

Kelly Gallagher ♦ Penny Kittle

180
Days

Two Teachers and the
Quest to Engage and
Empower Adolescents

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We are grateful to poets and writers
who inspire our students to read
and write with determination and joy.
We dedicate this book to you.

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Introduction

Teaching is a complex act. Charlotte Danielson (1996) estimates that a teacher makes more than three thousand nontrivial decisions every day. No list can capture the extraordinary subtlety involved in making instant decisions about which student to call on, how to frame an impromptu question, or how to respond to an interruption. The late Madeline Hunter compared teaching to surgery, “where you think fast on your feet and do the best you can with the information you have. You must be very skilled, very knowledgeable, and exquisitely well trained, because neither the teacher nor the surgeon can say, ‘Everybody sit still until I figure out what in the heck we’re gonna do next.’” (Hunter quoted in Goldberg 1990, 43)

A new school year approaches, and we will soon meet our students.

We cannot wait to get started.

We already know a few things about our students: too many will arrive with a pronounced lack of interest in reading and writing; some will have very low skills; and a few will have read all summer and will be excited for what lies ahead. We know that engaging all of our students will be a challenge every day. And we also know there’s a lot we just don’t know yet.

We expect the usual hurdles that emanate from outside our classrooms. Our instruction will no doubt be interrupted by messages sent by the office, by emergency evacuation drills, by assemblies. We will be asked to attend unproductive meetings. We will be given budgets that are laughable, given the challenges in front of us. And we will be handed mandates by public school bureaucracies that are at odds with what we are trying to accomplish. Sometimes it will feel as if the world outside our rooms is hell-bent on getting in our way.

But despite these obstacles, let us repeat: we cannot wait to get started. We believe that the teaching of literacy can be life changing. Literally. We know that after years of mind-numbing worksheets and packet work, too many of our students have come to see reading and writing as mundane chores. Many of them have parents who are not readers and writers, and because of this, many have never seen a person write something personal and powerful. We want

something different for our students. We want to show them the beauty reading and writing can bring to their lives. We do not want them to be indifferent; we want them to be empowered and independent, curious and passionate. We feel an urgency that goes far beyond the standards. And because so much is at stake, we are willing to fight through all that stands in our way. We know the work is vitally important, and we will not be deterred.

Because the stakes are so high, we believe that every moment spent with our students matters—that time is a precious commodity. This, of course, leads us to a simple truth known to all English teachers: there is simply too much to do and not enough time to do it. When we conduct workshops, teachers often say hello or share ideas and resources with us. But more often than not, the teachers who approach ask what we’ve come to call The Question: *How do you fit everything into one school year?* Sometimes we can even tell The Question is coming before the teacher says a word, because it is written in the teacher’s face—an expression that roughly translates as follows: “I like what you shared today, but what you are proposing does not fit in my curriculum. *How do you fit it all in?*”

In response, we often have been guilty of giving a very flippant two-word answer: “We don’t.” And because there really is not enough time to answer The Question standing in the hallways after a workshop, we have suggested that teachers begin by prioritizing what their students need most and to start their planning process by first addressing those needs and moving outward from there. This, of course, is surface-level, shallow advice, and it does little to help anyone arrive at deeper, more authentic answers. Having been asked The Question untold times, we had become adept at answering it without really answering it.

But then a funny thing happened. One day, while having lunch together, we were marveling at how often we get asked The Question. This, in turn, *led us to ask each other* The Question. This high-level discussion went something like this:

Penny: So, Kelly, how *do you* fit everything into a single school year?

Kelly (*Long pause*): Hmm . . . well . . . I don’t. (*Another long pause*) How *do you* fit everything into one school year?

Penny: I . . . um . . . well, I don’t try to . . . it’s complicated.

It *is* complicated. But since all teachers struggle with The Question, we felt compelled to explore it. *How do you fit it all in?* is hard because there are many layers to the answer. Instead of starting with the district-mandated curriculum guide or a list of required texts, we first ask, “What are the most pressing needs of the students who sit before us?” This leads us to ask,

“What then are the essential things we must teach them?” And then, “*When* during the school year should those things be taught, and *how* should we teach them?” Answering one question leads us to the next, which, in turn, leads us to other questions.

