

1 STANCE

CHAPTER QUESTION: WHAT DRIVES YOU?

ANTICIPATION QUESTIONS

- How would you describe your stance as a teacher?
- What are your closest-held beliefs about teaching and learning?
- As a teacher, what is your purpose?

Teacher Voice: The Power of Beliefs

“Whether consciously or unconsciously, we make our beliefs public every day. They come through in the ways we design our classrooms for student independence, in the ways we plan our lessons for engagement, even in the ways we talk with our students. When we take the time to reflect on our beliefs, we can bring them to life by empowering students with the strategies to accomplish their goals. This changes the way we teach, allows students to take off and fly.”

—ANNIE PATTERSON

Inferring Stance

“She hates me,” a reluctant social studies learner told me of his history teacher, “and she thinks I’m stupid.” I tried to pry this belief from his mind with reason and rationalizations, but he would not be moved. I went to watch. He sat in the back. She lectured. She did not call on anyone. At the end of class, she listed off the names of people with missing assignments who had to stay in for lunch. His name was on the list. I got the picture: by his twelve-year-old logic,

anyone who would take away his recess must certainly hate him, and a person who never stops talking must think their audience is stupid. He read her stance (rightly or wrongly) from her behavior. His behavior coalesced to match her beliefs: pretty soon, he was failing that class. It was a steep climb out of that hole.

REFLECTION: INFERRING STANCE

Tell the story of a time when you read an unsupportive stance from a person in a position of authority. What did you infer? Why? How did that affect your performance or learning?

Beliefs

Consciously or unconsciously, our beliefs inform our behavior; our behavior, in turn, shows the world what we believe.

As teachers, our beliefs have far-reaching influence on the lives of the learners we strive to serve. I remember reading in grad school about the now-illegal research Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson described in their 1968 book *Pygmalion in the Classroom*: teachers were told at the beginning of a school year that one actually typical group of students was highly gifted while another actually typical group of students had subpar potential. By the end of the year, as you may know, the students met their teachers' expectations, a self-fulfilling prophecy. More recent studies demonstrate the power of teacher beliefs on student learning outcomes: Sian Beilock and her colleagues (2010) at the University of Chicago studied the effect of teachers' math anxiety on their students and found,

By the school year's end, however, the more anxious teachers were about math, the more likely girls (but not boys) were to endorse the commonly held stereotype that "boys are good at math, and girls are good at reading" and the lower these girls' math achievement. Indeed, by the end of the school year, girls who endorsed this stereotype had significantly worse math achievement than girls who did not and than boys overall.

Each of us can also look to our own experience for additional proof: someone's belief in you—or lack thereof—surely influenced who you have become. To provide the best possible learning opportunities for children, we need to identify our own beliefs and notice how our actions reflect them—or how to adjust so that they do.

Take some time to consider where you sit on the belief spectra in Figure 1.1. I invite you to jot some thinking after marking your position on each line.

←-----→

I am powerful. **I am powerless.**

Why did you mark this spot on the line?

←-----→

My students are capable. **My students need rescuing.**

How might this belief influence your students' self-perceptions?

←-----→

My job is to inspire thinking. **My job is to promote memorization.**

In what ways does this belief come to life in your work?

Figure 1.1 Beliefs Reflection

BELIEFS ABOUT OURSELVES

We teach who we are. I firmly believe this. What virtuous qualities would you yourself like to invite learners to embrace? How can you model them in your classroom? Figure 1.2 is a list of productive beliefs demonstrated by many of the phenomenal teachers described in this book. Which ring true for you? What might you add? How do you envision bringing these beliefs to life in a classroom? (If you are not sure yet, come back later, as you progress through the book.)

“Every student deserves the chance and has the right to explore his or her glorious potential. Helping our students to believe in themselves when perhaps no one else does and working with them to cultivate hope where seemingly there is none are two of the greatest gifts educators can offer to our youth.”

—*Vicki Zakrzewski (2017)*

Belief	Might Be Modeled By . . .
I am powerful.	Speaking out to address racist comments.
I am kind.	Providing extra snacks for those in need.
I have high expectations.	
I am a lifelong learner.	
I am a hard worker.	

Figure 1.2 Productive Beliefs About Ourselves

BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNERS

As described in the previous examples, our beliefs about our students make a deep impact on their experience in school today, as well as their future success. Look at Figure 1.3. Which of these beliefs match stances you take or would like to take with learners? Add to this list, and think about how you might demonstrate those beliefs.

Belief	Might Be Modeled By . . .
You are important.	
You are welcome here.	
You bring background knowledge to share.	
You need to do the hard work of learning.	

Figure 1.3 Productive Beliefs About Students

BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Paulo Freire (1970) criticized the banking model of education—that knowledge can be deposited, stored, and withdrawn as needed at a later date—as requiring students to be passive recipients rather than active thinkers engaged in claiming their education. Progressive education today stands on another set of beliefs about the inherent strengths and abilities of learners. Read the beliefs in Figure 1.4. How do these resonate with you? What is missing? How might you show them in your instruction?

