SHOW UP FOR YOURSELF TO KEEP SHOWING UP

By Abby Scoresby

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Abstract: Education seems to have both an increase in standardization and teacher burnout. The loss of control could leave teachers feeling unimportant in their own classroom. This article explains how one teacher used reflection to find and create autonomy, reigniting her passion for her job. Through celebration, reflection, and authentic connection, teachers can reclaim their joy and stay invested in teaching. Authentic teaching keeps teachers in the field and students motivated.

Keywords: authenticity, teacher burnout, connection, classroom processes, joy

In the world of education, curriculum and assessments are becoming increasingly standardized. The texts chosen, the tests given, and the pace at which things move are often decided by people outside of the classroom. As classrooms become more standardized, often the only change from classroom to classroom is you! Teacher individuality is essential in the English classroom where vulnerability and community are even more important. A subject in the liberal arts requires passion from the teacher to ignite interest in the students, but as teachers lose autonomy, they lose passion as well. This in turn negatively impacts students' motivation to learn. Finding small ways to show up as your unique self is critical to fighting teacher burnout and engaging students in reading, writing, and academic discussions.

K–12 teachers have the highest burnout rate of any U.S. career (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Forty-four percent of teachers answered "always" or "very often" feeling burned out, but if your teachers' lounge is like mine, when this new study was mentioned, everyone chuckled and said, "I'm surprised it's not higher." Leichtman (2022) released a scale for teachers to assess their burnout. Both the first and last stages mention the lack of feelings of passion at work and home: "limited pursuit of passions or hobbies" (Level 1: Passionate but Overwhelmed section) and "lack of optimism for career and personal life" (Level 4: Complete Exhaustion and Breakdown section). Cultivating passion is a simple way to help yourself and your students find joy in school and fight teacher burnout.

Teacher fatigue goes beyond burnout, though. Teacher-educator and author Doris A. Santoro (Walker, 2018) believes solely blaming burnout on the widespread exodus of teachers makes this a teacher-centered issue instead of a systemic issue. Santoro found teachers left the classroom because they were demoralized by the trends they saw in education—not because of a lack of self-care. Things like standardized and high-stakes tests are diminishing teaching's moral rewards. Demoralization is a key vocabulary change in understanding teacher fatigue. It carries such a weight and ignores problems not even considered for systemic changes at different levels of

education to support teachers. Creativity and authenticity can be a key to fighting demoralization.

Teachers deserve to feel excited about their work. Identity can influence instruction, structure, and relationships. It can make all the difference for motivation and students.

My Experience

About halfway through my second year of teaching, I found myself feeling teacher fatigue. I taught about 120 sophomore students in either pre-IB or on-level English II courses. My Title I high school is situated in an isolated suburb of Texas. I loved my students, but I hated what I was doing. I dreaded coming to work each day and found little joy in what I taught. I am aware of the high turnover rates for teachers in the first five years of their profession, and I did not want to be part of that statistic. I knew that teaching was important, and I wanted to continue teaching; however, I knew I could not continue feeling drab and uninspired. It was during a district-mandated assessment that I walked around my classroom actively monitoring and bored out of my mind when I realized I did not like my classroom. I did not like where the bookshelves were and how the desks were organized. Nothing on the walls reflected me or my students. I had created a classroom of what I thought it *should* look like, but not what I wanted it to look like. It was at that moment that it dawned on me, "If I do not want to be here, why would my students?"

In the upcoming weeks, I spent my conference period scouring Facebook Marketplace looking for affordable flexible seating. I printed pictures of my favorite authors. I created a "wall of fame" corner to hang student work. I set up a desk in the back where students could work on puzzles. I added lamps. I found quotes. I hung posters of my favorite movies and sports teams. I changed the desk arrangement and bookshelf arrangement until it felt right. I began playing my favorite songs in between passing periods. I burned wax scents in my classroom so that it didn't smell like teenagers anymore. At last, when it was true, I added the lines from *As You Like It* to my door: "I like this place,/ And willingly could waste my time in it" (Shakespeare, 1623/2019, 2.4.97-98).

Suddenly, I found myself looking forward to being in my classroom. I felt comfortable and energized there. I felt like myself. And I started to love my job again.

