

TEACHING PRACTICES THAT TESTIFY(louder than words!)

Section 1: Your Classroom

Fruit: Giving Hope for Today & Tomorrow

Working in a public school, it can feel difficult or even impossible to share the Gospel but implementing the Bible-based teaching practices shared in this resource will surely testify even louder than words!

ANDREA N. LEMON, ED.D

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Fruit: Giving Hope for Today & Tomorrow

Teaching Practices that Testify (louder than words): Planning that Gives Students Hope

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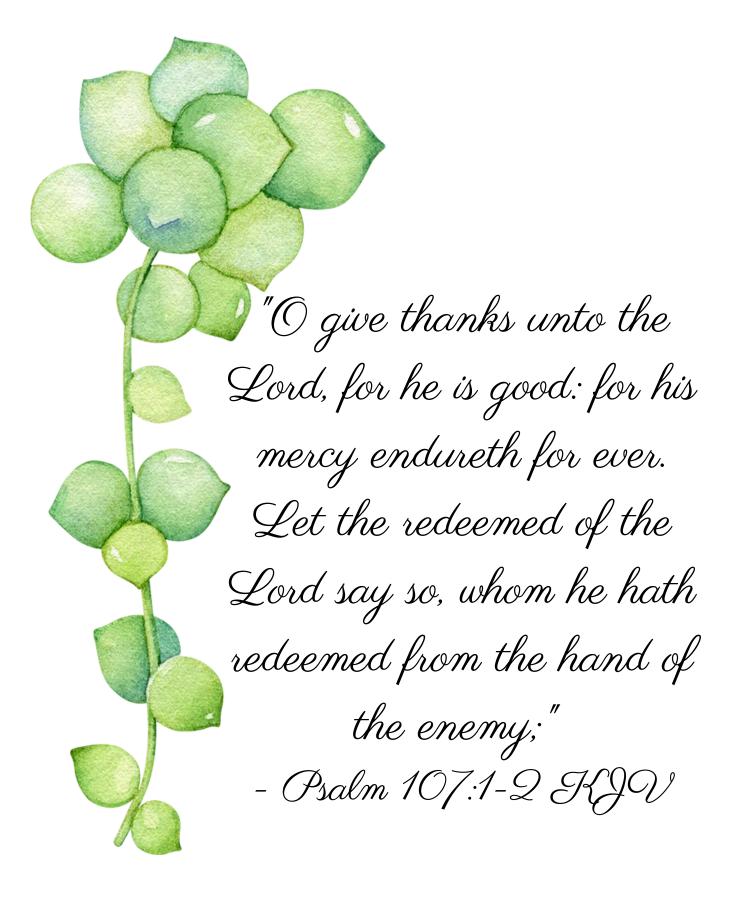
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Andrea Lemon, Ed.D.

First and foremost a follower of Jesus Christ, Dr. Andrea Lemon is also a wife, mother, ministry leader, life-long learner, and champion of educators. Dr. Lemon taught English for twelve years before transitioning to state-level leadership for six years as a coordinator at the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). Collaborating on numerous public school improvement initiatives led to the realization that what students and educators needed more than anything, was more of Jesus. In 2022, God's calling to teach took a new direction - designing and delivering Bible-based professional learning for educators and writing devotions and encouragement with the intent of equipping others to walk more closely with Jesus. In addition to working with educators, Andrea serves as a children's ministry leader for her local church and as a member of the praise team and director of the children's seasonal musical programs.



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SERIES INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. - Matthew 28:19-20 (CSB)

On a mountain in Galilee, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave the Great Commission to His disciples. Though these words were spoken to only eleven on that mountain, as followers of Christ, the Great Commission applies to us too. After all, you and I are the product of those first disciples making disciples who in turn made more disciples.

To ensure we can follow Christ's direction to make disciples, God equips each of His Sons and Daughters with the personality, talents, skills, and spiritual gifts specific to the Kingdom building tasks He has in mind for them to complete. While it is the charge of all Christians to be a disciple of Christ and to disciple others, God calls and gifts some of His sons and daughters specifically to become teachers, giving them a thirst for knowledge and a passion for helping others grow.

You, dear Christian educator, are one of those sons or daughters. You've opened this resource because you have a thirst for knowledge, a desire to grow in your craft as an educator and in your ability to nurture the growth of your students not only academically, but most importantly, spiritually.

You recognize that the most important thing you can teach them is how to experience the joy and peace of walking with God. You have this same desire for your students' families as well as for your colleagues and your overall community.

You wouldn't be a teacher if you didn't want to see others succeed, and what better measure of success is there than victory in Jesus!



Just as Jesus directed His disciples to go into Judea, Samaria, and then out into all the world, your mission field starts within the four walls of your classroom and then expands outward to your school and to the overall community you serve. As a fellow educator with 12 years of experience teaching middle school and 6 years of experience in state education leadership, I know as well as you do that you may be the only witness of Jesus Christ that some of your students, families, or colleagues will ever know. I also know the uncertainty you may feel about verbally sharing the Gospel of Christ in your publicly funded profession and the concern you may have about negative professional consequences that could come as a result of doing so.

In truth, the further into my career and the higher in administration I rose, the more frequently I thought to myself, "More than a new reading program or higher test scores, what this school and these students and teachers really need is Jesus!", and the more aware I became of the professional censure I could face as a government employee if I said that out loud.

Now, let me be really clear on a point that we explored more deeply in the first installment of this resource: If you have received confirmation from the Holy Spirit that you are to work in public education, then God absolutely can and will make sure that you are secure in the position that He has set aside for you. He will guide you in how and when and to whom to verbally testify of His loving kindness and will safeguard your career as you do.

In full transparency, I could not have said that so boldly to you in 2022. At that time, I truly did not see a way to keep my position and openly proclaim that knowing and following Jesus was more important for teachers and students than any initiative coming out of the state department could ever be. I suffered from the sin of unbelief in that area, a sin that gave me great anxiety, gluing my mouth shut, tying my stomach in knots, and creating a sense of frustration in the projects I was assigned and those that I designed for myself.

BUT GOD - two words I really love to see together - God took mercy on me in my unbelief and in His grace and infinite patience, He invited me to leave a full-time career in public education and then spent an entire year growing me up in His Word, drawing me closer to Himself, and giving me experiences that increased my trust in Him and my ability to act from a place of faith instead of a place of fear.

So dear friend, if you're struggling to see how you can follow Christ's command to disciple others and keep your position or keep advancing in your career, know that you are not alone. Take heart in the fact that God loves us even in our unbelief, and He is kind to teach us how to walk in His way at a pace specific to our current level of faith-fitness.



Speaking of our faith-fitness, let's dig into God's Word for a moment and consider some aspects of our spiritual health and our ability to testify to and disciple others:

In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus shared that many people may say they know God or are prophets of God, but that their heart is shown through the fruit their life produces. Throughout the Word of God we see an emphasis on bearing fruit.

In Galatians 5:22-24, we read about the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruit of the Spirit is often described by Bible scholars as a fruit basket, with the term "fruit" being collective rather than individual.

So, acquiring the fruit of the Spirit is not like moving through the lunch line when we were kids and a simple "No thank you" would keep that dreaded canned spinach off our trays. No, my friend, God serves up the fruit of the Spirit modern federal guideline style – you get it all on your tray like it or not, and when you get back to your seat, you can engage with it or toss it in the trash when you think God isn't looking.

Spoiler alert: We may struggle to keep eyes on 300+ students in the cafeteria, but God sees all of His creation, all of the time. Trust me, He knows when we pick through the fruit of the Spirit and choose to leave one or more of them on the "leftovers" table when the bell rings.

Through obedience to God's Word, we also develop other types of fruit such as the fruit of allowing Jesus to have Lordship of our finances (faithful tithing, giving to the less fortunate – even when your paycheck looks less than fortunate) or the fruit of a ministry (salvations, baptisms, closer walks with God).

In John 15:1-8, Jesus presents Himself as the vine and His Father as the vinedresser. Brothers and Sisters, the Vinedresser doesn't simply demand that we bear fruit; He facilitates it, taking away the attitudes and actions that do not bear good fruit and pruning and shaping attitudes and actions that produce fruit so that we can be even more fruitful.

Our Savior ends the analogy by stating that, "My Father is glorified by this, that you produce much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

How do we make our teaching practices testify louder than words?

Reflecting on the mercy and grace and patience that God has shown me, I have come to the conclusion that God has a two-fold plan for this resource and future installments of it:

ONE: To support educators who feel anxious about verbally sharing Jesus Christ with teaching practices that testify so they can fulfill the Great Commission at their current level of faith as God grows them into greater faith.

AND

TWO: To support educators who are already comfortable verbally sharing Jesus Christ with teaching practices that testify so their actions are able to speak even louder than their words.

Brothers and Sisters, as the day of Christ's return draws nearer, it is increasingly imperative that the teaching practices of Christian educators in public education serve as undeniable proof of the transformative, life-giving power of Jesus Christ.

It is my heart-felt prayer that through these truth- and grace-filled pages, you will be inspired and equipped to root your daily professional practice in the vine of Christ and in doing so bear the good fruit of increased student achievement, a nurturing learning environment, and relationships that open doors for you to share the Gospel of Christ with your students and their families as well as with your colleagues and greater community.

Before you jump into this journey with me, please allow me to speak this blessing over you, your practice, and your mission field.

May this day and each day find your heart open to the tending and pruning of the Vinedresser. May the gentle hands of the Lord reveal to you the roots of worldly teaching practice that need dug up and tossed away. May He plant new seeds of Christ-like practice in the garden of your heart and bless them richly with living water and the light of truth. May you reach always toward growth in Jesus Christ, allowing the Vinedresser to prune and prop each area of your practice to bring forth the most fruit. May your students, colleagues, and community benefit richly in this life and in all eternity because you have chosen to be a fruitful educator.

May this day and each day find your heart open to the tending and pruning of the Vinedresser.

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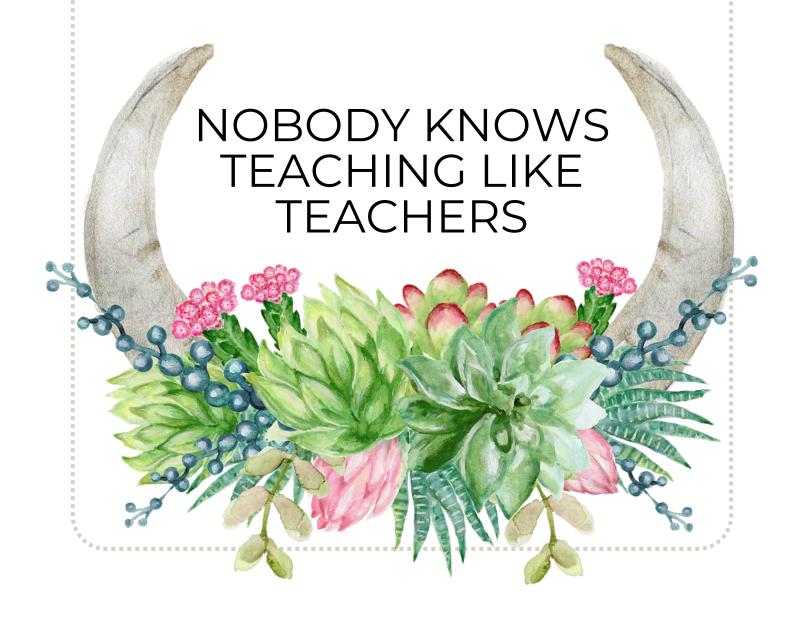
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This is what the Lord, your Redeemer,
the Holy One of Israel says:
I am the Lord your God,
who teaches you for your benefit,
who leads you in the way you should go.

- Isaiah 48:17



NOBODY KNOWS TEACHING LIKE TEACHERS

Several years ago I heard a speaker at a professional convening make the following statement, and it has stuck with me ever since:

Nobody knows teaching like teachers.

It became a catch phrase for the convening, and I've seen it reiterated across educational websites and platforms ever since. I've used it myself in the opening moments of almost every professional learning session I've conducted over the past seven or eight years.

If you're familiar with the phrase, "that's the mountain I'll die on" and it's counter, "that's not a mountain I'm willing to die on", then you know, there aren't a lot of mountains on which most of us are willing to die.

But that statement, well that's a mountain on which I'll stake my professional life:

Nobody knows teaching like teachers.

And the research agrees - teacher effectiveness is the greatest determining factor in student achievement within the school*. Teacher effectiveness matters more than the size of the school's budget, more than the leadership style of the building administrator, more than the quality of instructional materials, and more than access to the most cutting edge technologies.

From bell to bell, you, friend, are the greatest determining factor in your students' achievement.

Yes, outside school factors play a role too, but those are often beyond our control and therefore, something we surrender to God's control. Remember the key element in maintaining peace that I shared in *Creating a Peace-filled Classroom*? That's right, embrace the fact that you can only be accountable for your part in a student's life while he/she is in your presence and then trust that God is always present in their lives, even when you are not.

Outside factors are also very difficult to measure; based on achievement data, we know that factors like family structure, finance, and healthcare create barriers or advantages to student success, but they rarely to never create absolutes.

After all, based on family income and the age I became a parent, I shouldn't have a doctorate in education or any of the career opportunities God has given me.

What's an absolute?

Teacher effectiveness significantly impacts student achievement.

- Highly effective teachers are linked to greater student achievement.
- Ineffective teachers are linked to lower student achievement.

So, what makes a teacher effective?

If we rely solely on research, we can see that effective teachers use best practice, supported by proven strategies, and we can find entire databases on what has the greatest potential to accelerate student achievement and what has little potential or even negative potential*. Effective teachers dedicate their professional lives to the pursuit of continual improvement and refinement of their teaching practice. They stand on what's proven to work, open to exploring different methods and technologies, but are not moved by the swinging pendulum of educational policy, leadership changes, or trending programs.

Nobody knows teaching like teachers.

And, friend, I had some highly effective teachers as a young person, and I've met and worked alongside some amazing teachers over the years. God has placed me where I've held conversations with, been trained by, and sat in rooms where some of the most acclaimed researchers and authors of professional resources were speaking. As wonderful and brilliant and informed as all of them are or were, there is one Teacher who knows far more about teaching than any other teacher or researcher ever could.

It's strong professional practice to dig into research, to study and apply strategies and methods that have been proven by man to be effective.

But, Christian, it's a far stronger life practice to dig into God's word, to study and apply the teaching strategies and methods that God has proven to be effective. If you do, I believe you'll discover what I have discovered, that man's research simply validates what God has already shown us is effective through His interactions with us and through His Son Jesus Christ.

This is what the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel says:

I am the Lord your God,

who teaches you for your benefit,

who leads you in the way you should go.

