

Excerpts from interview with Jolie Ankrom,
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I'm a young teacher, only in my second year of teaching. I don't think I would be a successful student-centered teacher if I weren't trained in it. There's a formal program in Michigan that first year teachers go through. It's called Entry Year Teachers (EYT), though every school's entry program looks different. Ours was led by two DECA teachers through the University Park Campus School, a charter school [at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts] that has developed [for the Early College High School Initiative] a framework for student-centered teaching methods called the Common Instructional Frameworks.

The two DECA teachers taught all of our entry teachers the Frameworks and how to implement them. They not only taught us what they were, but they modeled them for us and they co-taught with us for pretty much the entire first year. It wasn't an everyday thing, but every couple of weeks we would meet and brainstorm a lesson that we were working on and ask, "How can we integrate the Frameworks? How can we use them?"

The Common Instructional Frameworks, there's six of them. Some are themes that every teacher should know, like scaffolding: how to integrate older material with newer material, how to help kids to connect the material. But others of them are specifically geared towards student-centered learning, like collaborative group work. Most teachers know what that means, but not how to apply it. We learned specific activities to integrate collaborative work with the kids and then practiced them.

In the end, all of the Common Instructional Frameworks are centered around having the students being pretty much the leaders and the teachers the facilitator. "What does student-centered learning look like?" I'd say it looks like me doing a lot more planning, in the background, but at the actual implementation of the lesson, you'll see me floating around, observing, listening to see whether kids were getting what I wanted them to get, watching to see if they on task or off task. As a first year teacher, you can be so focused on yourself and your planning and being the center of attention and lecturing that you don't *see* the students. It was freeing, once I'd done the background planning for an activity, to see the students run with it—and *collaborate*.

You quickly learn as a new teacher that with collaborative group work, you can't just throw a group of four kids together and say, "Okay! Everybody do this worksheet together and figure it out." You have to plan. "How am I going to differentiate it? How are the groups going to be laid out? Is it going to be everybody at the same level in one group, or am I going to vary the levels of understanding? And how am I going to hold all of them accountable to the same standard if one kid is, you know, miles behind the rest of them in understanding?"

So things like establishing roles, that's an extra bit of planning beforehand, but it's much more rewarding to do that, because it helps the kids work together much more smoothly. I just did a recent activity where the kids broke into teams and each read a different article about the Spanish conquest of Mexico. I created a role for each student on a team, so that they all read the same article, but the role that they were viewing it from was different. And what was nice about that was they think it's just kind of, "Oh, you have this role, this role, this role." But I can easily pick out the person that is going to be the best discussion leader because they have a higher level of understanding. They can create discussion questions. So I just, you know, pass that student that role, "Oh! Looks like you're the

discussion leader.” And then somebody that’s lower level, I can say, “You’re the summarizer. Just tell us what happened in the article.” It lets every student feel important at something, but it also engages them at the level they are at.

So, I would say as far as my needs, the biggest thing has been training and modeling and co-teaching. And as far as what student-centered learning looks like, it often looks chaotic when you come in the room. You have to get used to letting the kids do their thing and not, you know, constantly fighting for control: “Everybody in your seat! Everybody quiet . . . working on something.” That’s been tricky for me because I’m a pretty controlling person, so it was hard for me at first to let go of the reins. But again, with the training that I received, I learned a lot of little things that were important, that there are ways to control the chaos. For example, explaining the purpose and the expectations of the activity to the class before you start often times keeps things in line. They know from the beginning, “Well, we were told we have this many minutes to do it, so we have to stay on task or else we won’t be done.”

A big plus was that they actually taught us the frameworks by *using* the frameworks. So if we were learning how to do a literacy group, they had us become our own literacy group. We played it out in real time. We could see the logistics and what’s tricky and what we needed to tweak. I chuckle when I think about my college courses where the lecturer would read through a PowerPoint and say things like, “You have to engage your students! You have to have them apply what they’re learning!” I’m thinking, “It’s funny that he’s saying that, because we’re not doing any of that. He is not engaging us and we’re not doing anything to apply the learning!”

As to learning how to be an adviser, I’m not sure that there is such a thing as advance training. It is a complex dance, one you have to simply feel your way around. Advising is a whole different set of skills, often like parenting, which is a stretch for me because I’m 23.

