

Listening is the New Lecture

Mara was one of my best students; she was reliable, dedicated and truly loved to learn. One day, at the end of seventh grade, she informed me she'd be dropping my Latin class for her eighth grade year so she could have an additional study hall, time she needed to finish her other school work and participate in extracurricular activities. I signed off on her request, but I also sensed that the explanation she gave was not the whole story. Weeks later, she asked to meet with me and, voice shaking, admitted she had dropped my class because she did not feel as if her time was being well spent because she was not learning much.

As she laid my failings bare, my mouth opened, defense at the ready. When I began to speak, however, she looked me in the eyes and thanked me for listening to her.

That's when I shut my mouth and realized I had not been listening to her at all, not for the entire year she'd been in my classroom.

If I had been listening every day, instead of just this once, her confession would not have been news. If I'd been using strategies focused on her learning, rather than my teaching – heck, *if I'd just asked*, I would have known she wasn't learning.

I write about education through the lens of my own teaching, so many of my most grievous errors are Google-able, available for public consumption for as long as the internet shall live. Horrifying on a personal level, yes, but I believe teaching mistakes laid bare are a good thing for education at large.

Anyone who has managed to stick it out in the classroom for more than a year has committed serious errors. Teachers lecture, even when evidence shows [lecturing isn't effective teaching](#). Teachers favor certain students over others based on [race](#), behavior or [personality](#), even when research reveals that supportive and positive teacher-student relationships form the [foundation of learning and school engagement](#), especially for [students at increased risk of educational failure](#).

Letter grades, [sexist dress codes](#), homework, [institutional racism](#) and high-stakes summative tests have stood as America's educational status quo for hundreds of years, but handing these artifacts down to the next generation without questioning their propriety or utility is, put bluntly, bad teaching.

I, like many other teachers, have also swung too far, too fast, in my yearning for magic, silver bullets. Because I like to [poke the sacred cows](#) lazing around my classroom, I adore reading education clickbait, articles that trumpet the exciting promise of new findings. When a study emerged in 2014 on the [deleterious impact of excessive classroom decorations on kindergarten learning](#), for example, I was tempted to purge my classroom of my carefully curated yet distracting maps, poems and student art. Fortunately, I've learned to stop, take a breath and consider whether the finding at hand was simply interesting (this one was) or something tried,

tested, ready to be deployed with all deliberate speed in classrooms across the country (it was not).

A willingness to embrace new methods is admirable, particularly when current ones are not working, but education is a big ship to turn around, particularly when it is moving full steam ahead in the wrong direction.

Despite American education's failures, missteps, errors of judgment and blunders of best intentions, I remain optimistic about where we are headed, both as a profession and as a nation. No, I'm not naïve; I started teaching 18 years ago and have committed or witnessed many of these blunders firsthand. Rather, I remain optimistic because I've also spent three years on the road meeting teachers, school counselors, administrators and school board members, and I know how much they care about their students.

Education may seem adrift right now, what with deeply entrenched debate over national versus local control of standards, the utility and fairness of standardized assessments and the economic and social worth of teachers. But at the center of much of this conflict, we all have the same focus: the students.

I believe our shared compass bearing will help us get this ship pointed in the right direction, toward a place where learning trumps expedience, knowledge confers power and listening is the new lecture.

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