- Isaiah 48:17

Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of life."
- John 6:68

Nobody knows teaching like teachers, and nobody has the potential to know highly effective teaching like those who follow the perfect Teacher.

Highly effective teaching occurs when dedication and study are boosted by spiritual giftedness and the bearing of spiritual fruit.

God tells us in His word that He builds up the body of Christ by appointing some of His sons and daughters specifically to teach and gifts them accordingly (Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:6-8).

For those appointed by the One Most High, teaching is not just a career, it's a way of life. If you're like me, your teacher-hat never comes off. You likely teach at church. You probably coach a team or sponsor a club. You are compelled to teach store clerks how to accurately apply a discount even when their error gives you a better deal. You regale your non-teaching family members with stories of how you applied a newly learned strategy and it worked for half the class, but you desire to reach every student, so you're continuing to study. You're asked to help write something and you spend five minutes teaching everyone nearby how to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition (Surely that's not just me?).

For those appointed to teach by the One Most High, teaching is the last thing that the enemy of your soul wants you to be effective at doing. That snake in the grass knows the eternal impact you can have on the lives of those you teach, and if he can divert you to a position that doesn't have you teaching, he will.

How many times has someone told you that you could make more money or have better benefits doing something else with your knowledge, gifts, and talents? How much more tempting have those offers become in recent years?

Goodness, I've been tempted to step away from teaching so many times. A few times it's been a really obvious diversion like one offer to be a full-time grant writer for a health-related company. Most times though, it's more subtle, like becoming an administrator or a curriculum writer - still in the field, still incredibly important, but teaching-adjacent more so than actively teaching.

If the enemy can't divert you from using the gift God has given you to increase the Kingdom, then he'll distract or discourage you to make you less effective.

Those days when you feel like none of your students are listening...

The parent throwing shade your way on social media because lil' Johnny has never misbehaved at home or has never made a bad grade before... 2

Those times you're mandated to use a new silver bullet for student success that fails to deliver even though you used it with "fidelity" (tell me you cringed with me on that word)...

The learning standards and standardized achievement test that change every three to five years...and then new instructional resources that come right after...

It's so easy to become flustered by student or parent behavior or by administrator or policy-maker decisions. It's so easy to feel like everyone is telling you how to do your job better but no one is listening to what you need so you can actually do your job well. It's so easy to forget who your real enemy is.

It's not rowdy students or parents who handle conflict immaturely. It's not administrators or policy-makers; truly, they're dealing with distraction and discouragement as best as they know how also. Your real enemy is the father of lies, and oh Christian, the things he's tricked us into believing over the years.

The lies and half-truths we've fallen for as teachers are numerous and several are explored throughout the barren branches of practice in this resource series, but there's one big, fat lie that we, in American education at least, have swallowed hook, line, and sinker: "We need to put God back in our schools."

I know, you're probably scratching your head right now because you know that I know that we need God in our schools more than anything; I wouldn't be writing this series if I didn't believe God was the answer to our school and social issues.

So, why do I believe that statement is a lie?

Because in all truth, God has never been taken out of our schools.

Read that again. God has never been taken out of our schools.

How can I say that, given the numerous laws and policies about separation of church and state? The censure Christian educators and coaches have endured?

Because Jesus said this:

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." - Matthew 18:20

If there are two Christians anywhere in a school, God is with them.

What if you're pretty sure you're the only Christian in your school?

"Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?"
- 1 Corinthians 3:16

God has never been taken out of school because God is wherever His people are.

Every believer who crosses the threshold brings God to school with them.

Why does the enemy want us to believe that God needs *put back* in schools?

Because if we believe God needs put back, then we'll believe that someone or something can take Him out. We'll give power to the enemy that he does not possess. We'll teach from a standpoint that we are alone, that God is not present with us because He's somehow blocked at the doorway by man's law or policy. We'll forget who and Whose we are in Christ Jesus and for eight hours a day, we'll detach from the vine of Christ and rely solely on man's pedagogy and philosophy.

It's time to stop saying we need to put God back in schools and start declaring that He's never left our schools.

Nobody knows teaching like teachers.

And you, my dear Christian colleague, have been appointed to teach by the greatest Teacher this world will ever know. God knows that you can be a highly effective teacher because God knows teaching. You are His temple, filled with His Spirit, attached directly to the vine of Christ; you are equipped and gifted to teach, empowered by the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the grave.

Let me speak this truth over you:

Your presence in the classroom has the power to be more impactful than what your students face outside of your classroom because your presence brings the Spirit of God into the room.

Your instruction has the power to be more effective than any canned or scripted curriculum because your instruction is empowered by the One True God.

Your feedback has the power to bear more good fruit than any computerized program or artificial intelligence can because your feedback is supplied by the vine of Christ.

Remember who you are and Whose you are.

Remember Who appointed you to this place and time to be a teacher.

You have the greatest school-based impact on your students' achievement.

The enemy doesn't know teaching because nobody knows teaching like teachers and he's never taught anyone anything; his only craft is deception.

Don't let the enemy divert, distract, or discourage you.

Don't let the enemy convince you that you have to leave God at the door.

You have the Spirit of the Living God within you.

The Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel knows teaching and will teach you for your benefit and the benefit of your students and their families.

Nobody knows teaching like teachers.

Study the Master Teacher and stand firm on practices that reflect God's teaching.

Advance what brings hope and a future for your students.

Abandon all that does not.

WE CAN ONLY GIVE AS MUCH AS WE HAVE



Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over —will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

Luke 6:38

Precious Colleague in Christ, I would be remiss if I started discussing teaching practices that give our students hope without first addressing our own need for hope as educators.

After all, we can only give as much hope as we have - or - as I almost titled this section, "we can't give what we don't have".

Let's face it, teaching is not for the faint of heart. Teaching requires courage and gentleness and patience and forgiveness and wisdom and all the things that Holy Spirit can give us - and that's just to get through 1st period. Am I right?

But what about getting out of bed in the morning day in and day out?

What does that require?

It requires hope.

Hope that what you do every day matters.

- Even when the test scores don't go up but behavior referrals sure do.
- Even when parents complain about the way you teach or what you teach.
- Even when students say your class is "dumb" or "too hard".
- Even when administrators dismiss your professional expertise on what's best for students (because another computer program is going to fix everything).
- Even when politicians pass education bills that they don't fund properly or really seem to understand in the first place (yeah, I said what I said).

And that just scrapes the surface of what seeks to diminish our hope as teachers.

It's why we see so many bright, energetic young people join our ranks only to make a quick exit three to five years later.

It's why we all avoid that one colleague in the lunchroom; you know, the very draining person (VDP as my pastor says) who never has anything good to say about anything or anyone, but manages to monopolize every meeting somehow.

Hope. It's so absolutely vital to our profession.

After all, why teach if we don't expect our efforts to bear fruit?

We know it's not for the big paychecks (oh, I'm feeling cheeky in this resource!).

We teach because we have hope - an expectation - that what we do improves our students' lives right now and builds a foundation for them to have a prosperous future.

We hope - we expect - that putting forth our best effort to teach our students will result in their best effort to keep society going when we retire.

ROOM TO REFLECT

What are your "hope-fors" for your students? What fruit do you hope to see in their lives as a result of being your student?

How confident is your expectation that what you do each day will help your students attain what you hope for them or bear the fruit you would
like to see as a result of your efforts?
<u>_</u>

If you joined me for the first resource in this series *Creating a Peace-filled Place*, then you know how desperately our students need peace, and friend, I don't have to tell you that our students are in just as much need of hope.

And we can only give them as much hope as we have ourselves.

So, how do we renew our hope if, or, it's more accurate to say, when, we feel it slipping away? How do we maintain our hope in the face of such trying times in our field?

First, we have to ensure that our hope is rooted in the right Source.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Romans 15:13

Now, Lord, what do I wait for?

My hope is in you.

- Psalm 39:7



We can follow every academic, behavioral, social-emotional program known to man with complete fidelity, and it will still fail us in some way.

We can follow the most accomplished, award-winning administrator with absolute faithfulness, and he/she will fail us in some way.

We can take every course, earn every degree, certify in every area of expertise, and we will fail someone in some way.

Truly, friends, there is only One who will never fail us or forsake us, who is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore (Isaiah 46:10; Malachi 3:6).

If we are looking to anything or anyone other than Almighty God to give us the means and the methods to love and teach our students, we will be disappointed quickly and often.

That's not to say programs and curriculum and experts and administrators aren't wonderful resources. Yikes! I'd be out of an income as an educational consultant and professional developer if that were true.

But, it's important to remember: resources are not a replacement for The Source.

Then, we have to make sure that we stay connected to the Source of hope.

Anyone who believes teaching is a 7:30 am to 3:30 pm profession, or even a Monday to Friday or August to May profession, clearly hasn't been in the classroom very long (or at least not the typical American classroom).

Teaching requires more than 40 hours a week to do well; we're planning and prepping and assessing and developing professionally and contacting parents and attending student support meetings and so much more.

And that's on top of caring for our personal children or parents (depending on your season of life), volunteering at church or in the community, squeezing in time to exercise or attempting to have a social life (I know, what's a social life? Taking tickets at ballgames counts as a social life, right?)...

Friend, it's really easy to pack our calendars so full of activity - good, wholesome, God-honoring activity - that we neglect to spend time with God Himself.

When our connection to the Source of hope becomes loose, it's not long before we start losing hope.

Jesus shared that:

I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me.

- John 15:5

If we want to give our students hope, we must stay attached to, abide in, the One who gives us hope.

Prioritize your personal relationship with the Lord.

Attending church is vital to staying attached to the vine, yes, but congregational or small group services are not a substitute for personal time with God.

Be in prayer every day. Be in God's Word every day.

Be in a posture of worship and praise every day.

Be in a consistent state of obedience to God's Word and Holy Spirit's leading.

There is no good, lasting fruit on any vine but the vine of Christ.

To maintain hope, we must cling more tightly to the vine of Christ than to anything else.

I wish that I could give you a five step plan or a tried-and-true formula for remaining on the vine, but we each of us have a personal relationship with God and that means we also have a personal way of praying, worshipping, studying His Word, and abiding in Him.

I just want to strongly encourage you to talk to God about developing and maintaining daily rhythms that work for you, that keep you connected to Him.

If you're feeling a little disconnected from the Source or in need of renewed hope lately, I've included some devotions at the end of this resource that I pray are helpful to you. You can also find more devotions on Psalm1072.com. I'd love to walk with you as we each seek to grow closer to God and bear more fruit for His Kingdom.

To prepare us to get into the meat - or rather fruit - of this resource, I'd like to share Luke 6:38 again:

Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

- Luke 6:38

My dear colleague, when our hope is in the Lord our God, the only One who is unfailing and unchanging, then we are able to give hope to our students, our colleagues, and our community (but those last two are for another resource down the road).

Our Savior has spoken it, so we can take it to the bank: when we give what hope we have, it will be given back to us, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

The teaching practices in this resource are tried and true, but the best way to give your students hope is to fill yourself up with the hope of salvation and freedom and provision and healing and so much more that only God provides.

For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

The more hope you have, the more you can give, and the more is returned to you, meaning the more you have to keep giving.

Connect to the Source of hope and stay connected as tightly as you can.



BEARING FRUIT: PRACTICES THAT GIVE STUDENTS HOPE



"For I know the plans I have for you"
—this is the Lord's declaration—
"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

Jeremiah 29:11 (CSB)

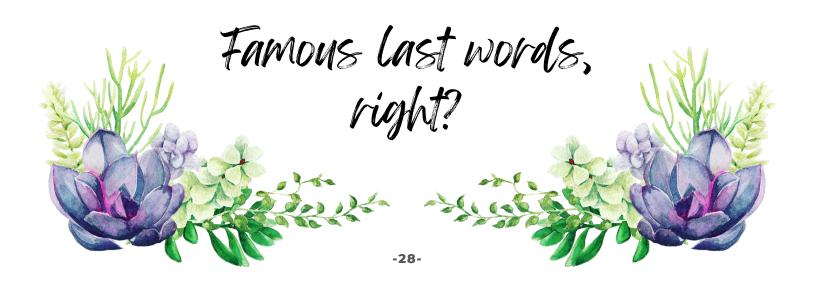
PLANNING FOR HOPE

8:15 am

The bell rang and the room began to fill with the boisterous sounds (and bold smells) of 8th grade boys and the more subtle sounds (though no less pungent perfumes) of 8th grade girls. This was it. The first day in my student teaching placement that I was providing instruction for the full 47 minute period. I'd spent hours planning the day's lesson on the college's prescribed (and lengthy!) lesson planning template. I'd studied the grade-level state standards and written a carefully worded learning objective on the board; I'd drawn on all the great researchers and theorists to design a lesson that I was sure would be engaging and increase student literacy achievement.

8:17 am

My 26 students were all seated and quietly completing the daily bell ringer routine while I took attendance and submitted it to the office. We went over the answers to the bell ringer orally. My students were attentive and everyone had the correct response recorded after a few minutes. Everything was going so well. My confidence as a new educator soared. This wasn't nearly as difficult as my professors and cooperating teacher had made it sound!



8:22 am

I read the learning objective aloud and launched the meat of the lesson an interactive storytelling activity involving a ball of yarn passed back and forth across the room to form a web as each student added to the story. The first few passes went well enough...but it wasn't long before the ball of varn began to be tossed haphazardly about the room with some students desperately attempting to be heard adding to the story while most talked amongst themselves and others worked covertly (and overtly!) to divert the yarn from its intended recipients. Every few tosses, two boys at the edge of the activity found a way to wrap another boy up in the increasingly messy web. Panic mounted in my mind as I realized there was definitely more engagement in tossing and tangling the yarn than in collaboratively building a story as stated in my learning objective. I attempted to redirect, to restate the directions, to use proximity control to help distracted (and distracting) students re-engage with the lesson appropriately. Nothing was working. How would they ever master the learning objective at this point? Truly, I was a failure as an educator. Maybe my guidance counselor was wrong about teaching being a stable profession. Switching majors to journalism at the eleventh hour was looking pretty good.

8:30 am

Flustered and defeated, I ended the activity - which took several tries due to the noise level in the room - regained possession of what was left of the ball of yarn and began cleaning up as students struggled through the web back to their seats. Fighting tears, praying no one tripped and fell, and avoiding what I was sure would be the disapproving gaze of my cooperating teacher, I assigned silent sustained reading for the next 10 minutes while I sought to regain my composure and salvage the learning objective for the day.

Oh, what a lesson I learned that morning! I could fill the remainder of this section with a play-by-play of my errors in planning for and executing that lesson, but the long and short of it is that the lesson became a disaster because I did not properly plan for students' well-being.