A Year of Teaching Dangerously

This book began as an earnest attempt to share the decisions we make when determining what will fit into a single school year. To move beyond the surface-level responses we had grown accustomed to giving, we decided that the best way to get to the answer was to first plan a year together, and to then teach a year together. This book captures that year, but it has evolved into much more than simply sharing what we did.

At its heart, this book is about *why* we did what we did. Creating a classroom conducive to raising engaged readers, writers, listeners, speakers, and thinkers continually led us back to closely examining our decision-making process. And teaching the units we designed meant paying attention throughout the unit to what our students were learning. That led to unforeseen lessons that had to be taught (or retaught). This created tension in our year plan since extending time during one unit constricted time for something else. The bottom line: *it didn't all fit*.

Given the demands of the modern-day classroom, we were forced to make critical additions and deletions. We began making these decisions in the summer before we met our students, and we continued to make them as the year unfolded. Often, we found ourselves making decisions while standing in front of a room full of adolescents. In this book, it is our intention to capture as many of these decisions as possible and to share our thinking behind them.

Truth be told, both of us are feeling a sense of unease in opening up our classrooms to this level of public scrutiny. Writing a book that attempts to show why we do what we do—and exposing all that we didn't get to in a year of teaching, even with our best intentions—is very different from writing a book that simply shares what we would *like* to do. It feels risky to have to account for sometimes painful decisions. Why does this stay in? Why does this get cut? Why are we teaching it this way? Why did this work? Why did this not work? What should we do next?

We think about this work constantly—our spouses would say obsessively—and we still don't have all the answers we're seeking. But we know this: teaching is seductive simply because of its complexity. We want our love of English to be present in the lives of our students this year,

and we want our lessons and units to be clearly organized in order to effectively teach well, day in and day out. We invite you to share the journey with us in this book as well as online, where you will see videos of our team-teaching, conferences with our readers and writers, and planning discussions we held throughout the year.

Our Two Schools

When Kelly first walked into Penny's classroom, he scanned the six round tables with four chairs each and asked, "Where do all of the rest of the students sit?" Classes are small or "just right" in Penny's school—a product of declining enrollment and administrative determination to provide excellent conditions for learning. Ten years ago Penny taught thirty-four seniors squeezed into a portable on the back lot behind an overcrowded, crumbling 1923 building. In 2007 a new high school was built, creating new opportunities for the use of space.

Penny has almost two thousand books organized into categories (like a bookstore) in tall shelves that rim her classroom. Her walls are painted with bright colors. Her classroom is a warm and inviting place. Penny's school has a vibrant Career and Technical Center, and the Little Eagles Preschool playground is outside the windows along one wall. When the weather cooperates, Penny's students work next to the squeals and giggles of four- and five-year-olds. The school is built on a hill one mile from the center of a small collection of towns and is surrounded by forest. Black bears occasionally wander through the parking lot.

When Penny first stepped from the blazing California heat into the dark of Kelly's classroom, the first thing she noticed was books and the annoying buzz of the air conditioner. Kelly also has an extensive classroom library, organized by categories. The second thing Penny noticed was lots and lots of students (thirty-eight of them in his ninth-grade class). Students are jammed into desks from one side of the classroom to the other, which is why Kelly strongly encourages the regular use of deodorant.

Kelly's portable classroom is wedged into the back of the school. Unlike Kennett High School, Magnolia High School has received only superficial facelifts over the years, and it shows. Kelly's portable has drab, beige walls made of clothlike material, thus making them impossible to paint. The school, located in the center of urban sprawl, has mostly concrete grounds, with little vegetation. There is zero chance that a black bear will wander through the parking lot, though stray dogs are not uncommon.

