

Preface

There is something about big yellow buses, adolescents, bumpy roads, and junk food that induce nausea. I was a new teacher, and my class was on one of those buses traveling down the Eisenhower Expressway to the Field Museum in Chicago.

I noticed a male student turning an odd shade of green—you know the color.

The driver could not stop.

I could not get back to him with the trashcan.

His window was open.

You know where this is going.

Inexplicably, I yelled, “Put your head out the window!”

Dutifully, he complied.

As a science teacher, I feel compelled to tell you that when traveling at 52 miles per hour down an expressway, any liquid that exits a window will come back in the next four windows and cover anyone unlucky enough to be sitting nearby. Suddenly, I had four more students turning that same shade of green and a significant cleanup job.

Lesson: Don't tell a student to spray his vomit on four other students.

This year marks the eighteenth anniversary of this incident, and I am reminded of why I am writing this book. The incident could happen to almost anyone and did not make me a dramatically better teacher, but mistakes like this beg the question: How do we get better as teachers—not just individually, but as a profession?

THE NOVICE ADVANTAGE

One way we get better is through first days. In an ever-changing education landscape, we have to change, which means we have many first days over

the course of our careers. We get to begin again every fall. Below are some of my first days and the thoughts and feelings I associate with them:

- First day as a student teacher: *Awkward excitement*—I am a guest in someone else’s classroom, but I am so excited that I am finally teaching.
- First day of teaching: *Pure joy tempered by fear*—I have real students! This is our classroom. I can’t believe parents are going to trust me with their children.
- First day of teaching middle school students: ???—What am I doing in a science lab with middle schoolers? Did I make a mistake? Didn’t I hate middle school as a student? I can make middle school better for these students. I get to teach science all day!
- First day as a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University: *Overwhelmed enthusiasm*—Am I really a student again? My fellow doctoral students are way smarter than I am. Will I survive the next three years of teaching, coaching, and Vanderbilt? I am excited.
- First day at the U.S. Department of Education: *Restrained optimism*—Teachers are actually going to be able to influence federal education policy. Is this really true?
- First day as a college professor: *Curiosity*—Can I help prepare better teachers, conduct research, influence policy, and continue to grow as a teacher?
- First day back in a fifth grade classroom: *Playful innovation*—As a professor, I have time to go to local public schools and teach real kids. My college students give me feedback. Am I still growing as an effective teacher?

I have grown through all of these first days. Whether we like it or not, our work as teachers continues to change. We get new students, new standards, new curriculum, new technology, or new demands. We can either be overwhelmed or embrace the possibilities that come from new opportunities. When we choose to embrace them, they become an advantage when we take on the “novice mindset.”

The novice *mindset* is the belief that we grow continuously through fearless, deliberate practice. When we are new, we seek input, adapt, change, and are constantly learning. There is an exciting rawness to that learning, which can make teaching utterly fascinating, and thus becomes advantageous. The novice *advantage* is therefore the benefit that comes from fully embracing the notion that we can get better each year, each semester, each class period, and each field trip. When we embrace this mindset, we become open to the bold practice—free of fear—needed to meet the diverse needs of today’s classrooms.

Getting better requires deliberate practice (Dweck, 2006; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Hattie & Yates, 2014; National Research Council, 2000; Willingham, 2009). We know deliberate practice is necessary for students—skills need to be developed with guidance, specific goals, feedback, assessment, and reflection (Hattie & Yates, 2014). We provide this for students every day. However, this kind of practice is rare for teachers due to lack of opportunity and fear in this current educational system. *Teach Like a Novice* is designed to help change that reality for every teacher.

The novice mindset is the belief that we grow continuously through fearless, deliberate practice.

WHO NEEDS THIS?

Most of us are not superhero teachers. Maybe, we dreamed we would be when we watched Robin Williams stand on his desk and tell his students to rip pages out of textbooks in *Dead Poet's Society*. Maybe Edward James Olmos inspired us to push calculus students to *Stand and Deliver*. We wanted to be Michelle Pfeiffer inspiring students to become *Dangerous Minds*, or Hilary Swank developing *Freedom Writers*, or Viola Davis who *Won't Back Down*, or Richard Dreyfuss as he conducts *Mr. Holland's Opus*, or maybe we just want to be the *Superman* that students are *Waiting for*.

I certainly am not a superhero teacher. The first time I saw myself teach on videotape I knew that no one would be making a movie about my teaching. My students have ripped pages out of their textbooks in my classes, but not for principled reasons. Students have done things to their desks but not because I wanted them to. Although some of the movies listed above are based on true stories, these depictions have been glorified and sensationalized. They do not capture the genuine realities of teaching.

The actors in these movies are not real teachers.

This book is for real teachers. Preservice, beginning, experienced, inspired, naïve, savvy, committed, and tired teachers. Any teachers who want to get better. *The Novice Advantage* is about a mindset and process that can be applied to practices over the entirety of a teaching career. Real teachers need to be fearlessly vulnerable and honest in their reflection on their teaching as evidenced by student learning. Expert teachers do this well. In order to become experts—not just experienced—we need the novice mindset.