What do I mean by that?

Take a look at God's promise in Jeremiah 29:11 again:

"For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the Lord's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

Jeremiah 29:11 has always brought me such comfort. I may not know the full scope of God's plans, but I know from His word that the purpose of His plan is to bring goodness to my life and to your life. Because trusting in the promise of that good future gives me hope in the here and now, I am motivated more completely to follow wherever He leads me in the future.

The lesson I shared with you was a disaster because my plan was more focused on meeting standardized objectives than it was on developing my students' well-being. They struggled with the activity not because they were undisciplined or because they didn't have the skills to complete it. They struggled because they didn't see how the lesson was for their immediate good or how it would help them succeed in the future. Furthermore, given my inexperience as a student-teacher, they likely did not trust that following my plan would lead to greater satisfaction than what they could immediately experience tossing the ball of yarn around the room.

Reflecting truthfully, are we not also very much like my students, choosing at times the immediate satisfaction of distraction or entertainment over the work it usually takes to enjoy the long-term goodness that comes from following God's perfect plan?

Do we not sometimes struggle in a learning experience God has brought us to and lose hope in its purpose as a result? Are we not guilty of seeking to take control of activities when we feel we have a better plan than God does?

Ouch.

I can only answer for myself, but I can think of far too many times when I can answer "yes" to one or all of those questions. My dear teacher friend, I imagine if we were in the same building, this would be one of those times when we both lean out of our classroom doors, make eye contact, and just shake our heads and smile in joint recognition of how much we need Jesus every single day.

And that is why, knowing what we do about ourselves as learners under God's tutelage, we must consider how best to support our students by examining how God supports us.

As we dig into the teaching practices on the following pages, let's keep these questions in the front of our minds:

- How does God keep His children focused on His divine purpose for our lives?
- What does He do or say to help us see that His plans are for our well-being, to give us a future and a hope?
- How can we mirror His ways in our teaching practice to give our students hope that what we are teaching them truly is for their good now and in the future?





4 PRACTICES THAT PRODUCE HOPE

Setting a Relevant & Engaging Purpose

Providing Balanced Instruction

Leveraging Prior Knowledge

Giving Feedback that Nurtures Hope

SETTING A RELEVANT & ENGAGING PURPOSE

"Why do I need to know this?"

The one question sure to make our hearts soar or set our teeth on edge.

How can such a tiny question cause such diverse reactions?

Honestly, it all depends on how it's asked (or who asks it).

- "Why?", can be a sign of an inquisitive nature or interest in a topic.
- "Why?", can be a test of our position as experts or authority figures.
- "Why?", can be a stall tactic when content is new or appears challenging.

Whatever lies behind our students' "why", to be fruitful educators, we must remember that our response to their "why" seriously impacts the value our students place on what is being taught, and <u>how</u> we deliver our "why" greatly influences the teacher-learner relationship* we have with each student.

We'll dig into the connection between our response to "why" and the value students place on a lesson in a minute, but first, let's explore our most common reactions to "why" and how those reactions can influence the teacher-learner relationship.

If we're being honest with ourselves, our reaction to a student's "why" is often based on our confidence level teaching the content or skill(s) being addressed. When we are confident, we leap at the opportunity to share what we know with students. When we are not so confident, we can perceive "why" as a threat to our position of expertise or authority.

And, since I'm that friend who says things other people won't say, sometimes we're really tired, or we're stuck in pacing-guide-rules-all mode, and we just don't think we have the energy or the time to deal with a student's "why".

When we are uncertain, low on energy, or pressed for time, it can be so tempting to answer, "Why are we learning this?", with, "Because I said so."

And, as the God-appointed authority figure in the room, you should set an expectation of students responding to your lead with obedience*.

BUT - and this is HUGE - instant obedience is <u>not</u> always an indicator of a healthy teacher-learner relationship.

Consider the interactions between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees were outwardly obedient to God's Law, but had such a distant relationship with God, that they did not recognize Jesus was God in the flesh when He was right in front of them (John 14:9-10). They did not trust His authority, so they either inwardly doubted His teaching, or they openly opposed Him and His disciples. In both cases, they not only failed to learn what God had for them to learn, but they responded in ways that interfered with the learning of others.

Though I'm finding it is a decreasing amount of the student population these days, some students will start working as soon as you say, "Because I said so", because their parents or guardians have taught them to do so, because they want to please you, or because they fear your ability to give them detention, give them a bad grade, or remove a privilege such as attending a field trip.

Whatever their motivation, their response could be based on compliance to the "law" you or someone else has laid down, not to their recognition of you as someone with the desire and expertise to help them learn, or with the belief that what you are teaching will improve their lives in some way.

Friend, obedience is really helpful to maintaining order in a classroom, but blind obedience is not a substitute for a healthy teacher-learner relationship.

A healthy teacher-learner relationship is built on their hope, their confident expectation, that what you are teaching them is for their good.

That's where the practices we'll explore in this resource come into play.

But, if you'll tarry with me one moment longer, now that "Because I said so" is off the table, let's dig into the connection between your response to a student's "why" and the value they place on what you are teaching.

Why does your response to "why" hold so much power in the classroom?

Recall with me the yarn ball fiasco of 2003. That morning, I gave my students a learning objective because it was in the state mandated standards, but I did not realize how vital it was for them to understand why I had set that specific learning objective for the day. I also did not understand how important it was for my students to see the connection between the objective and the activity I was asking them to complete.

Consider this truth with me for a moment:

God has all authority over all things in Heaven and earth, but when He gives His children a directive, He still explains His why.

So often we tell ourselves that God is distant and hidden, but in truth, God has made Himself known to the world through His Word and through His Son Jesus and constantly reveals Himself to believers through Holy Spirit within us.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. - John 1:14

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Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, since the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. - 1 Corinthians 2:10

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Our Heavenly Father knows His children need to understand the "why" to be successful, and He is always faithful to provide what we need.

Let's look at a couple of God's commands and then examine how He explains the reason or the "why" for that command:

In Exodus 20:3, God tells us that we should not worship any other gods.

Why does God tell us not to worship other gods?

- Because He alone is God (Isaiah 44:6).
- Because He loves us (Romans 5:8).
- Because He alone has the power to save us (Acts 4:12).
- Because He knows we'll be hurt by putting our trust in useless idols (Jonah 2:8; Psalm 155:15-18).

And I'm sure those four reasons just scratch the surface of His "why".

In Ephesians 4:32, God tells us to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving.

Why does God tell us to be forgiving?

- Because unforgiveness plants bitterness and anger in our hearts (Ephesians 4:31).
- Because forgiveness grows love, but dwelling on faults separates people (Proverbs 17:9).
- Because forgiving others is part of loving God (1 John 4:20).
- Because God forgives us when we forgive others (Matthew 6:14).

And again, we're just scratching the surface of God's "why" with those four reasons. Over the next few days, consider searching out additional verses on the topics of idolatry of forgiveness to see just how many more "whys" God provides.

Dear colleague, even when storms and trials come into our lives, even when God's activity is unclear to us, we can rest assured that He has a purpose and that His "why" is for our good and for His glory.

"In view of this, we always pray for you that our God will make you worthy of his calling, and by his power fulfill your every desire to do good and your work produced by faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified by you, and you by him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

- 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Knowing that God, the only One with absolute authority to say "Because I said so" or "Because it's in the standards" (that He wrote), gives His children a reason for what He tells us to do, we too must plan from a student-centered perspective and provide proper reasoning for what we are asking them to learn or to do.

response to "why", and what's been presented about God's faithfulness in giving us reasons for what He tells us to do. Before we dig into teaching practices that testify, take some time to talk to God about your reflection.

As you dig into the considerations on the next few pages, I encourage you to have your Bible or your favorite Bible app open and read God's guidance directly, framing your take-aways as they relate to your position in the classroom.

I encourage you also to remember that we are all of us a work in progress (Philippians 1:6). Some of the barren branches of practice that you will read on the next few pages are practices that I had in my classroom at some point - maybe even when I transitioned from teaching middle school students to teaching educators through professional development (eep!).

As you read each barren branch and the biblical reasoning for why it doesn't produce hope, or at least not lasting hope, give yourself grace for what you did not know or consider before and thank God for the mercy of being able to apply new learning today.

As you read each tip for pruning a practice to produce greater hope, don't feel like you have to embrace every pruning tip right away.

Reflect on your current capacity to apply something new and ask Holy Spirit to guide you to the tip that you most need to apply right now to give your students greater hope, and to remind you down the road to apply other tips are you grow.

Simply posting standards, learning objectives, targets, "I Can" statements, etc...

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Information that is posted but not regularly referred to as part of instruction becomes a decoration, easily overlooked or glanced at occasionally but not applied to learning.
 - Consider the difference between owning a Bible and using your Bible as part of daily instruction for your life:
 - Joshua 1:8 mediate on it day and night
 - John 14:21 who has my commands and keeps them
 - John 8:47 the one who listens to God is from God
- Standards are most often written with a teacher-centered focus on instruction rather than a student-centered focus on learning.
- Too often standards and/or objectives are written:
 - in a broad or general manner without clear expectations for performance or demonstration.
 - as a narrow, isolated skill or understanding without context to an overall or long-term learning purpose.
 - without a clear "why" or relevance to real world living or to an improved present or future.

- What key truths about learning are presented by the Scripture verses above?
- Do I currently post standards, learning objectives, I Can statements, etc...?
 - If not, why not?
 - If so, am I posting them as an intentional part of instruction, as a decoration, or only out of compliance to school policy or practice?

- Frame instruction by reviewing the standard(s) and/or objective(s) at the beginning *and* end of the day's lesson.
- For maximum effectiveness,
 - write them in student-friendly language.
 - include a "so that" statement to answer students' current need to know and their future need to know.
 - provide exemplars so students know what success looks like for the given standard or objective (more on this in the next practice discussed).
 - allow students to read/review them aloud and to do most of the explaining.
 - When students can explain what they are learning and most importantly - WHY they are learning it, they'll have greater hope for learning and you'll have greater hope that they are getting it!

ROOM TO REFLECT

- How might implementing the practices above support student learning?
- How might reviewing wellwritten objectives or standards before a lesson affect the value students place on a lesson?
- How might reviewing them at the end of the lesson affect students' ability to retain/apply the day's learning?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in my approach to sharing learning standards or objectives with students? Which practices above might I try in order to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of my own need pruned?

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Emphasizes task completion over understanding content or gaining skills, creating a *get-er-done* rather than *get-er-done-right* mentality.
- Some students simply aren't motivated by grades.
- Some students are already convinced they can't or won't make an A, so why try in the first place.
- A test is only as motivating as the reason for taking it (see above on grades and below on college).
- Adult life is far away and difficult to envision, especially for younger students.
 - Imagine if God only promised us joy or hope or strength <u>after</u> we reached Heaven. What would be our motivation to learn what we need to in order to live a full life here on earth?
- College readiness doesn't motivate students who don't think they can or will go to college or for whom college is really far away.
- Career readiness doesn't motivate students who don't understand what a career is, how to get one, or why they might want to think about having one (an alarming number of students these days).

- What is my current practice for giving students a purpose or a "why" for learning?
- Which responses or attitudes presented above do my students tend to demonstrate most often? How do I tend to address those?

- Provide reasons for learning that:
 - Emphasize the value of possessing lasting skills and knowledge over the immediacy of getting grades or passing tests.
 - Define how a skill or piece of knowledge benefits the student and others across time (now, in the next grade level, as an adult) and also across contexts (other content areas, in sports/hobbies, in relationships, in career/college).
 - Honor a range of student aspirations and family backgrounds by providing opportunities for students to explore different careers, including professional homemaker, and practice the skills necessary to succeed in adult life such as...
 - collaboration, organization, time management, problem solving, consensus building, effective communication, cleanliness, etc...

ROOM TO REFLECT

- Does my current practice of responding to "why" give my students hope for today and for the future?
- What lasting skills and knowledge do I emphasize well? Which could I emphasize better?
- What student aspirations, family backgrounds, and career types do I tend to honor most in my response to "why"?
 Which do I honor least?
 - What could I do to provide opportunities for students to explore and practice a range of life-long skills?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in the reasons I typically provide students for learning certain skills/content? Which practices above might I try in order to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of my own need pruned?

For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. On him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

- Colossians 1:9-14

PROVIDING BALANCED INSTRUCTION

Revisiting the first failed lesson I ever taught (trust me, this wasn't the last one, or even the worst one...), I knew I needed to post the learning objective for my students, but as a student-teacher, I didn't realize that 12 to 14 year-olds needed more than a learning objective and some spoken directions to follow my plan.

Left to their own understanding of what we were doing and why, they made a mess - quite literally - and completely missed the purpose of the lesson.

In the last section, we discussed setting a relevant "why" for students, so now it's time to look at providing a balance of "what" and "how".

This is also a good time to look at some key actions in our profession:

- Assigning
- Instructing
- Modeling

Before we dive into these actions, use the space below to define or describe each one. As you do so, what similarities, differences, or connections do you see? What is the purpose for each one? When would you use each one?

Looking back on my educational training, I'm sure that we addressed those three teaching actions to great depth in our bookwork and classroom discussions, but, like many concepts and skills in education, you don't really get a firm understanding of them until you've taught for a while.

So much of teaching is trial by fire, isn't it?

Ah, but I digress.

Back to those three teaching actions.



For the sake of discussion, let's adopt very basic definitions for those actions:

Assigning: giving a task to practice or assess skills/knowledge learned

Instructing: delivering information to support acquisition of skills/knowledge

Modeling: showing what skills/knowledge to apply and how to apply them

Take a moment to look at your definitions and descriptions on the previous page. Reflect on your reasons for employing each of these teaching actions and how often you use each one. Based on these very basic definitions, add to your earlier response if desired, then join me in a little reflection of my own:

In the six years that I worked as a coordinator in our state department of education (2016-2022), one action that I noticed was rapidly on the rise in classrooms around the state was **assigning**, especially in upper elementary through high school. Instructing was in decline, and modeling, a key component of instructing, was unfortunately MIA in most classrooms that I visited. I found that this trend often had roots in a misunderstanding of project-based learning (PBL) and a stigma that rose around the use of direct or explicit instruction.

Then, I observed an explosion of assigning during the COVID-19 pandemic: read this text or watch this video and answer these questions, or complete X amount of minutes on this digital program.

Though the stay-at-home and stay-at-a-distance restrictions lifted in most places during the 2021-22 school year, it seems many educators have continued to assign heavy amounts of bookwork or digital seat time and to rely on programs or auto-grade features to provide students with instruction and feedback.

