



Finding Purpose in Your Profession: Teaching Tips for More Career Satisfaction

SPEAKERS

Michael Strawser, Tierney King, Ken Alford

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor Annual Conference. This year, join us in New Orleans from June 9th through the 11th and attend a conference where you'll network, learn, and refocus on why you got into teaching in the first place. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Every now and then, it's important to take a step back to self reflect and listen to advice from other educators. With an exhausting past few years, here's your reminder that your purpose as an educator is so impactful, and so important. Today, we'll talk about mindful teaching and how you can use the acronym HEARTS to be mindful of your presence as an instructor. And then, Ken Alford will talk about his 40 year teaching career, the best advice he's received, and how you can experience more career satisfaction and effectiveness. We hope you can take these tips and techniques as a reminder that you are not alone - we are rooting for you. To start, Michael Strawser explains that in order for your students to succeed, you need to self reflect on what your role is as their teacher. In Strawser's seminar, Contemplative Pedagogy for Purposeful Teaching, he'll discuss using HEARTS to guide your mindful teaching approach.

Michael Strawser 01:28

So I think it's important as we think about our role, we cannot understand our students without first understanding ourselves. And if you think back to probably when you first became an educator, if you were like me, you were filled with grand ideas of being a world changer and a game changer. And I hope that there's some of that still embedded with you. But the more that we get to it, I think we also realize just how many different things and different realities we have to deal with daily in our job as we engage with students. But the reality is, is that as you think about who you are, as an instructor, as an educator, self exploration, introspection, self development, and vulnerability to a certain extent, as well as transparency are essential. And so what I mean by this is that before we talk about contemplation in the classroom and deep teaching, I think we have to have an accurate understanding of who we are and how we function, and kind of what the specific purpose and specific role of what we do is, right? We can't just kind of step back and allow our students to reflect and to self analyze, and to explore themselves without first doing that for us, and trying to figure out who we are, and how we can approach even ourselves a little bit more deeply. There are two different frameworks I want to give you

for kind of thinking about the role of the instructor in a context that emphasizes contemplation. So the first one is a mindful teaching approach. And so I really like this particular acronym, because it can be really helpful for kind of thinking about how we are supposed to engage in the classroom as instructors. And so this mindful teaching approach, the acronym is **HEARTS**. So we want to make sure that we have a **Heartfelt understanding of the mindfulness technique**, right, of just this mindfulness context. And so really, what I think this means is that we want to be mindful of who we are in our classrooms. And then we want to **Explain different classroom challenges**, right? I keep thinking about my students, and every two to three years now I have students who are drastically different from the ones I've had previously. And I remember when I first started teaching, that wasn't the case, that I could kind of count on at least a four if not five year span, students who are relatively similar in what they think what they cared about how they acted. And that's just not the case anymore. Three, that A, we want to **Apply mindfulness quality intentions**, and be really intentional about how we apply mindfulness to our classrooms. This is both this is both in for you, applying mindfulness to yourself and to your role, but also how we can help our students be a little bit more mindful. So as you think about reflection and contemplation, that that embedded idea of mindfulness is kind of constantly present, right, we can't allow our students to think they're engaging in deep learning without encouraging them to be mindful about what they're doing. And then that R, **Review appropriate teaching strategies**, right? As we kind of sit there and think about exploring this mindful technique, and contemplative pedagogy in general, and I'm gonna give you several different techniques that I think can be really helpful, we want to **Take note of student learning**. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, I am an assessment nerd. And so I always like to think about how I can take my classroom and assess it and analyze it and think about, you know, whether or not student learning has actually taken place. And the reality is, is that when we when we engage in contemplative pedagogy or a mindful approach to teaching, we need to make sure that we're assessing that as well and making sure that we're going to clear on what's going on. Finally, the S, we want to **Self-reflect for self-renewal and self-transformation**. So again, we want to make sure that we are exploring ourselves, right that we're exploring and analyzing who we are Then allow that to change what we do.