The advisory structure itself is tricky. It’s essentially a study hall, but also much more than that. We have the kids every day for 40 minutes. They come in. Every teacher’s advisory might look a little different. They usually have a set place to sit, and what’s difficult about it is that they are permitted to work on homework during advisory and many students consider that their right. “If I have homework, you can’t tell me I need to work on something else.” But advisories are also the place where students prepare for their gateways. So not only am I overseeing a study hall, but I’m also responsible for making sure that my students are getting through the gateway process in a timely manner. It can become a battle at times of, you know, “You can’t tell me I can’t do my homework and I have to work on gateway work. I have to do this homework today.” And there are students in my advisory that I don’t have as students. They don’t want to come in here and have some person that they don’t even have as a teacher telling them, “Sit down. You need to be working on this.”

It takes time to form a relationship with your advisees, where they respect you and will listen to you. It’s also difficult because advisory is the time where kids get their errands done. While my advisees run and make up a quiz for so-and-so’s class, I have Spanish students that come to me, asking me for make up work or with questions on an assignment. So it becomes this incredibly chaotic 40 minutes of time, where I’ve got three students talking when they should be working on homework. I’ve got two who have papers that they’d like me to edit because they’re ready to do their gateway, but they need me to look over them. I have five students who need their tardy homework assignment from last week in Spanish. And I have three students who need to go run an errand and I have to sign their pass.

So it is very different from teaching. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve called my mother at the end of the day, “Mom, I just want you to know that I completely feel indebted to you for all of the things

you've done for me. And I never said, "Thank you" to you." We're so close at this school that the kids kind of do treat us as parents and as family, there's things that they expect of me that they don't realize that I'm doing out of the goodness of my heart and on my spare time. But, that comes with the position. They try to warn you in your interview, "This is not a normal job. You're going to be spending a lot of your time doing things that normal teachers don't do."

Different teachers have different kind of styles. Some teachers are so loving that they will be here until 8 o'clock helping a kid who waited until the last minute. That is not my style. I tell my advisees I am not going to enable an attitude where you can wait until the last minute and I will pull through for you because I am, you know, your teacher that stays here until 8 pm. I do things for them, but I also let them feel the consequences of their decisions.

Since this is such a small school, I *am* the Spanish department. In content meetings, I don't really have anyone to collaborate with. Most of what I get is through informal exchange, like sending another teacher an email saying, "Hey, I have this thing I want to cover, but I'm not really sure how to go about it. Do you have any ideas, you know, you can bounce off of me?" Some of my closer teachers, I'm in their classrooms a lot. I'll see them doing something and say, "Hey, I've never seen that before. How do you play that game?" Or, "How did you come up with that?"

We wrestle a lot with what should go in the gateways. Some of the things that we have the kids do are simply because we want them to be college ready and we want them to have the best college application that they can have. So things like having students complete 100 community service hours while they're at our school. You know, that's something that will, of course, help their application look good, but will also give them a sense of, "It's important to give back to your community and it's important to find ways that you can do something that's benefiting others and giving of myself." Then there's the academic proficiency levels. It's so hard to know where to set them, when we have so many kids that come into the ninth grade at fourth, fifth, sixth grade reading levels. We don't want to give them a watered-down curriculum or lower standards, but we don't want them to give up, either. And the book reflections and analyses. We require so much writing here, in class and for the gateways. I can't think of a better preparation for college. But the students say it's tedious. Finally, there are the self-discernment goals. I think a lot of kids b-s their way through it, you know, "My goal is to not procrastinate." But at the end of the day, even if their goals are superficial, I think we're at least teaching them to recognize, to self-evaluate, and to think about their thinking and think about their personal character. Yes, it is tedious. At times I think there's things that probably are a little too tedious, but then we constantly are reflecting and revising what we require of kids.

One of the things I value most about this school is that it's a constant revision and a constant reflection on what we're doing and everybody has a say in what's going on. As a first year teacher last year in the staff meetings, I felt completely comfortable to raise my hand and say, "You know, I think with this gateway you could change it to this and it would be much less time consuming and much more effective for the kids." I knew that my voice would be heard.

You really have to care about people to be in a job like this. I think the biggest satisfaction is the long-term effects. I haven't been here long enough to see someone go from a freshman to a senior, but when I see freshmen I had when I came here two years ago, it is just incredible to see how much more they're capable of now and how much they've grown and how much more professional they've become from the practice of presenting. The growth here is incredible, and that makes it worth every minute.