Figure I.1 describes a more detailed comparison between our two schools.

| | Kelly's School | Penny's School |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Location | Kelly teaches at Magnolia High School, an urban school in the Anaheim Union High School District, in Southern California. | Penny teaches at Kennett High School, a rural school in the White Mountains of New Hampshire that draws students from eight communities covering more than 1,000 square miles. |
| School history | Magnolia High School was built in 1963. It is the smallest of eight high schools in the Anaheim Union High School District. | The new Kennett High School was built in 2007 but was first established in 1923. It is the only high school in the valley on the New Hampshire side of the border with Maine. |
| Teaching history | Kelly has taught at Magnolia for 29 of his 33 years of teaching. He has taught all but one of his years at the high school level. | Penny has taught at Kennett for 20 of her 33 years in teaching. She started as an elementary teacher, then moved to middle school, college teaching, and then back to middle school before settling in high school. |
| School enrollment | 1,854 students | 749 students |
| Demographics | The ethnic breakdown of the student population is as follows: White: 10 percent African American: 3 percent Latino: 67 percent Asian: 8 percent Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander: 1 percent Filipino: 3 percent Two or more races: 8 percent | The ethnic breakdown of the student population is: White: 95 percent African American: 2 percent Alaskan native: 0.5 percent Latino: 1.2 percent Asian: 1.2 percent |
| Language learners | English language learners constitute 29 percent of the students. There are over 30 languages spoken on the campus. | English language learners constitute 3 percent of the students. There are 3 languages spoken on campus. |
| Free and reduced lunch | Magnolia offers free and reduced lunches to 85 percent of its students. The school has the highest percentage of homeless students in the district's sixteen schools. | Kennett offers free and reduced lunches to 28 percent of its students. |
| Dropout rate | Magnolia has a dropout rate of 8.4 percent. | In 2006, Kennett had the highest dropout rate in the state. Since 2013, the dropout rate has been less than 0.2 percent. |
| College attendance | In 2015, 67 percent of Magnolia's graduates went on to two- and four-year colleges. | In 2015, 84 percent of Kennett graduates went on to two- and four-year colleges. |
| School schedule | Magnolia is on a traditional schedule, so Kelly sees his students every day. The class periods are 53 minutes. Kelly has 9,360 instructional minutes in a school year. | Kennett is on an A/B block schedule of 80-minute classes. Penny sees ninth-grade students every other day for 80 minutes. Penny has 7,200 instructional minutes in a school year. |
| Class sizes | Kelly's ninth-grade class has 38 students (21 girls and 17 boys). Students in the class are heterogeneously mixed, so there are general-level, college prep, and honors students in each class. | Penny's ninth-grade classes average 17 students (12 girls and 23 boys in two classes). Students in both classes are heterogeneously mixed, so there are general-level, college prep, and honors students in each class. |

Figure I.1 Comparison of Our Two High Schools

After our initial visits to each other's classrooms, we were intrigued by our different teaching worlds, and these visits led us to consider some interesting questions:

- In what ways would a ninth-grade year in New Hampshire look the same as a ninth-grade year in California? In what ways would they look different?
- What is common no matter where you teach?
- How will our very different environments shape our decision-making?
- How will the difference in the hours we have to teach students affect our decision-making?
- What kind of cross-country collaboration might occur between our students? How might our kids benefit from this collaboration?

We knew it would be easier to continue to do what we have done for years, but after visiting one another's classrooms, we could see that a collaboration would challenge our thinking and our practices. The Question would push us both to new understandings of teaching and learning.

How This Book Is Framed

This book is divided into two sections. Section 1, “Planning Decisions,” takes you through the process we used—and you might consider—to plan a year of teaching. The section includes five chapters:

- 1: Start with Beliefs
- 2: Establish Daily Practices
- 3: Map a Year of Reading
- 4: Map a Year of Writing
- 5: Balance Feedback and Evaluation.

Section 2, “Teaching Essential Discourses,” begins with an introduction that explains the general framework for planning a unit of study in a specific writing discourse. Then, in the four chapters that follow, we detail the decisions we made in four discourse studies: narrative, informational, argument, and multigenre. Our hope is that by reading about the decisions we made as we planned together, you will be inspired to reimagine the beautiful possibilities for your teaching.

We know that the choices we make about how to spend time show students what we value. Our choices determine what our students will do and what they will learn. This responsibility is daunting, and it is exhilarating. We are already making choices about what fits, but in August time feels expansive. The year is filled with possibility: We will discover books that will keep us up late at night. We will learn new technologies to lead our students. We will live as readers and writers in a community with fascinating, complex young people. We are ready to lead and to follow them. We can't wait to get started.