Add to that the frequency and severity of student behaviors, a shortage of certified teachers, large class sizes, and the fact that a digital program is cheaper than providing teacher health and retirement benefits, and it's easy to see how assigning work has become more prevalent than instructing or modeling.

Informally polling students and teachers across my home state, I have found that it is not uncommon for a student in grades 3 through 12 to spend four to five hours a day completing workbooks or other forms of seatwork or engaging with a computerized instructional program... which raises questions among students and parents, like, "Why not sit at home and complete this work?", "Why come to school at all?" and "What do teachers do all day if the computer is instructing and assessing?".

Ouch.

And, suddenly, I feel like my pastor delivering a zinger in a sermon and asking the congregation, "Amen, or oh me", as we reflect on a Bible point he's raised and decide if we're applying it to our lives (Amen!), or if we're pulling our toes back to avoid having them stepped on (Oh me!).

You may be shouting an "Amen" of validation right now because you've held onto actively instructing and modeling in the classroom, even when it was unpopular to do so. Amen, I have an Andrea vs. the reading program tale to rival John Henry's man vs. machine story any day.

You may be breathing out an "Oh me" because you recognize you've been using more class time assigning, on paper or digitally, than you've been using for actively instructing or modeling. Oh me, I have a personal story for that too titled, "Misunderstandings Born of Train-the-Trainer PBL Workshops".

Precious colleague, as I will do frequently in our time together, allow me to encourage you to remember grace, grace, God's grace.

With grace, recognize that the pandemic years were tough and that assigning, especially on digital programs, was vital to salvaging any semblance of learning.

With grace, recognize that research on best practice often reaches the field with misunderstandings and areas of misapplication; the baby goes out with the bathwater and sometimes our adherence to best practice goes with it.

Give yourself grace. Recognize room for growth or revitalization. And then...

Praise God that He applies a perfect balance of assigning, instructing, and modeling to our individual growth plans.

Praise God, for He knows we need clear instruction at all ages; He does not simply give us commands and then expect us to do them correctly right away.

Praise God that in His perfect planning, He has given us the Bible, a complete instructional guide for how to live a life pleasing to Him, and He has given us Holy Spirit to actively teach us to apply what His word says.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17

"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you."

- John 14:26

Our God is an active teacher!

Praise God, His balanced instruction helps us reach our objective as Christians: Becoming more like Christ each day, bearing more good fruit as we mature.

Through God's word, we learn which attitudes and actions bear good fruit and which do not. Studying His word, we see that God has left nothing to chance.

His plan for instruction addresses multiple learning needs and includes:

- Explicit Directions, like:
 - The 10 Commandments
 - The advice in Proverbs
- Instruction through Literary Structures:
 - Psalms
 - Song of Solomon
 - Jesus' Parables





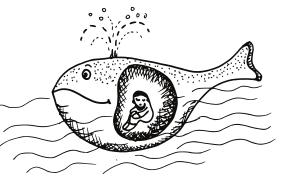
• Instruction through Primary Documents:

• Firsthand accounts, like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Correspondences, like 1st and 2nd Corinthians,
 Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1st and 2nd
 Timothy, Jude...

 Histories, like Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah...

- Real-Life Models of:
 - Perfect Practice: Jesus Christ.
 - Promising Practice: Moses, Joshua, David, Esther, Ruth, Jonah, Peter...
 - Problematic Practice: Pharaoh, Haman, Delilah, Goliath, Jezebel, Herod...



As a self-acknowledged over-thinker, I have a strong appreciation for God's explicit directions.

Give it to me straight, Lord! Don't leave me any room to imagine alternatives!

As a classically trained English teacher though, I really love all of the histories, correspondences, poems, songs, and parables.

And when I read those red letters in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, I can hear Jesus talking right to me, and when I read about Him, I can feel the love that must have poured into the people all around Him.

Sometimes though - in all transparency - I become overwhelmed meditating on what it means to be Christ-like because of Jesus' absolute perfection.

How could I ever hope to be like Him when sin invades my heart/mind so often?

It's in these times that reading about the lives of believers who showed "promising practice" lifts my heart, and their models remind me that God expects progress from His children, not perfection.

And I don't know about you, but I'll happily learn from the mistakes of those "problematic practice" models if I can avoid the first-hand experience of falling down or tripping others up! I think of those folks as the "what not to do" models.

Just as God gives us different formats of instruction in His word, our students need clear instruction presented in multiple ways to achieve the learning objectives we have set; they need to read, hear, see, and try what attitudes and actions will and will not lead to success.

And dear colleague, **no matter what age our students are, or how long** they've been in school, we cannot assume they already know how to perform as we expect or how to successfully complete the learning objective.

After all, we are all well-educated adults, and we still miss God's mark even though we are studying His word and trying to follow Him closely.

As shared earlier, when you dig into the considerations on the next few pages, I encourage you to have your Bible or your favorite Bible app open and read God's guidance directly when references are provided, framing your take-aways as they relate to your position in the classroom.

I encourage you also to remember that we are all of us a work in progress (Philippians 1:6).



Ask Holy Spirit to guide you to the tip that you most need to apply in the near future and what can be revisited later.

Now, let's take a look at some barren branches of instructional practice to cut away and some practices to prune to produce greater hope for our students (and ourselves!) in the classroom and beyond.

Assuming students know what you want them to learn from a task or that they know how to use their skills/knowledge to complete an assignment

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Some students don't yet have the vocabulary or conceptual understanding to figure out what they are being asked to learn from a text, program, or other form of task or how they are supposed to use what they've learned to complete a task. As soon as you say, "begin", they are lost, defeated, and possibly too afraid to ask for help. Plus,
 - Some students don't read task explanations or directions.
 - Some students don't listen to task explanations or directions.
 - Some students don't read or listen...
 - Father, please help us; we all have that one (or three)!
- Throughout the day, students experience a range of reasons for being given tasks as well as a range of expectations for behavior and for format and quality of work, especially when they have multiple teachers throughout the day, or in schools where teacher expectations vary widely based on age of students and courses taught. To many students, keeping up with differing demands can feel like a hopeless task or can create a sense of hopelessness toward a specific course or teacher's expectations.

- What is my current practice for ensuring students know what I want them to learn from a task and how to complete the task?
- What assumptions do I tend to make about my students' knowledge of, or ability to complete, a learning task?
- How do reasons for learning tasks and expectations for completing tasks differ from teacher to teacher in my school or system? How does this impact students' performance in my classroom?

- Model explicitly what is being taught and how to complete the learning task before turning students loose (remember the ball of yarn incident eep!).
- Conduct a think aloud to reveal to students not just the behavioral steps of completion but the *critical thinking and questioning* that takes place as part of the learning/doing.
- Share exemplars for what you will accept as evidence of learning; be sure to include exemplars that are on-point or promising and non-exemplars that are problematic; discuss with students what makes exemplars more or less successful and how to improve less than successful exemplars.
- Provide directions and task descriptions in three or four formats: orally, visually, pictorially, as a body of text, as a bulleted list, as a video, through a peer explanation...(remember all the ways God instructs us.)
- Follow academically necessary terms with student-friendly explanation, examples, or context clues; give students opportunities to give explanations, examples, or clues to each other before stepping in to provide them.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- What benefits do I see for following a clear reason for learning with instruction and models prior to assigning work?
- How am I currently doing at providing instruction and modeling prior to assigning work?
- How are my colleagues and I doing at providing greater hope for our students through consistency in expectations for behavior and learning?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in the way I currently prepare students for learning tasks? Which practices above might I try in order to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of my own need pruned?

Addressing too much at once; lacking clear organization in instruction or directions

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Students can become lost in multi-part instruction, often remembering the beginning and/or the end, but not the middle, or remembering one or two specifics, but losing the overall point of the learning.
 - Many religious leaders of Jesus' day worked hard to memorize the whole Law, but He frequently noted that they did not follow major tenets of it. He then summarized the whole of the Law into: Love God, love others (Matthew 22:36-40). The leaders were memorizing the Law, but not applying the intent or information to their lives, so they missed the point.
- When given full sets of instruction at once, some students become overwhelmed by the complexity or magnitude of what they are being asked to learn or do and freeze or shut down.
 - Imagine if, at the point of salvation, God told us every single thing we needed to fix in our lives all at once for our entire lifespan. I don't know about you, but even as a young girl, I think I would have just collapsed in a heap at the altar and been too paralyzed to go on with life. Praise God, He gives us instruction and provides modeling <u>as</u> we grow!

- What format(s) or method(s) do I typically use for instruction or directions?
- What is my current practice for organizing instruction?
- Have I observed students freezing or shutting down during instruction or when it is time to complete a learning task? What seems to precede these actions?

- Keep instruction clear and concise; avoid detours, rabbit holes, long reading passages, or lengthy lecture or video clips.
 - Be mindful of students' attention span (age, development, ability); teach
 active note-taking and/or listening strategies to ensure students can
 attend to instruction in whatever format it is presented.
- Consider using different types of tools like checklists, bare-bones rubrics, or visual aids to support instruction.
- Chunk instruction into key concepts or a step-by-step process; revealing only the "do now" and/or "do next" to those students who are easily overwhelmed or lack confidence.
 - Employ gradual release (I do, you pay attention; I do, you do with me; You do in small groups, I support; You do alone; I support), remembering that it's not a linear process; some students need more time and more support than others depending on their familiarity with topic/skill and prior knowledge.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- How does my current practice for organizing instruction give my students hope for understanding each day's lesson?
 - How does it give hope for success with future lessons and in life application?
- What am I doing well to reach all learners? What format(s), tools, or methods might I consider adding to reach more learners?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in the way I currently organize instruction? Which practices above might I try in order to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of my own need pruned?

Emphasizing procedures, strategies, or "tricks" over learning content or concepts

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Presents students with a way to "get-er-done" without understanding what they're learning, why they're learning it, or how it works. Examples include:
 - Writing strategies that dictate sentence count or sentence type over conveying the student's message in a clear and authentic manner.
 - Memorizing mathematical or scientific formulas or phrases and "plugging in" numbers with the purpose of getting "the right answer".
- The lack of focus on learning content and concepts:
 - Creates confusion when a different procedure, trick, or strategy is presented to address the same concept or when they are asked to complete a task without the strategy being named (especially at home).
 - Decreases transfer of knowledge or skill to other grade levels, content areas, or types of tasks.
- You know this has happened when:
 - Students begin writing immediately when asked to do "four-square writing" in 5th grade, but stare at the 6th grade teacher blankly the next year when asked to write an argument or an informative paragraph.
 - Students accurately add/subtract negative integers in class but are stumped on the state assessment because the question doesn't ask them do "Keep, Change, Change" problems.

- What procedures, strategies, or tricks are commonly used in the curriculum of your grade level or discipline?
 - How might an overreliance on or mishandling of these create opportunities for students to perform a learning task without understanding what they are doing or why they are doing it?

- Avoid methods that teach students a "trick" to get the right answer.
 - Ours is not to reason why, just invert and multiply!
 - I before e except after c (and all the other times it doesn't work...).
- Avoid including the title of the strategy or procedure in the learning objective for the day. For example:
 - Instead of saying, "Today we are learning 4-Square Writing", say, "Today we are going to practice sharing our ideas with others though writing and explore how a graphic organizer can help us be more successful in communicating our ideas when we write."
 - Instead of saying, "Today we are going to learn the FOIL strategy", say,
 "Today we are going to practice the distributive property and explore a mnemonic device that reminds us how the distributive property works."
- Aim for self-regulation and independent application:
 - Allow students opportunities to explore different strategies, processes, or approaches and then apply what works best for them as learners.
 - Provide scaffolds for students as they learn to self-regulate through visual cues, mnemonics, graphic organizers, etc...with the intent that students work toward independence and self-regulation.
 - As students become more consistent at accurately applying content and concepts, gradually release them toward independence by removing visual cues and other scaffolds.
 - Note: It is unlikely an entire class of students will reach independence and self-regulation at the same time. As you remove whole class visual cues, have smaller copies available for certain tables or specific students who still need the cue. As you stop running 30 copies of a graphic organizer, make 5 for students who still need them.
 - Avoid forcing all students to learn or apply all strategies for accomplishing a task.
 - Once a student is able to consistently demonstrate understanding or application with one strategy, process, or approach, presenting him/her with additional options may be confusing or even frustrating.
 - Remember, the goal is not that students know and can apply five ways of achieving the same answer. The goal is to move students toward long-term understanding and independent application of content and/or concepts.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- Are there any "tricks" or "shortcuts" in my instructional practice?
 - How might these prevent my students from gaining conceptual understanding?
 - How might they trip students up later on?
 - Are there times they don't work?
 - Do I understand the concept well enough to not use them myself? Or do I need some professional learning in this area?
- When I introduce a lesson, do I emphasize the what (concept) or the how (strategy, method, or process we'll use)?
 - How might I word learning objectives to emphasize that the how is not the learning goal, but simply a way to get to the what of the goal?
- How does emphasizing why, how, an d when a strategy or process works (or doesn't work) provide students with greater hope on the current lesson?
 - On future lessons or in life application?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of emphasizing concepts over strategies/processes do I see in my instruction? Which practices above might I try in order to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of my own might need pruned?

ADDITIONAL ROOM TO REFLECT ON BALANCED INSTRUCTION

LEVERAGING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE TO INCREASE CURRENT SUCCESS

If your teacher education program was anything like mine, activating prior knowledge was introduced in Education 101, revisited often, and featured prominently on the college's prescribed (and lengthy!) lesson planning template.

A key component in constructivist learning theory, activating prior knowledge is often described as making connections between previously learned skills and content and newly introduced learning objectives.

It's such a foundational concept that we as educators often take it for granted that our students.

- 1. have the necessary prior knowledge, and
- 2. know how to apply it in a new learning situation.

Then, we launch a learning activity or give an assignment without activating or connecting to what they already know (or have at least heard before) and wonder why they seem so confused or frustrated by the new task.

This is precisely what happened in my well-intentioned story structure lesson.

My students had been studying narrative story structure using what many refer to as the "plot mountain diagram". The plot mountain diagram is a good enough place to start, but I wanted my students to experience a more organic story structure; to see that the exposition, rising action, or any other part of a story's plot could be a long, winding journey all on its own or an abrupt, detail-less event, not necessarily fitting the precise angle of ascent or descent presented by the nice, neat plot mountain diagram.

Near the end of a bachelor's program heavily laced with literary studies, I understood this concept very well, but I took for granted that my students' impression of plot structure did not go beyond that neat, symmetrical mountain. I introduced the yarn activity without referring back to what they already knew, without activating their understanding of story structure or making connections for them between their current understanding and what I was going to show them through what should have been an elaborate web of story structure visually and physically modeled in yarn.