Tierney King 05:02

As you reflect on your own teaching journey, Ken Alford also reflects on teaching strategies he's learned throughout the years to help rejuvenate and build his career. In this program, What are 14 Strategies to Take My Teaching Career from Good to Great, you'll gain insight and how you can become a more effective educator.

Ken Alford 05:21

One suggestion I would make is to be kind, especially in things like peer reviews. As you have an opportunity to do peer reviews of your colleagues, I have seen so many, otherwise normal and kind faculty members just become tyrants when they are handed a peer review that is going to be anonymous - don't do that. Be the same person, always give advice that you would like to receive. It doesn't mean that you can't make suggestions and give constructive criticism, but certainly do it in a kind way. I would also recommend that you just be kind to your students. Remember how you appreciated professors who were kind and had students best interests at heart. Make sure that's the kind of professor that that you are. One of my heroes is Colin Powell, and he's just always impressed me. And it was a great experience to serve in the military while he was serving as the Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff, and also as a very senior Army officer, I would highly recommend, in fact, his book called, "It Worked for Me." And in there, he talks about the role that just kind of showing basic kindness to everyone you associate with. And so in our situation, it's not only students, but it's faculty peers, it's faculty staff, it's the custodial staff, it's everybody that makes the university work, because without everyone, it just doesn't work. And Colin Powell, in that book that I mentioned, shares a great thought. And here's what he says, he says, "Always show more kindness than seems necessary, because the person receiving it needs it more than you will ever know." And so I would just recommend, be kind. The next thing I would suggest is to be flexible. You know, the old saying, "Nothing is as constant as change." And it's certainly true. And often what happens in especially in an academic environment I've noticed, is class assignments change sometimes uncomfortably. At the last moment, students change during the add drop period, and assignments change, responsibilities change. Everything just seems to be in a constant state of change, your discipline also changes. And so you just need to be flexible, and go with the flow. My students at the National Defense University, one semester, my graduate seminar there, I had several marine officers. And we just had a series of changes to the rules. The rules kept changing on various trips that we were going to take as part of our curriculum. There were changes required by our accrediting board, there were just change after change after change during this one academic year. And so I announced early to the group that we were just going to roll with the flow and we were going to be flexible and and accommodate all of these changes as best we could. And in a gesture of their appreciation, they gave me a Gumby and as Marines, their motto is Semper Fidelis, always faithful, but they said that the motto of our class that semester, was Semper Gumby, always flexible. So I keep that Gumby on my shelf in my office to remind me that sometimes you just have to be flexible, when quite frankly, it's not your first inclination to do so. Along with that you're going to receive throughout your career, several admonitions from various sources saying you know, make sure you stay balanced - live a balanced life. Well, quite frankly, I've lived far enough down the road of life to learn that there really is no true balanced life. A balanced life is simply simply a series of temporary imbalances. So there may be a brief period where family is receiving the majority of your time, and other times when you may have to briefly give emphasis to teaching or to citizenship or to scholarship, and certainly you're trying to balance all of those areas in the rest of the portions of your life. But just recognize, and I think life gets a little bit calmer if you recognize, that a balanced life is simply a series of temporary imbalances.

Tierney King 09:47

Although some of these evergreen ideas you may have heard before, it's nice to be reminded of the basics. Ken Alford continues to reflect on his teaching career in this program, What is the Best Teaching Advice I Ever Received?

Ken Alford 10:02

I would also pass on advice I've received a couple of times and that is just simply lighten up. Too many professors think that they have to just be so dour and sad and just just unhappy on the stage to look professional and that's just not the case. Personally, I love it when it when a presenter will share a joke or say something funny or have a funny aside. And so give yourself the freedom to do that. I think your students will just enjoy it if you will do that. Let me share one with you, this is with permission of a friend of mine in my current department. At the end of the semester what had happened was he'd had just a lot of requests from students saying. "Hey, you gotta give me one point. You need to bump me over for