Belief	Might Be Modeled By . . .
Learners' questions and ideas are important.	
Teachers are facilitators.	
Content is a vehicle to practice thinking and understanding.	
The purpose of school is to foster learners' independence.	

Figure 1.4 Productive Beliefs About Teaching and Learning

REFLECTION: ACTUALIZING BELIEFS

If you are not yet fully sure how you might fill in the right-hand columns in Figures 1.2–1.4, that is alright. This book is all about exploring some concrete ways you might bring your beliefs and best intentions for every learner to life in your instruction, so read on. But first, what questions do you have?

Purpose: Agency and Understanding

This book defines teacher success as raising learners to possess two gifts: agency and understanding, two shoes that will get you where you need to go. Lace up agency, and you have an individual who believes in their own power and possibilities, who faces obstacles with courage and confidence, who perseveres with poise through challenge and change. Tie

Teacher Voice: Results of Acting on Our Beliefs

“Working with PEBC has made me more confident in what I believe in as a teacher. I think that students should be able to learn for themselves and learn in their own way. I have grown more confident in implementing these strategies within my classroom. I’ve seen the benefits in my students’ motivation, as well as the amount that they’re keeping up with—and they like—their learning. The kids have been maintaining their knowledge more than in years past when I’d just been doing kind of the old school approach where they’re just taking notes and regurgitating that information. Now they’re actually coming up with their own ideas rather than my ideas.

“Students see the benefits of what I am doing in my classroom because they are seeing that they are learning more, whether that’s on our weekly quizzes or even on our monthly progress monitoring. The kids are becoming more motivated because they are seeing that growth within themselves.”

—*Andrew Jones, Berry Creek Middle School*

“If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. As teachers, then, we try to maximize children’s feelings of agency. There are really three parts to this: the belief that the environment can be affected, the belief that one has what it takes to affect it, and the understanding that that is what literacy is about. Developing in children a sense of agency is not an educational frill or some mushy-headed liberal idea. Children who doubt their competence set low goals and choose easy tasks, and they plan poorly.”

—*Peter Johnston (2004)*

understanding onto the other foot, and you have someone who knows—or who knows how to know—a lifelong learner competent at grappling with challenging content and making meaning for themselves. With agency and understanding, all things are possible.

AGENCY

Agency is essentially a belief in one’s own efficacy, one’s ability to control his or her own life. Agency is an orientation toward the past, present, and future that reflects free choice, optimism, conscious influences, and uniqueness (Bandura 2001). It is a can-do attitude, a willingness to work with hard, dogged perseverance on a quest. Educational researcher Manja Klemenčič (2014) describes it this way:

By exercising their agency, students exert influence on their educational trajectories, their future lives and their immediate and larger social surroundings. . . . Yet, through their agency they also contribute to the development of others, development of knowledge and to economic and social development.

Numerous factors beyond learners’ control—socioeconomic status, cultural capital, family of origin, health condition, and more—contribute to one’s sense of agency. Still, history is rich with tales of those who rose from humble beginnings to accomplish great tasks. Alexander Hamilton, Oprah Winfrey, Mohandas Gandhi, and LeBron James all shared confidence in their own capacity to influence their futures and that of our world. We can raise children to believe in themselves too.

To this end, we can design learning experiences that put students in the driver’s seat, that invite them to bring their authentic selves and to strive in wonderful and unique ways for their own visions of success.

REFLECTION: AGENCY ALIVE

Describe someone you know who has a strong sense of agency. How does their agency come to life?

UNDERSTANDING

Understanding is the construction of meaning, meaning that can be remembered and reapplied in new situations. Although we aspire to raise students who understand a great many things, the collective of human content knowledge is so vast that an even greater gift to our children is knowing *how* to understand. Jay McTighe and Elliott Seif (2014) explain,

The world is increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing, offering new potentials and problems. Search engines, computers and smart-phones give most people increased and immediate access to huge amounts of information. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook and soon-to-be invented technologies enable instantaneous communication with people throughout the globe. The highly complex job market, with its array of novel and changing careers, calls for creative, innovative individuals who can think critically and apply their learning to new situations while functioning as continuous, lifelong learners.

McTighe, along with Grant Wiggins, defined the six facets of understanding as the abilities to explain, interpret, apply, demonstrate perspective, display empathy, and have self-knowledge (Wiggins and McTighe 2005). Given the vast landscapes of our learners' future, our goal is to cultivate graduates who not only grapple with important ideas but also have the ability to tackle unfamiliar topics with an eye on understanding.

REFLECTION: DEFINE UNDERSTANDING

What does understanding look and sound like in your content area(s)?

How Do We Get There from Here?

What does it look like to build students' agency and understanding amidst shifting standards, changing assessments, waves of mandated curricula, and evolving educational policies? If, against that backdrop, we believe in fostering the unique promise inherent in each child, how might our classrooms look and sound? If we are devoted to celebrating the thinking and creativity of every individual, what might we do?

