Recognizing Personal Challenges to Emerge as a Stronger Teacher

As a teacher, the question “Am I good enough?” frequently rings through my brain, especially late at night when I should be getting the rest I need for the day to come. This question and others—such as “What am I doing here? What if I cannot connect with my students? What if my best efforts don’t work out as I planned, or I become complacent?”—can challenge anyone’s self-worth.

Even when asked to write this commentary, I struggled with a hope that my NABT colleagues would be interested in what I have to say. Rationally, I think back on the journey detailed in my vita. I am fortunate to have been able to become an associate professor after spending a decade in higher education as a student and many more years working toward tenure. I still find myself wondering how I can keep improving as a teacher, and how to feel that I deserve the accolades I have been fortunate to receive. I am lucky that I have worked with ambitious educators and budding scientists through my jobs, advising and serving on committees for students who will become our next generation of science educators. I teach courses in biology and science education, both in the United States and abroad. I love being an educator, but I struggle with the fear of becoming stale. I often pore over things gone wrong or that I might have handled differently. I worry about whether I prepared my students enough to conquer the challenges that they will face as they move on to the next steps in their own journeys. I wonder how I will know if I have fallen out of touch with my students, who might no longer connect to examples I offer or fail to laugh at my biology jokes.

As each new semester draws near, I have already been preparing for weeks, yet I still find myself nervous about the idea of stepping into my classroom and meeting new students. I scour my lesson plans, integrating updated examples and plans for new activities and teaching techniques, and occasionally second-guessing my intentions in case my efforts might not work out as planned. I ask if I have planned enough details, while simultaneously reminding myself that I need to build in open options to allow needed flexibility for when things unknown inevitably pop up. I take moments to remind myself that I really am ready, and I can do this. I remember what one of my mentors has reminded me: one of the greatest joys of teaching is that we get the chance to learn from our past and start each semester fresh, having grown from lessons learned.

The most important thing that helps me rise to the occasion is that I know I am not alone. There are others who feel the way I do and others who can help. There is a phenomenon called “imposter syndrome,” wherein successful people may doubt or undervalue their accomplishments and internalize shortcomings to the point of being in fear of being “outed as a fraud.” This common phenomenon plagues many professionals, including educators, and few are immune. The good news is that I am fortunate to be surrounded by bright, motivated, and successful colleagues who can provide support and even occasional affirmation. They remind me that I have the expertise to contribute to discussions that, even in small ways, help make us a more effective team.

So now, when I ask myself, “How can I be better?” I find myself looking forward to seeking professional development through venues like the annual meeting of the National Association of Biology Teachers. I keep a stack of journals and books on my desk and nightstand that I read when I can, to stay up-to-date on new techniques and new examples I might work into my lessons. I also try to remind myself that it is okay to not be perfect in all my endeavors. In fact, I think we all need to remember that perfection is not even a possible goal. I remember when I first began teaching, my mentor told me that the first time through is about surviving, the second time is about revision, and maybe, by the third time through, things might start working out how you had hoped. Still, there is always room to grow and improve. We should recognize that we can often learn the most when things go wrong. Only then do the problems present themselves and solutions begin to appear. And problem solving is a powerful educational tool.

As I have worked on this commentary, I have also considered ways to reconceptualize my ideas about my personal worth and what it means for me to be a successful educator. I strive to set an example of good practice through my actions and acknowledge when I make a mistake, provide advice that is genuine, put forth honest effort on necessary tasks, embrace opportunities to learn with my students, be sincere and quick to praise the accomplishments of others, and try to be fully present when interacting with those around me. By striving to meet these goals, I come just a bit closer to accepting that “I may be imperfect, but I am good enough, and perhaps the small measure of lingering self-doubt provides the motivation to get better still.”

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