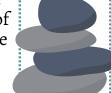
Oh colleague, there's a reason God's word places such a heavy emphasis on remembering.

A quick search reveals that the word "remember' is used over 250 times in the Bible. God tells us to remember Him, to remember His teaching, to remember what He has done for us, and He reminds us that He will remember His covenant with us and His promises to us.

Remember the wondrous works he has done, his wonders, and the judgments he has pronounced, - Psalm 105:5

Throughout the Old Testament, we see that God directed the children of Israel to construct altars and stack stones and build all manner of visual aids and physical models to remind them of His faithfulness and provision.

Joshua also set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant were standing. The stones are still there today. - Joshua 4:9



Afterward, Samuel took a stone and set it upright between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, explaining, "The Lord has helped us up to this point." - 1 Samuel 7:12

God also directed the children of Israel to pass their memories of His goodness and teaching on to the next generation.

He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children so that a future generation - children yet to be born - might know. They were to rise and tell their children so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God's works, but keep his commands.

- Psalm 78:5-7

Each of these directions to remember created connections between what the children of Israel had already experienced or known and the new situation they were facing. They could have hope in any new situation because of what they knew about God's character from past situations.

We can experience hope today because our trust in God is built in part on the evidence of His faithfulness to His children in the past.

In the Gospels, we see that Jesus often activated His audience's prior knowledge; His use of parables drew connections between what the people already knew, what was familiar to them, and what He was desiring them to learn.

Then the disciples came up and asked him, "Why are you speaking to them in parables?"

He answered, "Because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given for you to know, but it has not been given to them. For whoever has, more will be given to him, and he will have more than enough; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. That is why I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand."

- Matthew 13:10-13

The depth of love and grace that Jesus presented in His teaching was unfamiliar to the people to whom He spoke, but they understood concepts like fetching a lost lamb and receiving praise or rebuke from a master based on their stewardship of his resources. Jesus knew they would be overwhelmed if He tried to teach them everything at once because they were not ready to receive it.

In His kindness and perfect understanding of His students, He taught using real world examples that were culturally relevant and appropriate to the spiritual maturity of those He taught.

Those who continued to follow Him had hope that His teaching would bring about a new and better era for them because they were able to grasp at least some of the love and grace about which He spoke.

We may not be literal shepherds today or serve a master today in the sense that they did then, but we still understand the concepts of leaving the 99 to rescue the one and of making wise investments and using resources effectively.

The connections that Jesus made through His parables break the boundaries of time, place, and culture to give us hope as well.

Examining the remainder of the New Testament, we see evidence of God's goodness to give us reminders and make connections for us as He inspired Paul, Peter, James, and others to connect their instruction and encouragement to reminders of God's enduring faithfulness and the truth, love, and grace found in Jesus' teachings and throughout the Old Testament.

A great example can be found in the recounting of God's faithfulness to the saints of the Old Testament in Hebrews chapter 11, which many have come to know as the "Hall of Faith" or "Heroes of the Faith" to remind us that God's salvation comes through faith, not works.

Another can be found in Acts chapter 7 as Stephen teaches that Jesus is the Messiah by retelling the history of God's faithfulness, the words of the prophets concerning the Messiah, and how they prophesied that the people would fail to recognize the Messiah and persecute Him.

As the early church sought to be transformed through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, **they had to build upon what they knew and understood**, stripping away that which did not align to following Christ and reinforcing that which did with new depths of understanding.

This is perhaps most evident in the letters of Paul as each church was dealing with its own cultural challenges. For example, in Rome, the early church dealt with division between Hebrew and Gentile members over their understanding of the purpose of the Law. Paul retold the history of the nation of Israel's struggle to uphold the Law to activate the prior knowledge of the Hebrew believers and to build knowledge of the Law and its purpose for the Gentile believers. He activated prior knowledge and built background knowledge to teach both groups that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law and that salvation comes by faith in Christ, not by heritage or works.

Colleague, God has been activating and building upon prior knowledge since the beginning of time. He knows that we best understand the new through connection to the familiar.

Rest assured, our students learn the same way, and they need us to help them connect the new to the familiar.

Would we ask a student who has never seen an ocean to write a descriptive essay about having a picnic oceanside? Would we be frustrated if they could not do it or if their description was lacking detail?

The answer is no and no.

And yet...

- We try to teach students to divide fractions when we are fairly certain they do not fully understand the concept of part-to-whole.
- We assume because students have made it to 5th grade, they know where to place a comma and reduce their grade on essays when they forget one or misplace one.
- We jump into teaching the water cycle without checking to see if students have a basic grasp of the properties pf solids, liquids, and gases.
- We dig into the Great Depression without assessing students' understanding of economic concepts like inflation or recession or their knowledge of the impact of World War I on the world economy.

Whether it's a mathematical concept, a scientific principle, a social-emotional skill, or an enduring understanding about geography and economics...whatever it is that we teach, our students need connections to prior knowledge and prior experiences in order to have hope that they can be successful with new content, concepts, and skills.

I know I've said this before, but it's worth remembering for each practice:

When you dig into the considerations on the next few pages, I encourage you to remember that we are each of us a work in progress. Some of us have years of man's philosophy to remove from our teaching foundation and others are new to the profession and are trying whatever might work to build a foundation.

If a barren branch feels close to home, reflect on it, apply grace to it and to yourself, and ask Holy Spirit what to do next.

If you feel validated by a section of "how to prune to produce", thank God for the experiences that have brought you to effective practice, and reflect on how to guide others to the same good practice with grace and truth.

Now, let's dig into activating prior knowledge and work on developing greater hope for our students in the classroom and beyond.

Assuming students have prior knowledge

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Gaps in student experience are varied and, at times, wide, due to factors like:
 - Frequent absences or a lengthy period of absence
 - Classroom or life disruptions and distractions
 - Topics/skills students weren't ready to learn
 - Topics/skills students didn't like or don't want to learn
- Gaps in curriculum are also varied and, at times, wide, due to factors like:
 - Frequent or lengthy absence of multiple students or of teachers
 - Pacing or coverage issues (inclement weather, over-addressing or underaddressing certain topics or skills)
 - Topics/skills teachers don't feel confident teaching
 - Topics/skills teachers don't like or don't want to teach
- There is not a "mastery-guarantee" attached to student promotion.
 - Students can pass classes with as low as 60% understanding.
 - Students are promoted with known gaps because they are "too big" or "too old" to be retained (the effectiveness of retention depends on multiple factors; it's best addressed case-by-case).
 - Not to mention, grading practices can be wildly subjective.
 - Grades are given based on effort or student likeability.
 - Teacher expectations for quality of work varies.
 - Bonus points are given for non-academic reasons.
 - And so much more...

- When planning instruction, what assumptions do I tend to make about my students' knowledge, skills, or experience?
 - How often are my assumptions correct? How do I know?
- What gaps do my students present most often?
 - How do these gaps impact the way I plan my instruction?

- Utilize individual pre-assessments prior to beginning a unit of instruction.
 - Give them at least a few days before you plan to start the unit.
 - Provides time to adjust plans and build in support.
 - Make sure they are short, non-threatening, and give you data guickly.
 - You can learn what students don't know or can't do from just a few well-composed questions, problems, or scenarios.
 - Resist the urge to factor the results into students' grades.
 - Knowing it's not a grade decreases test-anxiety errors which can read as learning gaps that aren't actually there.
 - Plus, it's not fair to grade what you're pretty sure they don't know.
 - Fruitful grading will be addressed in a few pages, so to prepare read 1 Timothy 1:13-14 and thank God for His mercy on us when we are ignorant.
 - Consider not sharing results with students; it's discouraging to have someone point out what you don't know or can't do, especially if you were "supposed to" have already learned it.
 - Make sure they are taken individually.
 - Some students are incredibly adept at "fake-it-'til-you-make-it" when assessed in a collaborative effort reducing your ability to see their learning gaps until they get into the work and struggle.
 - Include the pre-assessment questions in lessons during the unit to see student growth; share the results then so students can see their growth.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- Consider a particular learning objective or unit of instruction, what knowledge or skills would it be beneficial to preassess?
 - How would
 identifying
 students' prior
 knowledge or
 lack thereof in
 advance increase
 the effectiveness
 of your instruction
 in the moment?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in the way I currently plan for addressing learning or skill gaps? Which practices above might I try to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of my own need pruned?

Assuming students can activate prior knowledge on their own or will automatically transfer previously learned skills or understanding to a new context

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- We've heard it said that what we don't use, we lose, and while it's not entirely accurate that we "lose" unused knowledge or skills, it can become buried in forgotten corners of our minds.
 - Summer learning loss is a prime example of how our minds bury information and skills during times of inactivity.
- The assembly line nature of our school systems, moving students through school by "age" or "grade levels", creates a mental box for some students; what they learned about history in 2nd Grade is in its own box. They may not naturally open this box in 4th Grade when, say, migration is addressed again.
 - Without support, these students approach learning without connecting to what they already know, creating the appearance that you need to reteach when really it's more like remind.
- The culture of many classrooms dismisses home life experiences or knowledge gained through independent exploration. This can lead students to keep any "outside" learning or experiences in their own boxes, unopened, robbing them of valuable connection-making, retention-building material.

- How well do my students activate their own knowledge or transfer skills from previous years to my classroom?
 - What knowledge or skills do they tend to struggle remembering or applying?
- What is my current practice for bringing previously learned skills or knowledge to students' minds?
 - When do I remind, review, or reteach? How do I choose which to use?

- Support students in making connections from one school year to the next or one content area to another by employing the 3 Rs, using pre-assessment results to determine which students receive Revisit/Reteach.
 - Remind all students before or after an individual pre-assessment
 - Activate: Ask small groups to do a "5 minute brain dump" on poster paper, jotting down what they remember about pre-requisite content or concepts relevant to the upcoming lesson and then have each group examine everyone else's posters.
 - Avoid:
 - Simply telling students what they should remember.
 - Single student domination of a group.
 - Using this in place of a pre-assessment; group effort masks individual needs.
 - Revisit like group (all had the same gap or misunderstanding)
 - Activate: Lead one short, explicit lesson that focuses on one piece of vital content or a key step in applying understanding and contains individual application. Use student performance during practice to determine if revisit addressed the gap or misunderstanding or if reteach is needed.
 - Avoid:
 - Lengthy revisit; the idea is to "visit", not stay, so use your students' age/development to determine what is a short revisit (ex. 15 minutes for middle school).
 - Giving whole class revisit unless pre-assessment indicates all students need the same review of content, concept, or skill.
 - Reteach like group (several gaps or significant misunderstanding)
 - Activate: Lead a series of short, explicit lessons that address the key content or concepts necessary for students to successfully begin the new learning you have planned. Break lessons and application into steps based on the context of learning to ensure gaps are closed. Release students as they demonstrate independent application.
 - Avoid:
 - Verbal cues that blame/shame students for not developing a lasting understanding in prior years or their previous teachers for not developing it in them.
 - Conducting reteach with students who demonstrated adequate prior knowledge to move into new content.

Research-supported tip:

 Lengthy revisiting and reteaching efforts delay access to new learning and create gaps in knowledge needed for the next year. Instead of hitting every gap up front, space efforts out as they are relevant to new learning, using preassessments and other student data to guide your selection of what to revisit or reteach and which students are in need of those supports.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- What differences do I see in the purposes of the practices of remind, revisit, and reteach?
 - How do I currently use these practices?
 - Do I tend to use one practice more than others?
- What is my practice for using evidence of students' current levels of skill or understanding to determine which instructional support may be needed?
 - What evidence is available to me? For what skills or knowledge might I need to create a pre-assessment?
- Examining the "avoid" sections, what pitfalls do I see that I have fallen into before?
 - Or, how might these pitfalls slow student progress or create a sense of hopelessness for students?
- Examining the "activate" sections, what potential do you see for closing gaps for students while maintaining forward progress (and greater hope for future success)?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in my current approach to addressing gaps in student skill or understanding? How might I try using student data and the 3 Rs to increase students' hope and decrease gaps or prevent future gaps? What practices in my current approach might need pruned?

ADDITIONAL ROOM TO REFLECT ON PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

GIVING FEEDBACK THAT NUTURES HOPE

We can't talk about giving our students hope for today and for the future without discussing how and what we communicate to our students about their learning progress. It's time to talk a good bit about giving feedback and a little bit about grading practices because grades are a form of feedback. Before we begin, let's take a few moments to reflect on our experiences with feedback as students and as educators.

As a student, what's the most hope-filled feedback you've ever been given or best feedback experience you've had? What makes it stand out so positively?
As a student, what's the most hopeless feedback you've ever been given or worst feedback experience you've had? What makes it stand out in a negative way?
As an educator, what elements of giving feedback give you hope and/or allow you to share hope with your students?
As an educator, what elements of giving feedback cause you to experience hopelessness or to create a less-than-hopeful experience for your students?

Since I'm walking with you on this journey to grow as a fruitful educator, I hope you'll indulge me as I share an experience that greatly shaped my desire as an educator to give feedback that bears good fruit, namely, the fruit of hope.

Picture it.

2001. Small state college. First semester, sophomore year. One of dozens of Literature courses this English major had to take.

The professor perches on the edge of his desk at the front of the 20-some student class. He poses a question about the week's reading and calls on yours truly. I respond, in great detail, using textual evidence before "citing evidence" was a buzzword. A previously proven "A+" student in all things literary, I rounded out my response and sat back, feeling quite pleased with myself and hoping I hadn't lost too many non-English majors in the room.

My professor looks at me, leans slightly forward, eyes narrowed and fingers steepling. I'm waiting for the praise that had always followed my responses in English classes. His eyes narrow further if that's possible. He leans back, licks his lower lip, and utters one-syllable of feedback, "No".

Then, he calls on someone else.

No explanation. No correction. Rejection and dismissal.

Over time I learned that it didn't actually matter what any of us said; his response was "no" nearly every time. After a few students had responded and received their "no", he would proceed to tell the class what we should have said.

Since it was a small state college, I ended up having the same professor multiple times for different courses. I learned to copy what he said during discussion, and then, on exams, to write exactly what he had said about the text to ensure I received an A. If I wrote my own response, it would inevitably earn me a B+.

Talk about a hopeless feedback scenario.

I never knew why my answers weren't satisfactory. I couldn't discern the difference between what I, or anyone else, had responded and what he shared was the correct analysis beyond the perspective that he brought to the text. My responses were successful overall in other courses with other professors.

So, I learned to play "the game" to get the A, and, friend, there was no hope in that game and no growth either. I barely remember what we read in those courses, and I seriously doubt I could hold a meaningful conversation about them. I don't remember the analysis that I copied from his response to my notes and over to the exam. I remember mostly the way he looked when he said, "No".