The experience of reflection and action, even focused on just my physical surroundings, made me reflect on *all* aspects of my teaching. I was inspired to begin practice-based research in my classroom and research: What can teachers do to embrace their authentic selves through curriculum and instruction? How are students impacted by teachers embracing their authentic identity?

Teacher Joy

Teacher joy is essential for protecting the integrity of the classroom and honing student success. Christensen (2009) clearly states, "Teach for joy and justice. It's what our students need. But it's also what we need" (p. 11). Christensen describes in her book how she has found joy in creative writing and storytelling throughout her career. She passionately creates a curriculum that matters to her and her students because she "discovered that students care more about learning when the content matters" (p. 1). A joy-centered curriculum promotes passionate teachers and passionate learners who take more risks and engage more in the content (p. 67).

Worsley et al. (2023) tested the need for joy at a summer writing camp. As teachers focused on creativity and different learning processes, they found more excitement in teaching and motivation to teach in the school year. While teaching at the writing camp, teacher Hannah Ficklin Watson realized joy through creativity and "geeking out" (p. 33) about writing with students. As she reflected on her experience and the reality of systemic issues that made this type of learning impossible in her classroom, she found that she could consider "some of the factors [she has] control over" (p. 35). Ficklin Watson records that the following school year, she reinvented her curriculum to include more creative and joy-filled activities. She has managed expectations and "remain[ed] optimistic as [she] continu[ed] to do what [she] can with what [she has]" (p. 35). Through moments of joy, teachers find opportunities to take control and teach in new engaging ways. Because "when teachers feel joy in teaching, students feel joy in learning" (p. 39). While focusing on teacher joy may seem teacher-centered, it creates more engaging, thought-provoking, and student-centered learning.

Joy Through Authenticity

One way to promote teacher joy is through authenticity. The term *authentic* can be abstract and have different meanings. When students were polled, students defined authentic teachers as "approachable, passionate, attentive, capable, and knowledgeable" (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017, p. 423). In the qualitative research by De Bruyckere and Kirschner (2017), they found four main categories that create authentic teachers: expertise, passion, unicity, and distance (strictness and proximity). The qualitative research concludes that these four categories are measurable factors in understanding what makes an authentic teacher. Perhaps most noteworthy in the current academic climate of standardization is that authentic teachers talk about more than what is found in textbooks including "about her/his own life … [and] extracurricular topics and things to lighten up the classroom routine" (De Bruyckere & Kirschner, 2017, p. 10). Teachers who practice unicity create unique lessons and are perceived as wanting to "go the extra mile for students" (p. 12).

Understanding what teacher authenticity means is important for many reasons—one being student success. Through self-reflection and evaluation, teachers can become authentic and foster an approachable environment in their classroom, which in turn promotes questioning and engagement from high school students (Hovel, 2021). Teachers with a strong identity have students who can "achieve complex learning outcomes" and help students develop their own identities (Kreber, 2010, p. 171). Authentic teachers create classrooms where students have intrinsic motivation to engage in the subject matter (Plust et al., 2021). Fostering a strong teacher identity and confidence can help create motivated, engaged, authentic learners.

Additionally, authentic teachers have an easier time fighting burnout. Teachers who are involved in curriculum development and instruction have an easier time finding purpose in their job (Wood & McCarthy, 2002). Giving teachers more control of the classroom is crucial in preventing later stages of burnout—not showing up to work, conflicting relationships with colleagues, and inability to complete professional tasks (Wood & McCarthy, 2002). Having a strong sense of autonomy and control are key to promoting wellness and engagement. Focusing on teacher joy and cultivating joy through teacher authenticity can fight demoralization and burnout while increasing student engagement and learning.

Methods

This action research took place at the beginning of the spring semester in an isolated suburban district in Texas. The researcher used polls and self-reflection to conduct the practice-based research. Research took place in an on-level and pre-IB 10th-grade English class. The survey was presented to 120 students with 63 responses. There was no reward given to students for participating in the survey. The conclusions for this research came from the teacher's reflection and coding students' responses to a nine-question anonymous poll with Likert-scale questions and a short answer response. Survey questions were inspired by the research from De Bruyckere and Kirschner (2017) who defined teacher authenticity as expertise, passion, unicity, and distance. These categories inspired the following questions:

- I learn new things in Mrs. Scoresby's class.
- I can be myself in Mrs. Scoresby's class.
- I enjoy being in Mrs. Scoresby's class.
- I work hard in Mrs. Scoresby's class.
- Mrs. Scoresby likes what she teaches.
- Mrs. Scoresby puts effort into teaching.
- I know more about Mrs. Scoresby than that she is a teacher.
- Mrs. Scoresby adds extracurricular topics to her lessons to make it more interesting and fun.
- Short Answer: Why do you like or dislike coming to Mrs. Scoresby's class?

