

The Great Teacher Myth



I had this one teacher in high school who changed my life. They set me on a career path. They saw something in me that no one else did. They sparked an interest, captivated my imagination, challenged me in a way no one else had. They changed who I am today.

When I tell people I teach science, I get this story a lot—the one teacher that really had an impact on them. It’s a mythical thing, that inspirational teacher who had the big effect. I suspect it’s the reason most teachers join the profession: to be *that teacher*. The teacher who was the only reason we graduated. The Mr. Keating of *The Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt, Thomas & Weir, 1989). The bringer of change. We all want to be “The Great Teacher.”

I think this notion does a disservice to teachers and students.

Depicting a past teacher as the lone teacher bucking the system is subtly couched in a larger assumption—that the surroundings are bleak and uninspired. When we glorify our own inspirational teachers, we quietly assume that our other teachers who came before and the teachers who came after “The Great Teacher” didn’t really do their jobs; we quietly assume that the other teachers who worked

alongside our “Great Teacher” were just going through the motions.

Reminiscing on our time as students, it is easy to paint this black and white picture of our day. We write a narrative of our education that casts a few teachers as either protagonists or antagonists, based on personalities, interests, and preferences. Of the hundred teachers we study with, we will only remember a few who stand out to us, and fill in the blanks with neutral at best.

This dramatic narrative may be formed in adolescence, but it colors our perception of teachers into adulthood. I believe that these lingering memories, selective and mystified, set the stage for the politics of education today. They encourage the public to view teachers as mostly ineffective, with a few shining stars.

More insidiously, though, it colors the way we as teachers view our peers.

What has changed for me, at least, is my view of my peers' inherent value as teachers. I have a much more profound respect for my peers, all of them, as educators.

When I came into teaching, I was ready to change the world. I was lucky enough to have some incredible training, both through student teaching and through externally-sponsored professional development. My KSTF Teaching Fellowship did an exceptional job connecting me with expert teachers and researchers from across the field of education. As a result, I have been very fortunate to be inspired by teachers from every region of the country and a wide range of experiences.

Not everything is always so rosy, though. As we discuss the change we hope to see and the innovations we are excited to spearhead, we quietly vent our frustrations to our co-conspirators about our colleagues, schools, and larger educational system. We subtly fall back on “The Great Teacher” myth—the bleak sea of educational darkness with a few bright spots of light. We, of course, are the lights: the few tasked with changing the many.

We may talk about the importance of collaboration and working with peers, but envision convincing our peers to teach the way we want them to teach—to work in unison towards our own personal vision of a classroom or department. We are hesitant to use our colleagues’ materials and ideas and are quietly judgmental of their work. There is an air of competition when we talk about data, and a sense of smugness when we share stories. We work hard to be the best, carefully tailoring our classes to be an ideal class. Though we humbly admit that it’s “a work in progress—it’s nothing perfect,” we silently add to ourselves that “at least it’s not what so-and-so does.”

I am ashamed to admit that I am often guilty of this “collaboration.”

The last few years have forced me to rethink this myth of “The Great Teacher.” In the wake of a school shooting, my peers and I found our ability to be “The Great Teacher” was significantly altered. Many of us—who used to take pride in being the first one in or the last one out—were barely able to stay at school longer than the students. The goal was no longer to have the perfect class, but just to have a plan for the next day.

With our hands tied by grief and trauma, we found ourselves sincerely relying on peers. Instead of simply dropping our own favorite curriculum into a shared folder that was never opened, we began to borrow each other’s materials indiscriminately. There was little fear of judgement, because everyone was just relieved to have something to do for the upcoming class. While collaboration used to be a parade of competing personal successes, collaborative conversations became very quick: “You take Wednesday, and I’ll take Thursday. There will be copies on your desk by first hour.” It was not an idealized, critical discussion of instructional technique and curriculum. but it was sharing at the most fundamental level.

Basically, I found myself teaching someone else’s class more often than my own. I

used their materials, slides, and goals without scruples. I learned how each of my peers functioned, what their “go-to” strategies were, and how much scaffolding they used. Each of us had a very unique style and strategy. The humbling thing, though, was that most of it was quite effective. In fact, there were lots of lessons I started skeptically, only to find that my peers had efficient or fun solutions to issues I hadn’t even considered. Despite our hard-fought battles over curriculum and instruction, we were all pretty darned good teachers.

Using others’ work gave me time to communicate more closely with individual parents and counselors. It freed up time to grade at school and spend one-on-one time with students at a time that was critical for individual attention. More personally, it allowed me to work fewer 10-hour days and leave without bringing work home. I believe that saved me from what I considered to be pretty imminent burn-out during the most challenging time of my career.

I would like to say that the story ends with us completely trusting each other as professionals, working together to use each other’s strengths, and collaboratively building each lesson. Some days, this is true; we spend shared plan periods revising old activities together, building on each other’s knowledge and strengths, and teaching the same lesson. Some days, we just share resources or split tasks—opening the rest of our schedule to grading, communicating with parents, or just having personal lives. Some days we can’t find that common ground at all, and everyone works independently. I think there is still room for us to disagree—we are, after all, very different individuals—but I still wish we had an even stronger shared vision of what our collaboration should be.

What has changed for me, at least, is my view of my peers’ inherent value as teachers. I have a much more profound respect for my peers, *all* of them, as educators. I have seen them give of themselves at a time when they had very little to give: coats during evacuation, firmly held hands as the school reopened, and one-on-one attention just minutes after wiping their own tears. Seeing them in a time of crisis has made it clear that they have the best of intentions for their students. Though I don’t always choose to run my classroom in the same way—and I still believe that some strategies are backed by research more than others—I see my peers as valuable professionals who teach as individuals. I see their professional teaching choices as reflective of a much larger intersection of instructional skills, educational vision, and personal work-life balance.

The key is, though, that it's not really about being that one "Great Teacher." That's just not enough. It's about working together so that every kid has teachers who support each other to be great.

As I have become more generous with my peers in our interactions, I see shifts in our collaborative work. Instead of subtly trying to pique my peers' interest in changing their classroom to be more like my own, I try to hear the concerns they voice and coach them to a solution that actually fits their educational philosophy. I try to take a more purposeful interest in recognizing their authentic strengths as a teacher, and pick their brain as a consultant. Though I won't profess any dramatic shifts towards a shared overall vision of education, sparks of collaboration have been born out of these conversations.

I no longer see my peers and myself as part of a dark sea with a few points of light. A grey-scale of bad to great wouldn't even describe my current perspective accurately. I think that, as teachers, we are a little less like Mr. Keating of *The Dead Poets Society* and a little more like the team from *Remember the Titans*: an unlikely group of individuals facing somewhat overwhelming odds together, each full of individual strengths, weaknesses, and a myriad of personal preferences that may have very little consequence on our effectiveness (Bruckheimer, Oman & Yakin, 2000).

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