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Don't get ready, get started

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We think planning is a non-negotiable in teaching. But having everything perfectly planned isn't the best way to teach …

Don't get ready. Get started!

There's a difference between being ill-prepared and being under-planned. We don't want to be ill-prepared. But that doesn't mean we can't start without being completely planned.

"Paralysis by analysis" -- We can over-plan things at the expense of ever actually doing it.

When we are exposed to new ideas, we don't think we're prepared … or we stew on it without taking action.

Noah: "I see that in the mirror all the time!" We can all be prone to procrastination or overplanning. We have the sense that we're underqualified / unqualified.

"Teachers need to give ourselves permission to be audacious."

You have to be audacious enough to say, "You know what … I'm good enough for this!" Give yourself permission.

Noah's example: He started blogging when TeachPaperless.com was popular with teachers. Noah loved it and sent the blogger a message asking to write guest blog posts. Noah was given permission to write whatever he wanted on the blog … and it that blog very widely read! How did it happen? He was told, "It was your audacity." He was brave and he had something to say.

"I'm not some snowflake who's original and unique in that. Every teacher out there has areas that they're shining in that they can give themselves permission to be great."

"Give yourself permission to take joy in the contribution itself. Not every single thing you do is going to be amazing." Example: The blog post that only gets three clicks. If you aren't willing to write a post that might only get three clicks, you won't write one that gets thousands. And one of those clicks might be someone who writes you an email and it really changes him/her.

Many educators are proud. Part of being proud of our work is a prejudice toward perfectionism.

If you're doing something innovative, it's not going to be awesome the first time! Iterate upon it, make changes. Down the road, you'll think, "How did I think that was good?"

One of Noah's students said Spanish was his favorite class in high school. Why? "It felt like we were your lab rats on trying cool stuff. All these other classes were just doing worksheets. All these things nobody had ever heard of you were using in the classroom. You'd tell us, I don't know if this is going to work, but I thank you students in advance for trying."

"That was really validating for me, that I wasn't doing it only for my own whims!"

He got iPod Touches for his students, and it was a battle to get them connected to WiFi. Then, these devices that were always about music and surfing the web was about teaching and learning in Spanish class that got them hooked on language and culture. I didn't know what I was doing. There was no roadmap. I was making it up as I went along.

"Don't get ready. Get started. Let's do this. Be humble enough to be up front with our students to say, 'This might not be perfect. This probably won't be perfect. We're going to make it better together.'"

Does having everything planned perfectly make us feel safe? When we think we're playing it safe, are we not as safe as we think we are?

For someone who says, "I'm getting fired if I try that," that's a real, valid concern. The ways they seek out audacious things to get started are within the confines of the structure of where they live and work.

In an abstract sense, it can be very unsafe to play it safe. We're not talking about ourselves … we're really talking about young people and their future. If we're not doing things to help them become free-thinking, critical-thinking adults, if we're not doing things to help them compete for jobs that aren't being automated and outsourced, we can play it safe with a worksheet. But jobs with info that can be Googled are not high-paying jobs. By playing it safe, we're creating a huge danger for our young people's futures.

Sometimes, by playing it safe and trying to cover everything, we end up covering nothing … if it's too bland, students can snooze their way through class as if nothing's ever happened. We've covered it, but they haven't learned it.

If you don't feel in a safe place to take risks, manage that.

Noah started to notice that cell phones could be used in the classroom and that it gave him a 1:1 environment. Instead of just jumping in and using them, he asked his principal to come by and see something he wanted to try. He asked for permission instead of forgiveness (instead of the other way around!). The principal loved it and asked him to present on it to his colleagues.

An idea to try: a student-authored review … students don't review, but students create the study guide for the class. If they write any really good questions, he'll swap them out on the real test. The test ends up more rigorous and robust.

"Just ship it." It's not perfect, but we've got to get it out.

When Noah learned about memes, he realized that all of his students were using them. There were only a few words, so they were accessible to all of his Spanish students. He started doing them on Tuesdays, and he put them on a website (a Tumblr page) where he could share them with others and other people could share them. Then, it morphed into using pop culture to teach Spanish. It turned into something he didn't expect, but it wouldn't have become all of that "had I not just shipped it." The website had more than 1 million hits, and it all happened because he gave something a shot.

Design Thinking: something that's very popular in education and in other industries. People find that they can get their ideas out there, validate their assumptions and iterate -- take the pipe cleaners, Play Doh and duct tape -- and get feedback. Then get feedback again. Have a continuous improvement mindset. You know that it's OK if your first draft "looks Frankenstein-esque" because you know it's going to get to someplace where it changes the world … or you find that it needs to be thrown away. But you didn't spend a million hours on it.

Why are we so afraid of trying things?

One reason: fear of being judged, and having that judgment that you're wrong.

There's a willingness to be vulnerable. It's like The Voice and American Idol. You know they're not going to make it to the finale, but Noah respects and values people who will try … they'll never know if they're going to make it unless they try!

You probably have a lot more crash and burns than you do winning the race and crossing the goal line, taking pictures and raising trophies. There's a lot more crash and burn, and I don't think you get to the finish line without the crash and burn.

What do you think are some things people can do if they feel like they have spent too much time getting ready and not enough getting started?

- Create a calendar reminder for the next week to have your first step completed. Invite some people to that calendar reminder … even if it's just so someone keeps you accountable.
- Give yourself permission to be audacious while starting small.
- Seek out an expert for your classroom. If you're reading a text, see if the author -- or an artist, or some expert -- will join your class via a Skype call or a TodaysMeet backchannel. If you read an article by a reporter, have students annotate it with hypothes.is and invite the reporter to join.
- Nominate yourself for something. Find a local union or teacher association. Apply for a grant for your classroom … you could use DonorsChoose.org.
- Be someone's champion. (via Shelly Sanchez Terrell)
- Pitch your principal on a new idea. If you've seen something at your school and thought, "There's got to be a better way," … instead of having that internal thought or talking to someone, what if you pitch it at a staff meeting or to a leader instead? Even if it isn't perfect and thought out yet, just get it out there. There's incredible power in getting an idea out there and working it through as a group. "The smartest person in the room is the room."
- Via Eric Johnson @yourkidsteacher -- He pitches ideas to the local newspaper about what his students are doing in the classroom.
- Get out of your element of professional development and attend a startup weekend. Meet entrepreneurs and find out about their startup business ideas. It connects you with a world your students might meet.
- Observe at a different school, content area or grade level where you don't teach. Going to a kindergarten classroom changed Noah's life as a teacher!
- Go on a real-world field trip (an "ed-venture"!). You can say, "In the real world …" and students will believe whatever you tell them next! Be sure you know the answer. "The real world is moving so fast right now. There's impetus to get out and experience it." Find a tech start-up or an 80-year-old health management company. Ask for a tour. Ask what they're looking for in employees. Then, take it back to your classroom.

"Sometimes, the difference between getting ready and getting started is inspiration."

It starts with giving yourself permission. You don't need someone to tell you. Go for it.

Give yourself some accountability. (Calendar reminder, etc.) Protect yourself against your own hesitancy.

Be willing to be humble and vulnerable. It's just like teaching … now that you've been doing it for a while, you've improved a lot! Your idea to change the world is the same way.