However, as for other classes and courses in my student career, I apply what I learned every day. Even as I write this resource I see the influence of the feedback my senior English teacher gave me and that of my undergraduate advisor and my dissertation chair. Though, admittedly, I often ignore the feedback I received from all three stating, "Sometimes less is more, Andrea".

I'm a wordy girl. That's just how I roll. Movin' on...

As we discuss feedback and grading practices that produce hope, let's anchor ourselves in Paul's teaching to the church at Thessalonica.

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing. - 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Whether it's during class discussion, in a one-on-one conversation about academic performance or behavior/attitude, written on an exam or essay, whatever form it takes, the fruitful educator gives feedback that encourages students and builds them up. The term we often use for this is "edification".

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul lists ministry roles that God provides to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). In the King James text, this passage reads "the edifying of the body of Christ". One of those God-given roles that Paul lists is teaching.

So, what does edification mean for us as educators?

It means we provide instruction that helps our students improve; that God intends the words we use to build them up, not tear them down.

How do we know that's God's intent?

We return to His word.

No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.

- Ephesians 4:29

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person. - Colossians 4:6

A good person produces good out of the good stored up in his heart. An evil person produces evil out of the evil stored up in his heart, for his mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.

- Luke 6:45

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. - Psalm 19:14 As we examine the Bible, we see that God's commands regarding our words, spoken or written, are very clear. They also include not only what we should say, but also how we should say it or write it and for what purpose. Too often we read verses about our tongues or our speech and hit the highlights, but miss the deeper personal or professional application.

For example, we read in Ephesians 4:29 that we should not use foul language, so we think to ourselves, "Well, I don't curse or tell dirty jokes, so I'm good on that one.", and we move on in our studies. But if we keep reading, we see that it also says to only say what is good, words that will build someone up, words that will give grace to everyone who hears them.

Now that's a bit more complex than just not saying curse words or crude jokes.

Friends, our feedback should focus on what is good and help a student improve, and it should be said in such a way that others can reflect on it and apply it to their lives as well. After all, grace is unmerited favor. This means, our feedback to one student should help others grow, even those who did not earn that specific feedback or favor.

Reading on in Colossians 4:6, we see that our speech should be gracious, seasoned with salt.

Why salt? What does salt do? Well, that depends on how you use it, doesn't it?

Traditionally, salt has been used to flavor or preserve food. In this usage, salt makes something easier to swallow or allows something to remain good for longer. In this case, salt is always considered to be positive. But, there's another property to salt that we must consider. We're all familiar with the saying, "Rubbing salt on a wound", right? This usage of salt is usually negative.

Why?

Because it hurts. In Bible times and up into the 19th century, salt was used to scrub wounds to prevent infection. Salt is naturally abrasive and has antiseptic properties. It also burns in an open wound like nobody's business. Helpful, yes. But also painful.

Back to Colossians 4:6 and the end of the phrase, "so that you may know how you should answer each person". To build our students up, help them improve, our feedback needs to be salty, but not always in the same way. Sometimes we season with salt to make words palatable to the student, so he/she will receive them. Sometimes we salt our words to preserve a student's motivation, or right action, or forward progress. And sometimes we salt our words in a way that brings about a little sting for healing purposes.

As we meditate on the "saltiness" of Colossians 4:6, we must also remember the goodness, edification, encouragement, and grace commanded in Ephesians 4:29 and in 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

These verses give us insight into the types of words we should use and how we should use them. They remind us that the words we choose matter. We'll examine how to apply this truth to our feedback and grading practices shortly, but for now, let's dig into two more verses.

As we meditate on Luke 6:45 and Psalm 19:14 (page 66 to see them again), we see that God doesn't just care about the words we use, or how we use them; He also cares about the motivation or heart behind our words. For greater context, consider reading all of our Savior's instruction regarding our hearts in Luke chapter 6 before moving into the specifics of verse 45.

In Luke 6:45, Jesus addresses the connection between our hearts and our words, stating that the "mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart." When my pastor speaks to this Bible point, he often gives the illustration of a cup filled to the brim. When it is bumped, whatever is inside spills out.

We can't change what spills out after it's spilt, and whatever spills out is just as likely to get on others as it is on us.
Therefore, we have to be mindful of what is in our cups.

The same is true of our hearts and our words. If we are bumped while our hearts are filled with frustration, then words of frustration spill out. If we are bumped while our

hearts are filled with joy, then words of joy spill out. Before we give feedback, we must make sure our heart is filled with what it takes for us to form good and gracious words that encourage and edify, and contain the right level of saltiness.

How do we do this?

First, we pray the words David prayed in Psalm 19:14; we ask God to help us keep the meditation of our hearts, what we're full of, and the words of our mouths, what comes out of that fullness, acceptable to Him.

Then, we fill ourselves with good things. After all, garbage in equals garbage out. Paul tells the Philippians to focus on what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, morally excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). Instead of focusing on the not-so-excellent aspects of our students' academics, actions, or attitudes, we must intentionally choose to focus on what is true:

Even when they are being unlovely, our students are loved by the Father, fearfully and wonderfully made for His good purpose as part of His perfect plan (Genesis 1:27; Ephesians 2:10; Psalm 139:13-14; Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 5:8).

Lastly, we actually practice meditating on what we ask God in prayer to help us meditate on, all those things in Philippians 4:8. When we sense a negative thought settling in, we catch it and hold it up against the truth of God's word (2 Corinthians 10:5). We listen to Holy Spirit, praying on-the-spot at times, to know what to say and how to say it because, colleague, the words that Holy Spirit provides to us will always be acceptable to God and will always be useful for the building up of our students (John 16:13).

With these key verses and spiritual practices in mind, it's almost time to examine what giving feedback that nurtures hope looks like in your classroom. Before we dig into application though, I'd like us to briefly consider the role of grading in the feedback process.

Take a few moments to reflect on these teacher-focused questions:

 What is the purpose of grading in general? In my classroom specifically? What is my approach to grading? How do I feel about my grading process? 	
Take a few moments to reflect on these student-focused questions:	
 What do my students express is the purpose of grading in general? In my classroom specifically? How do my students approach the grades they receive? What evidence demonstrates this to me? How do they appear to feel about my grading process? What evidence demonstrates this to me? 	
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Now, let's dig into the practical application of feedback and grading practices that produce hope. As always, remember to give yourself grace, to season your self-talk and reflections with the level of salt that you need to grow in truth and grace as a fruitful educator.

Remember to focus on that which builds you up, helps you improve, and helps you increase the hopefulness of your feedback and grading process.

I'm petitioning God on your behalf that you hear Holy Spirit clearly and discern what God has for you to do now, to do later, or to stop doing in the future.

Assigning a grade without any feedback/rationale

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Grades tell a student how well they did on an assignment, but they don't explicitly help them understand *why* they received a certain grade.
- Students make assumptions about less-than-lovely grades, like:
 - They are stupid in general or "bad" at the subject you're teaching.
 - They are unlucky, ungifted, or helplessly disadvantaged.
 - You don't like them, or you have something against them.
- Even when their grade is lovely, they don't know why and may simply make the opposite assumptions of those above.
- Providing a grade or even a smiley face without feedback or rationale does not allow students to learn what knowledge/skills they need to develop further or to keep applying on future assignments to experience success.
- Students *and* parents often interpret a lack of feedback as a lack of effort in reviewing students' work on the teacher's part. Why should students work so hard to complete something if the teacher is barely going to look at it?

- What's my current practice for giving students feedback or a rationale for the grade they receive?
- What evidence do I see that my current practice gives students hope for future assignments?
- How do my students react to the grades they receive?
 - Do they attribute their results to their skill, knowledge, and effort?
 - Or are they more likely to attribute them to luck or to teachers' relationships with them?

- Provide feedback or rationale in proportion to the weight of the assignment or assessment.
 - The more time, effort, and mental energy students spent on completing it or the more points it's worth, the more detailed feedback they need.
- Follow evaluative statements, like "Great job!" or "Needs improvement" with specific, targeted feedback related to what was great or what improvements are needed:
 - Great job using multiple pieces of evidence from the lab activity to support your conclusion! They give your work scientific credibility.
 - You applied the formula well on this problem, but some of your calculations are inaccurate. Double check your division work to see if you can locate and correct the inaccurate calculations.
- Counter student assumptions of "stupid, unlucky, or unliked" (or their opposites) when you hear them by speaking truth into the situation, explaining grading criteria clearly and consistently to all students.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- What evidence do I see of honoring students' time and effort with the level of feedback I provide?
- How specific or targeted is my feedback? Do I provide details for points of praise and points to improve upon?
- How might I speak truth to students when they attribute their success or lack thereof to anything other than their current level of skill, knowledge, or effort?
 - How might I season my words with salt to bring them greater hope on their next attempt?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in the way I currently give students feedback? Which practices above might I try in order to increase the fruit of my feedback or rationale? What practices of my own need pruned?

BARREN BRANCH OF PRACTICE

Focusing primarily on the negative
- or Not addressing the negative enough (or at all)

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- Focusing primarily on negative aspects of a student's performance creates an
 overwhelming sense of hopelessness. It may appear to them that there is too
 much to do to improve, and, depending on their maturity or resilience, they
 may be unable to frame the feedback into attainable steps for improvement
 and give up instead.
- On the other hand, if we do not address the negative enough, or at all, then we are not accurately representing students' current knowledge or skill or their ability to apply one or both to the given context.
 - Providing feedback on only what was done well communicates to students who received a lovely grade that they have no room to grow (which is untrue given that there's always more to learn).
 - To students who received a less-than-lovely grade, it sends the message that they did loads of things well and leaves them wondering why points were taken off of their grade and leads them to false conclusions, like: "the teacher doesn't like me".

ROOM TO REFLECT

- What is my current practice for addressing negative qualities of students' work or areas that are in need of improvement?
 - Do I present the negative too much, not enough, or at just the right level? How do I know?
- Do I see evidence of students giving up or believing they have nothing left to learn or improve?
 - How do I tend to address these attitudes?

HOW TO PRUNE TO PRODUCE HOPE

- Read Ephesians 4:11-16. Providing hope-giving feedback requires sharing truth about students' progress with them from a place of love, from a desire to help them to achieve and receive good things and a genuine belief that God has a good purpose and a perfect plan for them.
- To give our students real hope, we must be <u>accurate</u> in communicating their current level of skill and knowledge. To share truth in love, we must do so in a way that encourages and builds them up, gives them a confident expectation that with instruction and more practice, they can be successful in our subject area(s) and in future endeavors.
 - There isn't a one-size-fits-all ratio of praise to improvement. Until you know what works best for a student, a good rule of thumb is 60/40 praise to improvement.
 - If current skill or knowledge levels have few praise points, resist the temptation to stray from accurate feedback. Share another praiseworthy trait like progress gained, or persistent or positive attitude shown.
- Share students' progress with their families truthfully in love. Parents and guardians need to be properly informed to encourage and assist children in working toward their academic and lifetime goals.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- How does thinking of feedback as speaking truth in love help me address praise and need for improvement with students?
- How do I, or might I, share truth in love with my students when they express hopelessness or perceived perfection in their work/ability?
- Do I share students' progress with families in a way that helps them best support their child?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What hope-giving qualities do I see in the way I currently approach feedback related to needed improvement? Which practices might I try in order to increase the fruit of this practice? What practices of mine need pruned?

BARREN BRANCH OF PRACTICE

Giving more answers or corrections than feedback (aka, overhelping)

WHY IT DOESN'T PRODUCE HOPE

- We rob our students of growth through exploration and practice.
- We send the message that:
 - we don't believe they can learn or apply knowledge or skills.
 - we don't believe they need to learn or maintain a skill/content.
 - we don't believe they can find their own mistakes/solutions.
- Common examples of this barren branch include:
 - Circling or writing correct answers on assignments or tests.
 - Putting in most/all of the missing punctuation in a piece of student writing. BTW, ain't nobody got time for that!
 - Rephrasing or revising student sentences or paragraphs for greater clarity, organization, etc...when assessing written work.
 - "Touching up" students' artwork to improve technical proficiency.
 - Telling the class the right response after one or more incorrect attempts by students without providing instruction to go with it.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- What is my current practice for addressing student errors?
 - Do I tend to give answers or make corrections more or less than I provide feedback (or instruction)?
- What skill, concept, or knowledge area am I more likely to give answers to or make the corrections in for my students?
 - Why might that be?
 - What message(s)
 might I be sending
 to students about
 them and/or this
 skill, concept, or
 knowledge area?

HOW TO PRUNE TO PRODUCE HOPE

- In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul directs the church to obey God even in his absence and to work out their own salvation. He was teaching them the importance of obeying God themselves. He wanted them to walk in a personal relationship with God, not mimic his relationship.
- We want our students to use knowledge and apply skills in our absence, to "work out" their own understanding so they can walk in it daily. Practices that encourage this kind of growth include:
 - Asking questions that prompt students to examine the specific area of their work where an error occurred or to reflect on the steps or information that led them to an inaccurate response.
 - Directing students toward resources that will help them refine their understanding or process or add missing knowledge, being careful not to point at the answer. "Reread paragraphs 7-9" rather than "Reread the third sentence on page 5".
 - Teaching students to ask the right questions of each other in collaborative settings. Instead of "What answer did you get?", model asking and answering, "How did you get that answer?".
 - Allowing students to correct mistakes or revise/redo assignments to demonstrate what they learned from the practices above.

ROOM TO REFLECT

- Recall the skills, concepts, etc... you noted were areas where you tend to tell students the answer or make corrections for them.
 - How might that practice impact students' ability to work out their own understanding?
 - In what ways are the practices above more hope-filled than telling students answers or correcting their work?

Reflection Questions for Daily Growth:

What evidence of effectiveness do I see in the way I currently approach student errors? Which practices above might I try to increase the fruit of my feedback? What practices of my own might need pruned?

CONCLUSION

"For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the Lord's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

- Jeremiah 29:11

Colleague, when we intentionally plan and provide instruction that gives our students hope for today and tomorrow, our Heavenly Father in turn pours hope into our laps, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over (Luke 6:38).

How can our teaching practices give students hope for today and the future?

- By setting a relevant and engaging purpose for learning.
- By providing balanced instruction.
- By leveraging prior knowledge.
- By giving feedback that nurtures hope.

Precious Colleague, until He tells you otherwise, our great and gracious God has placed you in the mission field of your classroom for no other reason than to make Him known; this is the purpose of every Christian after all, to tell of God's faithfulness, to shine His light into a darkened world (Psalm 107:43; Matthew 5:16).

