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# The Hard Part



By Peter Greene



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They never tell you in teacher school, and it’s rarely discussed elsewhere. It is never, ever portrayed in movies and tv shows about teaching. Teachers rarely bring it up around non-teachers for fear it will make us look weak or inadequate.

Valerie Strauss in the *Washington Post* once put together [a series of quotes to answer the question “How hard is teaching?”](#) and asked for more in the comments section. My rant didn’t entirely fit there, so I’m putting it here, because it is on the list of Top Ten Things They Never Tell You in Teacher School.

The hard part of teaching is coming to grips with this:

There is never enough.

There is never enough time. There are never enough resources. There is never enough you.

As a teacher, you can see what a perfect job in your classroom would look like. You know all the assignments you should be giving. You know all the feedback you should be providing your students. You know all the individual crafting that should provide for each individual's instruction. You know all the material you should be covering. You know all the ways in which, when the teachable moment emerges (unannounced as always), you can greet it with a smile and drop everything to make it grow and blossom.

You know all this, but you can also do the math. 110 papers about the view of death in American Romantic writing times 15 minutes to respond with thoughtful written comments equals — wait! what?! That CAN'T be right! Plus quizzes to assess where we are in the grammar unit in order to design a new remedial unit before we craft the final test on that unit (five minutes each to grade). And that was before Chris made that comment about Poe that offered us a perfect chance to talk about the gothic influences, and then Alex and Pat started a great discussion of gothic influences today. And I know that if my students are really going to get good at writing, they should be composing something at least once a week. And if I am going to prepare my students for life in the real world, I need to have one of my own to be credible.

If you are going to take any control of your professional life, you have to make some hard, conscious decisions. What is it that I know I should be doing that I am not going to do?

Every year you get better. You get faster, you learn tricks, you learn which corners can more safely be cut, you get better at predicting where the student-based bumps in the road will appear. A good administrative team can provide a great deal of help.

But every day is still educational triage. You will pick and choose your battles, and you will always be at best bothered, at worst haunted, by the things you know you should have done but didn't. Show me a teacher who thinks she's got everything all under control and doesn't need to fix a thing for next year, and I will show you a lousy teacher. The best teachers I've ever known can give you a list of exactly what they don't do well enough yet.

Not everybody can deal with this. I had a colleague years ago who was a great classroom teacher. But she gave every assignment that she knew she should, and so once a grading period, she took a personal day to sit at home and grade papers for 18 hours straight. She was awesome, but she left teaching, because doing triage broke her heart.

So if you show up at my door saying, “Here’s a box from Pearson. Open it up, hand out the materials, read the script, and stick to the daily schedule. Do that, and your classroom will work perfectly,” I will look you in your beady eyes and ask, “Are you high? Are you stupid?” Because you have to be one of those. Maybe both.

Here’s your metaphor for the day.

Teaching is like painting a huge Victorian mansion. And you don’t actually have enough paint. And when you get to some sections of the house it turns out the wood is a little rotten or not ready for the paint. And about every hour some supervisor comes around and asks you to get down off the ladder and explain why you aren’t making faster progress. And some days the weather is terrible. So it takes all your art and skill and experience to do a job where the house still ends up looking good.

Where are school reformy folks in this metaphor? They’re the ones who show up and tell you that having a ladder is making you lazy, and you should work without. They’re the ones who take a cup of your paint every day to paint test strips on scrap wood, just to make sure the paint is okay (but now you have less of it). They’re the ones who show up after the work is done and tell passersby, “See that one good-looking part? That turned out good because the painters followed my instructions.” And they’re most especially the ones who turn up after the job is complete to say, “Hey, you missed a spot right there on that one board under the eaves.”

There isn’t much discussion of the not-enough problem. Movie and tv teachers never have it (high school teachers on television only ever teach one class a day). And teachers hate to bring it up because we know it just sounds like whiny complaining.

But all the other hard parts of teaching — the technical issues of instruction and planning and individualization and being our own “administrative assistants” and acquiring materials and designing unit plans and assessment — all of those issues rest solidly on the foundation of Not Enough.

Trust us. We will suck it up. We will make do. We will Find A Way. We will even do that when the state and federal people tasked with helping us do all that instead try to make it harder. Even though we can't get to perfect, we can steer toward it. But if you ask me what the hard part of teaching is, hands down, this wins.

There's not enough.

Originally posted at [Curmudgucation](#)

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