This book will offer an overview of six teacher superpowers that, when taken together, can make all the difference for student learning. We will examine these approaches in Chapters 2–7, and all are summarized in the Appendix.

- ◆ **Plan (Chapter 2)**

How can we design learning experiences that cultivate students' understanding and agency? In this chapter, we will consider both yearlong and unit-level planning.

- ◆ **Community (Chapter 3)**

In what ways might we develop classroom communities that support the agency and understanding of every learner? This chapter is all about supporting collective and individual efficacy, as well as productive identities in our classroom.

- ◆ **Workshop (Chapter 4)**

In what ways might we facilitate learning experiences that support students grappling with challenging tasks in service of conceptual understanding? Here we will explore how workshop model teaching scaffolds students' success as independent thinkers and problem solvers.

- ◆ **Thinking Strategies (Chapter 5)**

In what ways might we provide tools that increase learners' agency and understanding? This chapter describes the thinking strategies and how effective teachers can bring them to life in service of learners' understanding.

- ◆ **Discourse (Chapter 6)**

In what ways might we scaffold productive, engaged academic conversations? In this chapter, we will explore how to cultivate students' speaking and listening across learning experiences.

- ◆ **Assessment (Chapter 7)**

In what ways might we monitor and support progress? Assessment for learning, as a tool in students' hands, is the key idea of this chapter.



These practices, each powerful in their own right, work together to create an environment that fosters productive learning for students of all backgrounds. Remove one, and the others will stand, yet more weakly. Strengthen one, and all are fortified.

Believe in Yourself

Have you seen the movie *The Great Debaters*? It is based on the true story of Wiley College professor Melvin Tolson, who coached the debate team of his small, African American college in a tiny town in Texas in 1935. So great was Tolson's faith in his students that he wrote letters to colleges all over the nation inviting them to debate Wiley's team. Eventually, due to Tolson's persistent letters and his students' hard work, Harvard University's championship team accepted the challenge, hosted a debate with Wiley, and lost. Tolson believed in his students, took a stance of faith in their great potential, and behaved accordingly.

What we believe about ourselves, our students, and the processes of teaching and learning informs how we behave. When we take as our purpose the development of learners' agency in service of their own understanding, we plan carefully, develop community, facilitate workshops, teach thinking strategies, scaffold discourse, and enact ongoing assessment.

You are already making a difference in the lives of your students. And yet I applaud your courage in opening this book, seeking to do more. As you read on, take charge. I am not here to tell you what to do, just to share what has brought success to other aspiring teachers dedicated to developing learners' agency and understanding. Read critically; think hard about each facet: Does it make sense for you? How might it work in your own setting? In what ways might you need to adjust the ideas presented to best meet learners' needs? How might you begin? Take on small challenges in a manageable time frame. Enlist collaboration and the support of colleagues. Pause often to reflect: How did that go? What might you try next? Learning takes time. Be patient with yourself. You can do this.

REFLECTION: TEACHER EFFICACY

In what ways do you feel efficacious as a teacher now? In what ways might you like to grow? Which of the six strands previously described seem to offer the greatest promise to that end?

“Yeah, But . . .”

- **“What about the test?”**

You are about to read about teachers whose students consistently outdo state and district averages on standardized assessments of student achievement, though those students may come from historically underperforming groups. These learners succeed not because their teachers conscientiously cover every micro-standard listed in government-generated documents but because their teachers prioritize and honor student thinking and build learners’ confidence so that they can grapple with unfamiliar content and make meaning.

- **“What about my scope and sequence, my curriculum?”**

These pedagogical approaches can serve to support teachers in implementing most curricula. I say “most” because if the primary goals are mere memorization and regurgitation rather than critical thinking, you might have picked up the wrong book. Yet this work is well aligned with the Common Core and related standards that prioritize learners’ thinking and comprehension: demonstrating independence; building content knowledge; responding to demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; comprehending and critiquing; valuing evidence; using technology strategically; and understanding other perspectives and cultures.

- **“Am I allowed . . . ?”**

Yes. You are. A lot of teachers ask us this, as if someone else had a better understanding than you do of what is best for the learners in your care. Yes, you are allowed to make instructional decisions in service of your highest and best hopes for students. Now, you may not get to toss out the standards or rewrite the test, but you do get to infuse the route to those ends with rich invitations for thinking. Staff developer Sathya Wandzek advises, “Take a risk. It may not work quite like you expect, but you’ll never know until you try.”



STANCE REFLECTION

- What new thinking do you have about your and your colleagues' teaching beliefs?
- Which beliefs are you curious about learning to enact more fully?
- In what ways are agency and understanding alive and well in your classroom and school?
- In what ways might you enrich learners' agency and understanding?
- What do you envision might be different for you and your students as a result of your having worked through this book?

REFLECTION ON CHAPTER QUESTION: WHAT DRIVES YOU?

Invitation: Write a tweet about what drives you. Here are a couple of sentence stems, if you'd like to use one or both:

- As a teacher, I am driven by my beliefs that . . .
- My purpose is . . .

If you like, share your tweet on Twitter and tag me @wendywardhoffer.