

LEARN! ADVOCATE!

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As a high school student in the early 1970s, I marched against the Vietnam War and picketed a supermarket that was selling non-union grapes. In college, I worked on my first election campaign, knocking on doors and attempting to influence people to think about issues a little differently. Later, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Africa. With the optimism and idealism of youth, I was determined to make the world a better place.

Teaching ELL in the public schools was a logical career choice. While enjoying decent pay and summer vacations, I could honestly say I was doing important work.

Over the years, I've been lucky to have had friends, colleagues, and professors who have pushed me towards more reflective teaching and informed action. As summarized below, here are the rules that guide my teaching.

1. **Learn as much as you can about your students.** Reading about their culture, religion, and what brought them here is a start, but it is important to be aware that generalizations and preconceived notions can limit. Observe. Ask questions. Don't make assumptions that how you teach makes sense to them, or that unfamiliar behavior is a calculated assault on propriety. Long ago I thought that students did not know my name when they addressed me as "Miss" or "Teacher". Now I know that for many students it would be strange, or even rude, to call me by name.
2. **Think about what is actually important to teach them.** Am I teaching knowledge or skills? Am I teaching assimilation, or the ability to cope and decide? As I design my curriculum, I consider each of these questions. I want students to see the United States as a wonderful country that has welcomed the huddled masses, and also as a deeply flawed one, that nearly exterminated the indigenous peoples of the continent. I explain that knowing the culture, the history and the language of power will give them the most options in defining their own lives.
3. **Advocate. Always.** Talk to colleagues about effective teaching techniques, Share what you know about the students. A teacher who realizes that algebra might be a student's first ever math class will show more compassion. Talk to administrators. Talk to everyone, and don't let misinformation, stereotypes, and bigotry fester. For example, I have explained to administrators and to colleagues that it is illegal to demand proof of legal residency to attend a public school. Campaign for politicians who are education-friendly, and communicate with those already in office. And don't forget an occasional rally at the state capitol can send an important message.
4. **Teach the students to advocate for themselves.** Encourage students to speak up for their needs, whether it is extra time for a test, labels for pork products in the cafeteria, or the DREAM Act. Study topics that will illuminate and inspire. In one class, we read about Cesar Chavez, and also how some St Paul high school students in the 1970s spent months working to convince the district to stop buying non-union lettuce.
5. **Get out of your comfort zone.** Like many ELL teachers, my most formative professional experience was teaching overseas. I was a minority, and at times lost, confused and frustrated. The experience gives me empathy and insight into the lives of my students, and deepens my connection with them.

If I am to work on my original goal - to make the world a better place - the classroom is a natural place to start. And if I am to make my classroom a better place, I need to make the world a better place for my students.