Data were analyzed through thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data were collected after students had been in the researcher's class for one semester.

Application: Teacher Effects

As I began to explore my research questions, I began to reflect on what I had changed in my classroom to be an authentic teacher (Lammert, 2020). I began "to examine the activity structures that underpin [my] teaching, envision new possibilities, and transform [my] contexts" (p. 230). I have many state and district-mandated tasks that I complete (required reading, writing, and exams); therefore, I wanted to explore deliberate choices made to show up as myself each day. What changes appeared in my classroom to keep morale high and respect my core teaching principles? I found four main answers to this question: celebration, sharing passion, getting to know my students, and reflecting on my practices.

Celebrate (Everything)

The writing process needs to include celebration and reflection. However, in all that teachers are required to do, it is easy to overlook this crucial element; but when the celebration step is skipped, students get burned out—and so do teachers. To help my students have positive associations with writing, I made a concerted effort throughout the school year to give one day after a writing process to do some type of celebration, and I found that it has made all the difference.

We listened to audio recordings of our scary stories, left positive comments on peers' papers, and had museum days where we looked at what we had created. Each Friday, my classes pause so each student can share their favorite writing from the week. We take time after a mentally rigorous unit to play Catch Phrase (Williamson, 2018), Snake Oil (Ochs & Kaufman, 2011), or a Kahoot (Versvik et al., 2012) about the top songs of the 2010s. We hold poetry cafes where we share poetry and sip hot chocolate. These are the days I wake up in the morning overjoyed to be a teacher (and not because it is less mentally rigorous). I am excited to see student progress and share with them about their growth. The reason I teach is because I believe in the potential of children, but when I rush from unit to unit, I never pause to see how they have grown. Celebration fights the focus on standardized test scores and promotes enjoying morale rewards. Inevitably, test scores come back and I have not reached all of my goals; however, I have found as I focus on celebrating non-test growth (e.g., Lucy

wrote a thesis for the first time, Linus turned an assignment in on time because he cared, Charlie finished a novel for the first time in five years, etc.), I am motivated to continue helping students grow.

> “As I have tried to bring my passion into the classroom, I get excited about my content, and nothing engages my students more than when I am happy to be there.”

One of Anderson et al.'s (2022) steps in teaching grammar is "Celebrate in Action" (p. 46). In their book, *Patterns of Power: Teaching Grammar Through Reading and Writing,* the authors suggest teachers allocate weekly time to celebrate what is going well. They explain that "positive emotions and a rush of dopamine help learners retain information" (p. 46). The act of celebration gives teachers a chance to see the fruits of their efforts *and* helps students remember what they learn.

Share Your Passions

Showing up as yourself means that your passions should be part of your classroom. One of the joys of teaching English is the simplicity of tying in cross-curricular passions. There are books about every topic in the building. With just a little creativity, a lesson about plot can include your favorite sitcoms; you can analyze stats and debate March Madness picks; your poetry lessons can include lyrics from your favorite musicians; Socratic seminars can debate whether Severus Snape is a good teacher. Kelly Gallagher's Article of the Week archive (2024) evidences that nearly anything can be taught in English. Ingenuity allows almost any of your passions to become a text to study or topic to debate.

