, and how much time we spent putting together labs so that students could experience chemistry. This has always been her passion, and even distance learning hasn't dampened it. She is the teacher I want to be when I grow up.



We have nearly reached the one-year mark since physical classrooms closed. I am back at my desk, in my empty room, reflecting on these stories.



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Collectively, these teachers have a good 65+ years of teaching experience. For most of them, this year of distance learning comes at the tail end of their careers, a period in which we often label teachers as “set in their ways.” What I noticed this year is that, while I would argue they are all set in their ways, it is not with the negative connotation typically associated with the phrase.

My colleagues are “set” in giving voice to others, learning from challenging situations, sharing ideas and solutions, and constantly keeping the students’ experience at the front of their minds. As a mid-career teacher, I am not without these traits, but I hope that I can continue to find them in my senior colleagues, and push myself to continue to make them permanent parts of my practice.

Citation

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Chris Lipski,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, teaches chemistry at Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, California. He has been fortunate to serve as department chair, district curriculum lead, and house leader during his tenure.

Chris is passionate about teacher sustainability and the importance of sharing stories. Reach him at christopher.lipski@knowlesteachers.org.