The novice mindset is accompanied by a process composed of the “Four Rs:” reflect, risk, revise or reject. Coupled with the mindset, this process is necessary for deliberate practice to achieve expertise or status as an “expert novice.” Great teachers engage in this process regardless of how many years they have been teaching. There are richer examples of practice throughout the book, but briefly, here are the Four Rs:

1. Reflect: Student is turning green on bus. From previous experience, I know something bad is about to happen.
2. Risk: Tell student to stick head out the window to avoid mess on the bus (a particularly bad idea when hands and arms are not even allowed outside the window).
3. and 4. Reflect then Revise or Reject: Four students ended up covered in vomit. Reject any suggestion of having student use a window on a fast moving bus as a means of emptying his stomach.

A WAY FORWARD

The Novice Advantage is for every teacher who wants to get better. If you can only read this for three minutes at a time before falling into a coma each night, you should be able to get something you can use the next day. I understand and appreciate your exhaustion. I have been there with my face mashed against a book, with saliva pooling on a page as I lay unconsciously hoping some knowledge will be gained through osmosis.

A WAY BACK

Some of us have not been novices for a long time and might be a bit put off by the title of this book. We remember back to when we were novices, and we cringe. But, we also remember the energy, passion, and desire for learning we had. Remember how we were desperately learning, sometimes minutes before class began, and how our students, our school community, and the craft of teaching fascinated us? Remember the courage it took to stand in front of our students that first time or make it through that first night of parent-teacher conferences? Remember what it was like to not know all of the reasons why something won't work? This book offers a way back to the great aspects of the novice mindset while building on the teaching expertise we now have.

USE THIS BOOK TO MAKE YOUR WORK EASIER

This book will make your work easier. I despise books and professional development that make me feel like I just need to work harder and longer when I am already stretched thinner than seems healthy. Throughout the book, you'll find features that will make your work easier and stretch your thinking further.

First, you'll find many ideas for practices and strategies you can implement in your classroom immediately. You don't have to overhaul your practice, but some innovative thinking and small adjustments, borne out of your novice mindset, can go a long way.

Second, throughout the chapters, I include stories of amazing and cringeworthy practice, the latter coming largely at my expense that will make you feel better about the work you do (you probably feel better already because you have never told a student to stick his head out the window of a moving bus to vomit). You will be inspired by the work you do with your colleagues and with your students but not in a way that feels overwhelming.

Third, *The Novice Advantage* has boxes throughout each chapter that ask for “fearless reflection.” These boxes ask you to evaluate districts, schools, and yourself so that you can honestly approach improvement—you have to be fearless to do this. At the end of each chapter are discussion questions, open-ended case studies, and 3-2-1 action steps that allow you to apply what you are learning. Throughout the book are graphics, case studies, and sidebars that summarize key research that you can easily apply to your work. Ideally, we are journeying through our teaching careers with trusted colleagues. That is the ideal way to engage this book—in a class, professional learning community, virtual community, or book group. Superhero teachers, at least the ones in the movies, always appear to be fighting alone against the system and often their colleagues, too. This book is designed for us to get better together to improve the system for everyone—maybe we will all become superhero teachers. Given how valuable our work is, I hope we do become superhero teachers, but I hope we will be more of a team than individuals acting alone—think more Avengers and fewer Spidermen.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The book is divided into three parts:

Part I. Novice Mindset and Process—Chapters 1–3

Part II. Practices—Chapters 4–7

Part III. Expert Novices—Chapter 8

Part I will introduce the novice mindset and lead you through the 4R process. In Chapter 1, you will find cringeworthy moments from novice teaching and see how these can lead to continuous learning in a rapidly changing field. Chapter 2 asks you to embrace the novice mindset for yourself and your students. Chapter 3 describes the process that will facilitate disciplined risk taking that informs and is informed by practice.

Part II encourages you to apply the novice mindset and 4Rs to essential practices of effective teaching. In Chapter 4, you will explore ways to expand the walls of your classroom to increase the space for thinking, hard work, and risk taking. Chapter 5 addresses the challenges of motivating students who may not be particularly interested in your class, are not intrinsically motivated, or do not believe they can succeed in school. Chapter 6 will explore ways of expecting more of your students and how

to operationalize those expectations. In Chapter 7, you will find strategies for developing relationships with students and other essential partners that make education possible.

Part III will help you become a fearless expert novice at whatever point you may be in your career. With the novice mindset and the 4Rs applied to good practice, teaching is rewarding and renewing. With this mindset and tools, you will fearlessly lead your students and our profession.

The Novice Advantage is a testament to the amazing teachers I know who hope for a better profession for teachers and better outcomes for our students. You might not like all of the ideas in the book, but that is part of the mindset and process—in fact, disagreeing means that you are engaging with the ideas. Think of this as a professional conversation between real teachers about real teaching, real students, and real learning. Maybe they won't make movies about us, but that's okay because we really just want to get better for our students.

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