After my students' 2023 end-of-year reflections, I realized that they did not understand or value the writing process. I needed to adjust my curriculum to more consistently and explicitly teach the writing process. While brainstorming new ways to teach the writing process, I watched the Netflix documentary *The Last Dance* (Hehir, 2020). As a lifelong Chicago Bulls fan, I am quick to talk about the greatness of Michael Jordan because I respect his grit and refusal to accept mediocrity. Suddenly, I saw how my passions intersected. The writing process requires the same grit and work ethic that Michael Jordan took to practice every day. The writing process is a growth mindset process, and Michael Jordan, the greatest of all time, would be the perfect person to exemplify growth. I taught students that planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing mirror Michael Jordan's process of setting goals to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA) through practicing, scrimmaging, playing games, and winning championships. When I taught this lesson, I was able to show clips of Michael Jordan talking and playing. I was thrilled; consequently, the Michael Jordan writing process became a lesson my students remember and more frequently apply.

My favorite days to show up to work are when I bring my 5–9 to my 9–5. As I have tried to bring my passion into the classroom, I get excited about my content, and nothing engages my students more than when I am happy to be there.

Get to Know Your Students—Authentically

Two important things about me: I love debating hypothetical questions, and I hate playing icebreakers. I cringe at the start of every school year as the first of August rolls around, and I am faced with all the get-to-know-you ideas on social media and various websites. I hate inauthentic forced questions, but prior to this action-research work, I did not know what else to do because I wanted to get to know my students—icebreakers seemed to be what all other teachers did! So, I passed out papers with get-to-know-you questions and tried to remember everything they wrote down. Two weeks later, I still did not know my students. I reflected on why we had not formed a relationship and realized that I do not make friends with one-time get-to-know-you questions; I frequently and consistently ask questions. This is who I am, so this is what I started applying to my classroom. Each day after our bell ringer and announcements, we pause and ask a question of the day. Some are typical questions (e.g., favorite movie, where will I find you at 4:30 on a weekday, favorite subject, etc.) and some are ridiculous (e.g., Would you rather always wear wet socks or mittens? How would a dog wear pants? Would you rather own 100 duck-sized elephants or one elephant-sized duck?). Regardless, each day I prioritize getting to know my students with a question of the day because that is how I like to learn about people.

Knowing your students is important for teachers in every discipline; however, English teachers have to know their students differently because of the emotional nature of the content. Sharing writing requires trust and acts of vulnerability. Knowing students is not just about your students either; it will help you help them. It is nearly impossible to pick a book of interest for someone you do not know. English teachers must prioritize consistently connecting with students. Teachers need to see their students as human, and students need to see their teachers as complex. Evaluating how I want to get to know my students has paid huge dividends in getting to know them;

developing relationships with my students is the best part of my job.

Community building does not have to be a day set aside to break academic rigor. Instead, it should be a consistent endeavor. Christensen (2009) writes about sharing poetry in her class as community building and states, "We don't build community *instead* of work on academics. We build community *while* we work on academics" (p. 15). Shifting focus from icebreakers at the beginning of the year to building community daily allows teachers—and students—to form an academic community that encourages them to show up and try all year.

Recognize Your Autonomy Through Reflection

Ever since I was a first grader, I loved keeping a planner. I wrote down everything we did, anything I had to do at home, and what to look forward to. It made school make sense to me. It gave structure to my scattered, young, anxious mind. I needed structure to think clearly and make sure I accomplished everything I needed to do. When I was a first-year teacher, I planned my lessons to look like those of my colleagues, but few of my co-workers clung to schedules like I did. I found myself frustrated because I needed to remember the add-on things we were asked to do in our classroom: play announcements, pass out grades, and announce upcoming due dates. Currently, if you come to my classroom any day of the week, you will find a similar schedule:

- 10 minutes: independently read or write
- 5 minutes: grammar minilesson
- 1–5 minutes: announcements
- 2 minutes: question of the day
- 10 minutes: minilesson on learning target
- 13 minutes: independent work time
- 3 minutes: cleanup and final reminders

This structure has made it so that even on my worst teaching days, I know what to expect and so do my students.

I believe my structure works, though, not because all classrooms need to have a rigid structure but because I need a rigid structure. I have been in classrooms that run smoothly because students expect each day to be new. It does not seem to matter how the classroom runs but that the teacher knows themself enough to make the conscious decision to create their individual classroom.

Reflection is the process of learning from what you have done. It is a common practice in effective writers. Dean (2017) writes that "reflection is essential" (p. 11) to change writers into metacognitive, proficient writers. The same could be said of teachers. If teachers ever plan to improve their practice, they must reflect upon what they have done. Because students and curriculum are constantly changing, teaching is a profession that requires "continuous cycles of reflection" (Lammert, 2020, p. 230). Reflection gives a chance to develop identity and cement practices a teacher wants to continue.

