

Year 1 Reflection (Letter to Mrs. Strahl):

Hey Mrs. Strahl,

Well, my first year turned out to be fantastic! I learned a ton of stuff. Obviously, I learned how to interact and work with my students effectively. But I also learned an insane amount of knowledge regarding mathematics. I thought I knew a lot before...ya know, since I graduated UF with a BA in mathematics, but after a year of teaching high school Precalculus and Calculus, I picked up on a lot of things I missed.

Alright, well I'll try and go in order of major events that happened to me during my first year: Rewind back to August 21st, 2015. This was Open House day, where students and parents came to my classroom so we could get to know each other a little better. This was the first time where I remember thinking, "Wow, I am going to be working with your kid every day during Period X. And I...me...a 23 year old recent college graduate, am going to teach your child everything I know about Precalculus/ Calculus. Someone is looking at me to learn about a subject that I apparently know everything about. Pretty weird feeling. And I'll say it now...I probably learned MORE than my students in terms of Precalculus and Calculus. And even after a year of teaching, I already know there are things that I didn't pick up on that I will pick up on next year...or even several years from now.

So the first day of school comes around. I made a power point presentation (which is the only time I used PP for the entire year) which outlined how I was planning on running the class, how I was grading, pretty much everything the students needed to know about how to be successful. I emphasized how important doing the homework would be, since homework questions would be VERY similar to test questions. I even told them day 1 that I would provide study guides which would pretty much mimic the tests. If there were 20 questions on the study guide, there would be 20 questions on the test. Question 7 on the study guide would turn out to be the same type of question as question 7 on the test. But study guide questions were mostly questions they already did from the homework, so they had the worked out solutions already provided. Even on the last test I gave, I used this format, and my kids responded well to it. There weren't any surprises, they knew exactly what they should know, and I think in the long run, they really appreciated the system.

Another major event was developing my classroom rules. Towards the beginning of the year, I noticed that my students would take like 3 - 4 minutes to take out their homework, get their notebooks and pencils out, and work their way to their seats. When I was a student, I remember always being ready to go right when that bell rang, so I was kind of surprised that these kids weren't doing what I used to do. So, I developed the "Brenneman Classroom Rules", which turned out to work well for me and them.

The Brenneman Classroom Rules I developed stated:

1. When you enter the classroom, you need to take out your homework, notebook, and writing utensils, and put everything else on the ground next to your desk.
2. Turn your cell phone off and keep it in your backpack.
3. Do not pack up early. I will let you know when we are done for the day.

If every student in the class could follow these 3 rules for 5 consecutive days, I would give them 1% Extra Credit on their most recent test.. If one student broke one of the rules, the counter would reset and they would restart their days. Since there are about 45 days in a grading period, they could earn 9% extra credit on a test, which to them was a big deal. (Tests were worth 70% of their final grade; homework 30%). They worked well with it. It even got to the point where some of the students reminded every student who walked through the door to get everything out and put everything else away on a daily basis. It was awesome! Toward the end of the year, they were pretty good at it, and it was a "feel good" moment seeing myself in my students that way.

Gosh, there is just so much stuff to write about, all these little things, but I don't want you to have to read a book. So I'll cut down to those 4 requested questions you asked me:

1. Lessons I learned: Kids respond well to fairness. If students bombed a test, I would let them do test corrections or something like that so they could bump up their grade. Showing that I cared about their success in the course

seemed to motivate them to try harder...Which makes sense, because I remember when I was a student, I would always try harder for teachers that I liked, and wouldn't care as much for teachers that I didn't like.

2. Things I will change: The big one is spending way more time on free response questions for my calculus class. I am planning on assigning more practice FRQ questions for homework when we hit quarter 4 so they get that extra preparation for the AP Test. Those were huge, and I didn't spend an adequate amount of time on them unfortunately. Another thing I'll change for next year is who I allow to be my Teaching Assistants (T.A.s). Since this was my first year, I had no idea who anyone was, so when people asked me if they could TA for me, I said yes not knowing anything about them. So the thing is, I don't really ask my TA's to do anything. Just answer the the class phone if someone calls. But a couple of my TA's complained because they were bored and had nothing to do. I was like, "Seriously...wth??!" If I were in their shoes, I would love to have that extra period to catch up on school work, or play games on my phone or whatever. Next year, I'll make sure my TA's are people who I know and trust. Preferably, they'll be my Calculus students :)

3. What most surprised me: My kids, and how much they have to deal with on a daily basis while still being successful in my class. I got a little emotional when I realized that they aren't just dealing with my AP Calculus class or Precalculus honors class. They also have to deal with 6 other classes (often being other honors or AP courses), participate in their several extra curricular activities, and/or work their jobs. I even told them that what they are doing now is something I never did in high school, and that they had my utmost respect for what they did as a 17 year old student.

4. Greatest Accomplishment: I have two. The first one was when a couple of my Precalculus students told me they were going to take Calculus just because I was teaching it. Some of them told me that math wasn't their favorite or best subject, but they didn't care because they wanted to spend the first part of their school day with me. So that obviously made my day. The second one is more general, and that is having most of my students feel appreciated and wanting to come to my class. (At least, I think they felt this way haha). I tried my best to treat them as adults and try to always be happy when they entered my room. And I didn't even have to fake it! I really enjoyed my time with my students for my first year. And once I saw all my seniors walk across the stage during graduation, it hit me that the worst part of teaching is having to let them go. I had some really amazing students in Calculus and Precalculus, and saying good bye to them was...well, it was emotionally difficult. The good news is I'll have some of my Precalculus students in Calculus next year, but I know there will come a day when they all graduate too, and I'll have to re live those feelings again... It's something I am not looking forward to. I had my students create a final project where one of the requirements was to write a reflection paragraph of their year so future students taking the course would have a better idea of what to expect. One of my students wrote, "I hope that when you walk into Mr. Brenneman's four walled oasis on the first day of school, you feel the same calmness and serenity I did every day. It always put you in the best mood." I cried a little...

To sum this all up, my first year was better than I thought it would be. I went in to it thinking I might have to re-live my horrendous Apprentice Teaching experience at U of F, but MDHS students are nothing like them, at least not my kids. Everything seemed manageable, and I never felt like I was behind or I had too much going on. It took a lot of work and preparation though. I spent about an hour and a half every night reading my textbooks and preparing notes/ lessons for my kids, but I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it! I cannot wait for next year too. About 25% of my precalculus students are taking calculus with me (and believe me when I say that these kids are awesome! They are like family to me), so it will be awesome to have them two years in a row. I also saved all my class notebooks, all my tests, study guides, answer keys, etc., so this next year should flow a lot smoother.

Keep in touch, and talk soon!

Zack