I know it can feel very difficult to tell about God' love or His transformative power in your life. There may even be limits on what you're told that you can say and keep your position, or keep students open to your teaching. While you continue to seek God's guidance on what to say and when and to whom, let the fruitful teaching practices shared in this resource fill your classroom with God's bountiful hope. Let your teaching practices speak Jesus until God leads you to speak aloud.

I pray that this resource has been useful to you as an educator and especially as a Christian, equipping you to walk more confidently in the mission field God has set before you. I do hope you'll join me on social media, Psalm1072.com, and/or in future installments, but for the time being, allow me to intercede in prayer for you.

Father God, You alone are the only Source of true and lasting hope. Thank You for Your Son Jesus through whom we are reconciled with You and in whom our confident expectation of salvation is anchored. Thank You for the in-dwelling of Holy Spirit through whom we receive all good fruit. Lord, fill my precious colleagues in education with hope so they may give their students hope in good measure. Lord, You know that so many of their students come to school without hope or with their hope in flawed or false sources; soften their hearts to receive the message of Your saving grace and open doors for the sharing of it. Bless the efforts of those you have placed in the mission field of teaching, multiply their fruit that you Lord might be glorified. To you be all glory, honor, and praise.

Amen (let it be so now).



BONUS CONTENT:

DEVOTIONS TO DEVELOP HOPE

PREVIEW: GUIDING ALL STUDENTS TOWARD SUCCESS

ANNOUNCING: "PERSEVERENCE"

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DEVOTIONS TO DEVELOP HOPE

from Psalm1072.com

Hope on Any Trail

Strengthening Your Core

Hope in Affliction

When All Else Fails

There is No Condemnation -

adapted from Walking in Truth: God

Desires a Close Relationship with Me,
available on Amazon in print/e-book





HOPE ON ANY TRAIL

"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." - Romans 15:13

If you follow my devotions on Psalm1072.com, then you know I'm an avid studio cyclist, but here's a little something about me you might not know:

I'm not a fan of scary stories, and I generally dislike Halloween (except for the old fashioned popcorn balls some folks still give out - yum!).

In full transparency, I have had nightmares for weeks as a result of watching horror movies, especially the movies involving zombie-like viral outbreaks.

So, what on earth inspired me to jump on my studio cycle one morning and complete a zombie themed workout called "Trail of the Dead" is beyond me.

That said, I'm glad I did because it's funny where and how God talks to us sometimes, and He certainly did some talking to me through that ride.

Unlike the usual cycling programs I complete, where we ride in a gorgeous and often foreign location complete with live traffic or the occasional sheep crossing, "Trail of the Dead" played like a horror movie, starting out at a campsite with an excitable and encouraging guide headed toward an extraction point at the top of the mountain.

The camera perspective had a "Blair Witch Project" meets "Cloverfield" kind of vibe. The zombies would pop up out of the tall grass and trees along the trail intermittently. They were fast and would "grab" my bike causing the resistance on the machine to go up. I had to pedal hard, break away, grab a breather, and then take off again as the swarm caught up.

Throughout the 34 minute ride, my guide kept talking about hope. She **hoped** to find her family at the extraction point. She **hoped** it wouldn't get dark before we got there. She **hoped** the helicopter was still waiting for us. She must have said hope at least 20 times during the program.

Honestly, as we rode, I kept thinking, "If there ever is a real viral zombie-like outbreak, I just hope Jesus comes back for His church before it happens, so I don't have to experience it!"

Up hills and around blind curves and through rough terrain, my guide hoped and hoped and hoped, but we **didn't** find her family, we **didn't** get to the extraction point before dark, the helicopter **wasn't** still there, and - when we rode to the next extraction point - the helicopter landed right as the zombies overwhelmed us ending the ride with a "To Be Continued" and a credit roll for the cool down.

Despite all of my guide's hoping, nothing worked out in our favor.

And oh, friend, isn't life just like that sometimes?

How often do we put our hope in someone, or something, or some future time?

We hang our hope on a spouse, or a friend, or an employer. We put our hope in tomorrow or next month or next year. We have hope that life will get easier once we get that pay raise or that promotion or finish that degree.

Like my experience on the "Trail of the Dead", we often find ourselves going from hope to hope, and many times we reach our objective only to be overwhelmed by a season of life I can only describe as, "To Be Continued".

But what if life didn't have to be like that?

What if there was a Source of hope that never let us down, never left us behind?

The dictionary defines hope as "expecting something with reasonable confidence".

Dear heart, who alone can we put our confidence in to deliver us?

Our great and mighty God, the God of hope (Romans 13:15).

What do we know about God that makes Him worthy of our confident expectation?

This is what the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of Armies says: I am the first and I am the last. There is no God but me." - Isaiah 44:6

All things were created through him, and apart from Him not one thing was created that has been created. - John 1:3

God is not man, that he might lie, or a son of man, that he might change his mind. Does he speak and not act, or promise and not fulfill? - Numbers 23:19

Oh, Lord God! You yourself made the heavens and the earth by your great power and with your outstretched arm. Nothing is too difficult for you.

- Jeremiah 32:17

For I know the plans I have for you," - this is the Lord's declaration - "plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

- Jeremiah 29:11

What happens when we place our hope in God alone?

- ...but those **who trust in the Lord** will <u>renew</u> their strength; they will <u>soar</u> on wings like eagles; they will <u>run</u> and not become weary, they will <u>walk</u> and not faint. Isaiah 40:31
- But look, the Lord keeps his eye on those who fear him those who depend on his faithful love Psalm 33:18
- This hope will not disappoint us, because <u>God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.</u> Romans 5:5
- You are my shelter and my shield; I put my hope in your word. Psalm 119:114
- The person who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence indeed is the Lord, <u>is</u> blessed. Jeremiah 17:7

And one of my personal favorites:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us *new birth into a living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. You are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." - 1 Peter 1:3-7

Beloved, take a few moments to read the verses again and make a note of the relationship between the bold hope and the underlined phrases.

What do you notice?		

When we place our hope in God, in His promises, in His word, and in His Son Jesus Christ:

- Our strength is renewed; we will soar, and run, and walk and not grow weary!
- We are kept in the protective gaze of the Father!
- We are not disappointed because God's love is in our hearts and Holy Spirit is within us!
- We have a safe place, a hiding place, a shield against the evils of this world!
- We are blessed!
- We have an inheritance in heaven that will never fade or spoil!
- We are shielded by God's power!

Brothers and Sisters, we are able to rejoice on any trail that we walk when our hope is in the Lord!

May we each one allow the God of hope to fill us with all joy and peace as we believe in Him so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit!

May we live each day in the fullness of our hope in Him, a shining light to those who have lost hope, a beacon showing the way to Christ in whom all our hope is found!



ROOM TO REFLECT OR PRAY

STRENGHTENING YOUR CORE

"Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance."

- James 1:2-3

Over the past two years, I've lost 90 pounds and stayed committed to a consistent workout routine on my studio cycle, followed by a series of abdominal exercises.

But, may I confess something to you?

Some days, the studio cycle wears me out, and I really, really want to skip the abdominal part of my workout routine. Some days, I do skip the abdominal routine.

After all, what harm could it do to skip one day?

One summer day as I pondered that question, I decided to go ahead and skip the ab routine. I had a lot to do that day to help my parents prepare their home for a social gathering, and I figured I'd burn some calories doing that, so why not skip the abs?

As I was heading out the door to go to their home, Mom called and asked me to pick up a bag of pool sand at our local hardware store on the way over. When I purchased the 50 pound bag of sand, the kind gentleman behind the counter carried it to my car (can't beat local business for good manners and service!).

But once I arrived at my parents' house, getting the bag of sand from the car to the pool was all on me. My parents live in the country, on a hillside, so naturally the sidewalk is a half mile long. Not really. More like 50 yards probably. I'm bad at visual spatial reasoning, but it feels like half a football field-ish. Anyhow, it's long.

I swung the 50 pound bag of sand up from the back of the car to rest on my left shoulder and took off for the pool behind the house, steadying the bag with my right hand. As I walked, my left shoulder began to complain of the weight, and the bag felt like it might fall as I began to list a little to the left. Then, suddenly, all on their own, my abdominal muscles tightened and my back straightened, and, core engaged, I carried the sand to its destination with no further issues.

In that moment, I was reminded of my question, "What does it hurt to skip one day of abdominal exercises?", and I realized the answer:

One day, probably nothing. But more than one day, quite a bit.

You see, those daily or near daily abdominal exercises have strengthened my core, allowing me to carry more and carry it longer without injury.

And sweet friend, the same is true for our spiritual core.

What harm is there in short-changing our prayer time one day? Forgetting to read our Bible one day? Skipping corporate worship service one Sunday?

Just once, maybe not much harm, but when skipping becomes a pattern, when we miss out more than we opt in, our spiritual core becomes weak.

Consistent, daily time with the Lord, in prayer, in praise, in the Word, is like having a consistent abdominal exercise routine. It tightens the spiritual muscles at our core.

Then, when life heaves a 50 pound bag of spiritual warfare our way, our strong core of truth and faith engages, and we are able to carry the weight of our troubles to its final destination: the feet of Jesus, who calls us to cast all of our cares on Him.

Dear heart, when we allow our spiritual cores to weaken, and life hits us with a heavy weight, we start listing to one side. We struggle to carry the load one step, let alone to the final destination. Honestly, under the burden, we may even forget that Jesus' feet *are* the final destination.

We may stumble and fall or engage worldly muscles instead and find ourselves all out of alignment. Once out of alignment, we may turn to worldly solutions to help us carry our burden and, friends, nothing adds to our burdens like the consequences of leaning on worldly solutions.

Beloved, our dear Brother James said it clearly in James 1:2-3: In this world, our faith will be tested. That's a fact. If we hope to be a people who rejoice in that testing, who develop endurance through it, then we'll need to prepare our spiritual cores for the challenge.

- We must fight the urge to skip a day of church.
- Refuse to surrender our quiet time with God for the sake of busyness.
- Dig into His Word on a daily basis.
- Praise His name even when we don't feel like praising.

On the day of testing, all that prayer, all that worship, all that praising, all that studying and applying His Word, all that time with God will allow you to walk tall and straight on your way to lay your spiritual battle down at the Savior's feet.

Your spiritual core is the most vital muscle of them all. If it's a bit weak today, I encourage you to go to the Great Physician and allow Him to give you a spiritual adjustment.

ROOM TO REFLECT OR PRAY

HOPE GROWS IN AFFLICTION

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we boast in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." - Romans 5:1-5

Afflictions → Endurance → Strength of Character → Confident Hope of Salvation

Affliction. That's not a word any of us like to use. What we consider affliction may differ from person to person, but essentially, an affliction is a problem or a trial. Afflictions slow us down, frustrate us, make us sad. Most people avoid afflictions whenever possible. When we can't avoid them, we try to ignore them. When we're forced to face them, we tend to complain about them.

BUT God, our Creator and Great Physician, God has hardwired us to do so much more than fuss, avoid, ignore, or complain.

God has created us with the ability to grow through affliction.

In fact, dealing with our own problems or observing others deal with theirs is the primary way by which we grow. There are whole fields of study dedicated to growth mindset right now, especially in education, job productivity, and career studies. It's really cool stuff, but it's nothing new.

God shared the importance of problems and trials as a catalyst for growth with Paul thousands of years ago. God also showed Paul time and time again that He is right by our side in every problem and every trial.

Paul reminds us that we can face our problems and trials with the confident expectation that God will make something good of our situation.

"We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." - Romans 8:28

God shared the faith producing power of problems and trials with James too:

"Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing." - James 1:2-4

When we don't run away from or ignore tough situations, God helps us build endurance. When we stick with the process, endurance grows strength of character.

As stronger people, we are better able to tune out the distractions of the world and focus on the reality that God is our hope, and that His salvation is not only eternally secure, it is an ever-present help in this life too.

- Is there a problem or trial in your life that you've been avoiding, ignoring, or bemoaning?
- Maybe you've been trying to tackle it head on using your own wits or power?
- Whatever approach you've been using, isn't it time to turn that problem or trial over to the Father's hands and trust in Him to see it made right?
- Isn't it time to learn endurance from not just the greatest coach ever but our very Creator, the One who understands exactly what you need to grow and mature because He handcrafted you?

Beloved, use the space below to acknowledge whatever it is that's challenging

you today and then give it over to the Father. Rest assured, you'll be amazed at the work He does in you and through you!				

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS...

"Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act, making your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like the noonday."
- Psalm 37:5-6

Did you ever see something, a sign, a saying on a t-shirt, that looks Scriptural at first glance, but when you think about it, you discover it's really quite wrong?

The intent is well-meaning, but the message is not aligned to God's word?

Lately, I keep seeing these little ads everywhere for signs that say:

"When all else fails, trust God."

At first, I thought "That's right. Trust God.", but then I started really thinking about it and realized the message is actually quite wrong - dangerously wrong even.

Read it again: "When all else fails, trust God."

Do you see it?

It's the first clause in the sentence, "When all else fails".

Sweet friend, why on earth would we wait until all else fails before we trust God?!

That's terrible advice!

It's completely the opposite of the directive that God gives us in His word.

God's word tells us to "commit our ways" to Him; some translations write it as "commit everything you do" (Psalm 37:5).

This means we should trust God from the very beginning, not as a last resort.

God doesn't want us to run around trying our own way - messing everything up probably - only to fall back on Him in a sad, tired, frustrated, broken heap when all else has failed.

No way, that's not God at all!

Our Heavenly Father wants us to live victoriously!

He calls us overcomers and conquerors for a reason!

Here is just a small sample of the victory God promises:

- 1 John 4:4 You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.
- Romans 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
- 1 John 5:3-4 For this is what love for God is: to keep his commands. And his commands are not a burden, because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith.
- Deuteronomy 20:4 For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.
- 2 Corinthians 2:14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us in Christ's triumphal procession and through us spreads the aroma of the knowledge of him in every place.

"When all else fails..." that's the enemy talking there.

The enemy loves a hot mess, **BUT GOD** - say this next part with me - **GOD WANTS US TO LIVE VICTORIOUSLY IN CHRIST JESUS!**

How do we do that?

We commit our ways, everything we do - before we do it - to the Lord. We pray over problems and decisions, over our relationships, our finances and our work plans, over our family planning; we pray over everything. We study His word to better discern who He is and what He desires of us and for us. We listen, listen, listen for Him and to Him.

Dear heart, God is faithful to rescue us even if we choose the "when all else fails" approach, but why, oh why, would we ever want to put ourselves through the "fails" part?!

Why choose the reactive approach when God has given us a perfect proactive approach to avoid a lot of heartache and struggle?

Brothers and Sisters, let's choose to be more proactive today!