Effective classrooms are run by reflective teachers. This requires pausing and deciding why a day, unit, or semester worked or why it failed. Worsley et al. (2023) suggest that reflection allows teachers to "slowly [try] new ways of writing with students and connecting those experiences with the standards" (p. 39). Reflection promotes best practice. The nature of teaching requires lots of decisions and lots of failures, which, as passionate educators, we should recognize as part of the learning process. However, failure produces learning only if we recognize why we failed. Teachers need to understand their own identity to choose how that appears in their classroom. I found this easiest to accomplish when I reflected on my successes and failures. Those reflections have guided my future decisions: changing units, keeping assignments, and changing my day-to-day classroom. It does not matter how you run your classroom; it matters only that you have decided to run your classroom in a way that works for you—not your favorite elementary teacher, not your mentor teacher, and not your next-door neighbor. Run your classroom like it is your space.

Application: Student Effects

I made all of these changes to my classroom selfishly—thus I have described the teacher effects. I knew to keep the stamina I needed for my job, I had to create a space I loved; however, I was thrilled to learn from my poll that these conscious choices positively impacted my students—the student effects.

After polling my students, I realized that overwhelmingly students noticed and were impacted by the choices I implemented in my class. Eighty-one percent of students answered "strongly agree" that "Mrs. Scoresby likes what she teaches," with the other 19% responding "agree." Additionally, 100% of students answered either agree or strongly agree with this statement: "I can be myself in Mrs. Scoresby's class." Students' positive responses become important because nearly the same percentage of students responded positively to the statements "I work hard" in class and "I learn new things." One student commented, "This is the first English class I've work [*sic*] hard in." This data suggests a possibility that when students feel comfortable and passionate, they are more motivated and willing to learn.

The final question on the poll asked students, "Why do you like or dislike coming to Mrs. Scoresby's class?" This short answer elicited responses that reflected that students were positively impacted by the things I like in my class.

Students mentioned three topics that are my main focus: environment, community, and interactive participation.

Environment

About 27% of responses mentioned the environment of the classroom. Students said, "I like the vibe in the room," that it is a "calm comfterbal enviorment [*sic*]," and "I like that the lights are off." The first thing I did to reclaim my classroom, changing the decor, was commented on by over one quarter of my students. After reviewing the poll data, it is clear that students recognize conscious decisions to make a classroom welcoming and comfortable. One student said, "I like that it is the class where I can take a mental break but still succeed academically." It seems that just the decor on the walls and the lighting in the room impacts whether students perceive your class as a place where they can try, fail, and succeed.

Community

Students' responses coded in the community category reflected how they felt about themselves and their peers. Students mentioned that in English they "can be completely myself all the time," and can "participate openly." Other students mentioned how they get to know their peers and feel a connection with their classmates. Their responses reflect that because they are comfortable, they can take more risks and participate more.

Interactive Participation

Students commented on the multiple chances they had to participate in class. Three different students commented on the question of the day. Others mentioned playing games, staying active, various discussion topics, and hands-on learning. Again, the choices I made to create a classroom I enjoyed directly impacted my students. The things that make me want to show up to my classroom are also the things that make my students excited to be in class and willing to participate.

Conclusion

Teaching is a difficult, taxing, and time-consuming career. Teaching is also fulfilling, creative, and exciting. Taking control of the classroom and consciously creating a space the teacher enjoys can be the difference between enjoying education and early burnout or disengagement—even demoralization. There is so much that is out of the teacher's direct control: Did students eat before they came to school? What is the reading level of students entering your class? What will happen with state-mandated tests, fire drills, or online safety courses? Finding autonomy is critical to feeling like a trusted professional and finding joy in this career.

One of my students responded to the survey stating, "Mrs. Scoresby loves to teach and you can tell." I am proud to say that the student is right: I love to teach. However, that is only because I have created autonomy and controlled what is within my scope of influence. Taking control has helped me focus on the good, maintain the stamina necessary to continue teaching, and inspire progress. As I make decisions to create the classroom I want to teach in, I continue to show up for my students.

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