an from an A minus to an A." And this is the email he sent them, and so it says, "Dear students, I don't know why but I'm getting an abundance of emails from students explaining to me that they are one point short of an A and that if I don't give them that one point they will either one lose their scholarship, get kicked out of their apartment, forfeit their chances for medical school or get cut from the rugby team, not be able to get married this June or have to work in a coal mine all summer. And then he said, hey, it's okay. Just take a chill pill and relax. A hot shower and a full plate of Pad Thai chicken will do you some good. Just sit down with a Slurpee. I don't even care what flavor it is. Just don't make it blue blue ones jack up your teeth. Then he goes on and says look, if you put \$100 in a savings account, you can't withdraw \$101, you'll be overdrawn. Likewise, if you have an A minus, I can't give you an A just for kicks. I promise life will go on, You'll graduate from college, you'll go into an honorable profession. And best of all, you'll still drive your children to soccer practice in a really nice minivan. Life is going to be great. I have a hard time believing that this class is going to determine your future salary, or potential for winning the Nobel Prize much less who you'll marry or whether you'll have a nice home. Cheer up, eat some ice cream, live a little. You can do this. But don't lose any more sleep over an A or A minus. Get some perspective. You'll live to see another day. But hey, that's just me. He said, sorry for the rant. But man did that feel good. I love you all. And then he signed it with his name and sent it out. And he said students came back who had been complaining and they were now laughing. And that's that's what you want. When I first started teaching many years ago, we could teach a lesson and then at the very end of the lesson, put all the pieces together and do kind of a ta-da, here it is, here's the answer, isn't that wonderful? And that doesn't work so much with present students. You need to front-load your relevance. You need to let students know where you're going to go and why this class matters. Why the material we're talking about right now matters and how it fits into the larger scheme of things. If you provide students with that information, they'll have a better attention span during your class. Let me give you an example. A few years ago when it was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing the thesis on the door at Wittenberg Cathedral, a teacher, this was not a college professor, but it was a teacher of fourth graders in an inner city on the East Coast, wanted to teach his students about Martin Luther. And so he prepared about a 20 minute presentation for them, went into class and gave what he thought was the most wonderful presentation on Martin Luther. Then he had a little multiple choice quiz at the end of class, gave it to the students and every student failed every quiz. And he was just beside himself. He thought I'm a complete failure as a teacher. And then something dawned on him. He went back into those same students and said, How many of you know who Martin Luther King is? And every hand went up. And then he realized what he needed to do. So they had an A/B kind of schedule. And when he got the next group of students, he began his class this way. How many of you know who Martin Luther King is? And every hand went up in the room? And then he said, Did you ever wonder why his parents named him Martin Luther King? And all the students shook their head and said, Yeah, we have no idea. And then he said, Let me teach you who Martin Luther was. And he then he gave the same 20 minute presentation to the students, exactly he as he had done in the day before to the other group of students, and then gave them that quiz at the end of the 20 minutes. And every student passed, because when they began, he had front-loaded relevance of why that information mattered, and they had it in perspective. And so if we'll take the time to just take that 30 seconds, sometimes a minute, to give students at relevance, it'll just help us out.

Tierney King 12:22

Remember that world changing feeling you had when you first started as an instructor? We hope you know the impact you're making on education, on students, and in your field of work.

Ken Alford 15:06

There's just not a day when I go to work that I feel like I'm really going to work. This is a truly noble profession, and we have just a wonderful opportunity to participate in it. This is a favorite quote of mine. Jenkins Lloyd Jones said this, "Anyone who imagines that bliss is normal in life is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he's been robbed. The fact is, most putts don't drop, most beef is tough, most children grow up to be just people. Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration, and most jobs are more often dull than otherwise." But then he said, "This life is like an old-time rail journey. Delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders, and jolts interspersed only occasionally with beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed. The trick is to be thankful that you were able to have the ride." And I think that applies to being a professor. Not every day is filled with exciting intellectual discoveries. Not every day is a class that you leave in which students come up and just congratulate you effusively on how wonderful the class was and how it changed their life. Not every day is filled with the actual symposium. More days are filled with planning the symposium but there are enough experiences in academia that are just so wonderful and so fulfilling that it makes the rest absolutely worthwhile.

Tierney King 17:11

Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.