Let's choose to commit our ways, everything big and small, to the Lord!

I am fully persuaded that we will not be disappointed!

ROOM TO REFLECT OR PRAY

SERIES: WALKING IN TRUTH



TRUTH 1: GOD DESIRES A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH ME

Devotions designed to help you apply God's truth about His love for you to your daily walk with Him and with others.



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THERE IS NO CONDEMNATION*

"So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free." - John 8:36

Sweet friend, since we're talking about hope, I'm going to share a critical truth that God has been teaching me in recent years, a truth that I've resisted at times, but through God's faithfulness has become an integral part of my testimony.

Maybe it'll hit home for you too.

As we meditate on what it means to have God as our Source of hope and to have hope for our future, we need to spend some time in the truth that God desires to have a close relationship with us. To do that, I feel compelled to share that growing up, my relationship with God was not a close one at all.

From childhood through my early 30s, my perception of God was as a mighty destroyer, a divine judge to fear because He could and would smite me where I stood. I imagine you may have grown up with the same understanding or know someone who did; it's possible that you may know someone who still only knows this view of God.

In my late teens and early 20s, I made a series of decisions based on my feelings and the world's wisdom, and my life took a turn I hadn't planned. Because I did not understand God's redeeming love - only His awesome wrath - I was terrified of His condemnation. I ran from church. I ran from the Bible. I ran from God.

I ran for almost two decades, even changing locations to get a "fresh start".

I managed to play it cool sometimes, go to Sunday service every now and then and sing and smile and take sermon notes, act like I didn't need anything from the message, like my life was free from guilt or shame.

But inside, all that shame was churning, flaring up from time to time, telling me that I wasn't good enough, that God wouldn't want me until I'd done more, become more, made up for my poor choices somehow. So I sought degrees and titles and career recognition and to be the perfect wife and perfect mom. But...no matter how hard I tried or what I accomplished...the fear that I was not good enough, had not done enough, would not be quieted.

Shame and fear pushed me further away in my relationship with God and even put me on edge in the presence of men and women of God, causing me to avoid the very mentors and prayer warriors who could have helped me understand how much God loves to turn things around for us.

Looking back, I see that in my spiritual immaturity, my incomplete understanding of who God is and what He's all about, I was unable to separate conviction from condemnation.

Dear heart, I'm praying you have been blessed with a good grasp of the difference, but let's examine conviction and condemnation before moving on just to make sure we both have the same understanding of the words.

Conviction	Condemnation
 comes from God in love specifically identifies an unChrist-like action or attitude in our lives (sin) creates a desire in us to change (repent) tells us to run to God results in hope and life and so much more 	 comes from Satan in malice accuses us of being an unlovable, awful person in general, a hopeless case tells us we will never change tells us to run from God results in darkness and despair and death

Let's circle back to my personal testimony again.

In 2016, God arranged a series of professional opportunities that brought me back to my hometown and back into fellowship with my local church.

And sweet friend, once there, God laid it on me in the best way possible. Every sermon seemed to be about God's pursuit of us and His desire for us to draw closer to Him. Every song seemed to focus on His unconditional love and the unfathomable depths of His grace, mercy, goodness, and forgiveness.

Week by week, I found myself at the altar laying down another piece of baggage, my regrets, my fears, my shame. Month by month, I felt myself grow stronger in spirit. Year by year, I became a different person, more alive and more hopeful.

Beloved, God's voice is the Voice of Truth, and the Voice of Truth is not a voice of condemnation, but a voice of hope. A voice that says, "Let me help you. You are meant to have more joy, more peace, more strength than you have right now."

The voice of condemnation, the one that kept me on the run for nearly 20 years, the one that says you'll never be better, God doesn't want you, no one actually loves you...we all know that voice, don't we?

It's the one that makes us toss and turn long after the lights have gone out, nags us awake at two in the morning, blindsides us on desolate stretches of highway, picks at us when we're tired or sick or overwhelmed.

Precious friend, that's the enemy talking, seeking to drive us away from God, away from the hope, peace, joy and every good thing that God has in store for us.

Oh dear heart, that fear and shame that steals your hope, that makes it difficult to get up and function some days, or most days - hey, I've been there...That's the enemy too.

I'd love to tell you that over the past six years I've learned how to kick that slithering so-and-so permanently to the curb and give you a quick three step plan for doing so, but, to be perfectly honest, the enemy still slips up on me from time to time. I still struggle at times to fully embrace God's love and grace and forgiveness and the hope that He offers through them.

So, what do I do about my struggle? How do I keep from going on the run again?

I take myself time and time again to the truth, to God's word, specifically to Romans 8:1-2:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.



and I am reminded,

Because of the Lamb, I don't have to go on the lam ever again.

Because of the Lamb, Followers of Christ are covered in grace and forgiveness and do not face condemnation from God. Furthermore, Followers of Christ do not have to listen to condemnation from the enemy.

Precious one, if you've been feeling down with no hope, that's the enemy.

The enemy has no hope, so he can't give us any.

All the enemy can give us is shame and discouragement. With these tools, the enemy slowly drains our peace and joy, our strength, and most of all, our hope for today and for tomorrow.

BUT the nudge of God comes with hope. Even the tears that fall as we recognize our sin and feel sorry for it, come with hope.

Hope from the God who lives and gives life. Hope in His promises which fill His holy word. Hope to walk a more righteous path moving forward.

Don't let the enemy's condemnation distract you from the call of God's conviction. Don't let the enemy shame you into running from a relationship with the only One who can bring you healing and give you hope.

Sweet friend, tell God your hurts and your fears, confess to Him your sin and lay down your shame. Give it all to Him and inquire how to be free of it forever.

Run to the only One who loves you unconditionally, eternally, the One who will forgive all your sins, past and present, and even those you will make in the future.

Run to the One who wants to make you whole. The only One through whom we are made righteous.

Run to Him and don't let go!

Cling to Him 24/7, all day, ev'ry day.

Reflection

Our understanding of conviction and condemnation often comes from the religious instruction we received as children or as new Christians. These understandings become part of our foundation of faith, and it can be difficult for us to challenge beliefs we've held for so long. As I shared above, because my initial understanding of God was "destroyer-judge", I still fall prey to the enemy's condemnation from time to time, beating myself up and believing that God feels just as badly toward me as I feel toward myself. Breaking old patterns of thinking takes repeated exposure to God's truth and practice applying them.

Revisit the chart above that highlights the differences between condemnation and conviction and then reflect on the questions below.

- What are the primary differences between conviction and condemnation?
- What new understandings do you have about conviction, condemnation, or both?
- Reread Romans 8:1-2.
 - Why is there no condemnation for those who put their trust in Jesus?
 - How does this truth help you understand God's desire to have a close relationship with you and the lengths that He will go to draw you to Him? What hope does it provide for you today? For tomorrow?

Prayer

Pray, thanking God for His Voice of Truth and the assurance of Romans 8:1-2.

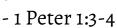
Praise God for the freedom from condemnation made available through the blood of Jesus Christ!

Petition God to help you hear His voice above the voice of the enemy, ask Him to shut down the voice of condemnation and free you from any shame you carry so you can more fully experience the hope that He provides.

ROOM TO REFLECT OR PRAY

Do not despise the Lord's instruction, my son, and do not loathe his discipline; for the Lord disciplines the one he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights. - Proverbs 3:11-12

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.



For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. - John 3:17-18

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PREVIEW:

GUIDING **ALL** STUDENTS TOWARD SUCCESS



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Guiding All Students Toward Success

On Instructional Pacing:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things. - 1 Corinthians 13:11

After studying how to leverage students' prior knowledge, we must acknowledge that students often come to us with gaps because of pacing issues in past years. Every student matures at his/her own pace. This is true of behavior and of academic readiness. Though we know students develop individually, we are tasked with addressing a set of learning standards within a specific, and seemingly unforgiving, timeframe each year. This is where instructional pacing and tools like pacing guides come into play. Pacing guides can be an organizational lifesaver, but they often get a bad reputation because:

- Many pacing guides are designed to keep the whole class moving forward at the same pace using a set number of lessons that all students complete regardless of readiness or ability, which leaves us with questions, like:
 - What about students who do not master content, concepts, or skills in the allotted number of lessons? Do I risk falling behind to keep everyone moving forward, or do I move on and hope those students catch up at some point down the road? What do I do with students who are ready to move on without doing all of the set lessons?
- Often, pacing guides are designed by a company who makes instructional resources or by a team of educators at the state or district level. They are meant to be followed year-after-year unless materials or standards change, which leaves us with questions, like:
 - What about the unique needs of my students in this specific year? What if I'm not in the same place this December as I was last December, or at the same time as my other grade-level colleagues? Is it ok to skip something to get caught up?

Friend, you are not alone in asking these questions or questions like them. Designing effective instructional pacing is not easy. Because there are so many factors involved with instructional pacing, I'm taking a different approach for this section, and instead of discussing "barren branches", I'd like to open with a mountain I believe the fruitful educator stakes his/her career on:

I will never hold so tightly to a pacing guide that I can no longer guide *ALL* of my students toward achieving our yearly goals.

As with many things in education, pacing guides take on many shapes and sizes.

Some are non-negotiable, dated guides that attempt to ensure all teachers in a specific grade level deliver the same instruction at the same time regardless of where students are in their learning progression or of what their current learning needs may be. Others are more like a curriculum map with learning standards grouped into units of instruction and more loosely defined "windows" for when each unit should be addressed within the school year.

Some are actively monitored by administrators and assessed by benchmark tests. Others are filed in a binder or drawer in an administrator's office and never looked at again. For some, pacing guides or similar tools are nonexistent.

Depending on your experience with pacing tools, you may love them, hate them, or be completely unfamiliar with or indifferent toward them.

As part of this bonus section, let's explore one of three components of developing an instructional pacing practice that allows us to better guide *ALL* of our students toward achieving yearly goals while also closing knowledge or skills gaps from prior years:

- Vertical Alignment explored here
- o Authentic Unit Design coming to Psalm1072.com, Winter '23-24
- Spiraling Support coming to Psalm1072.com, Spring '24

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, as we explore each component, remember to embrace grace. If you recognize a flaw in your current pacing practices, give yourself grace for yesterday, embrace growth for today, and have greater hope for tomorrow. Allow Holy Spirit to inspire you on how best to apply new learning to your practice and/or how to accept validation for your current practice with humility and an openness to sharing with others.

Vertical Alignment:

It's no secret that teaching can be an isolating profession. Though we serve in a building filled with other educators, we spend most of *our* time in *our* classrooms, with *our* students, working through *our* curriculum. Sometimes we are blessed with collaborative colleagues who teach the same grade level or subject that we do, but even then, we typically struggle to find the time to actually collaborate on instructional design or pacing with others.

This isolation often leads us to acquire tunnel vision. We become very well-versed in the learning standards or objectives for the grade level we teach, but we possess only a vague awareness of what is addressed in the grade levels before or after ours; usually that awareness only goes so far as the gaps our students come into our class with or gaps that teachers in higher grade levels... umm... accuse us of creating or perpetuating. And of course, we *never* blame the teachers in the grade levels before ours for creating or perpetuating the gaps that pain us...

Ouch.

There's a lot of finger pointing that goes on in education, isn't there?

When we're not pointing at each other, we're pointing at parents. And there's not much hope to be found in pointing fingers. In fact, it would do us well to recall what Jesus tells us about pointing at other people in Matthew 7. Instead of pointing out the splinter in someone else's instructional eye, let's make sure we don't have a beam in our own.

That's where vertical alignment comes into play as part of our pacing practice.

Vertical alignment refers to the progression of learning standards, content knowledge, and skill development from one grade level to the next. To best meet the needs of our students, help them close gaps, and ensure they don't leave our care with more gaps, it is imperative that we invest time each year in examining, at the very least, the learning standards of one grade level before ours and one grade level after ours.

As we examine the learning standards of the grade level(s) before ours, we should ask ourselves:

- What concepts, content, and skills are emphasized in this grade level?
- Are there any major shifts in content or concepts from this grade level to the one that I teach?
- What do my standards introduce for the first time to students (or maybe bring back up after it's been skipped for a year or two)?
- What do my standards maintain or build upon from year's past?

As we examine the learning standards of the grade level(s) after ours, we should ask ourselves:

- What concepts, content, and skills from my grade level are most critical to success in the next grade level(s)? Often called "pre-requisites".
- What concepts, content, and skills from my grade level aren't addressed again next year? Is my class a students' only shot at learning something or does it pop up again a few years down the road?

Unless your teaching context is vastly different from most, I have no doubt that you have quite a few learning standards of your own to attend to, and I'm sure that the thought of spending an afternoon examining "someone else's" standards may seem like a practice you simply don't have time to do. I get it. Time is precious, and the state assessment holds you accountable for what happens in your year and your year only.

But may I remind you of something?

You are part of the Body.

Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. - Romans 12:4-5

Now, I know that Paul was talking about those in the faith as he taught about us being one body in Christ and individually members of one another.

But, in the same way that we are one body in Christ and members of one another as believers, we are also one body in our school system and, therefore, individually members of one another. We are all connected in our service to our students, their families, and the overall community.

The health of our school "body" is impacted for better or worse by what we do as individual educators in our classrooms, and examining the vertical alignment of learning standards, content, and skills in the "body" will greatly help us set a healthy pace for the instruction we provide as a member of that body.

Ideally, we would examine vertical alignment collaboratively with educators from other grade levels, but even if we must sit down with only our own answers to the questions on the previous page, we are still better able to:

- design assessments that accurately inform us of gaps in students' prior knowledge and help us pinpoint the breakdown so we can close gaps.
- identify the concepts, content, and skills in our grade level that will likely present the greatest challenge to our students because they are new or require a shift in thinking from previous years.
- prioritize the concepts, content, and skills that we must address repeatedly until students master them to ensure they are ready to be successful in the next grade (more on this in spiraling support).

And when we can do these three instructional practices well, we are better able to give our students **hope for success** in our grade level and future grade levels (or college/career for my high school friends).

We also avoid several of the barren branches discussed on previous pages, like assuming students have prior knowledge, spending too much time addressing one topic or standard that is more "nice to know" than "critical to success", or spending too little time on something that didn't seem that critical to your grade level, but is crucial to success in future grade levels.



Keep an eye on Psalm1072.com for tools and resources to support your examination of the vertical alignment of your learning standards and for remaining components of effective instructional pacing.





TEACHING PRACTICES THAT TESTIFY (even when you can't!)

Your students need you, but more importantly they need to see Jesus in you. In the mission field of your classroom, will you choose to be a fruitful educator? Will you allow God to shape your teaching practices? I pray you say "Yes and Amen!".

P S A L M 1 0 7 2 . C O M