



# TWO YEARS IN THE LIVES OF TWO ENGLISH TEACHERS

To Be, To Do, To Become

Bob Fecho, Dawan Coombs,  
and Trevor Thomas Stewart  
with Rachel Knecht and Emelio DiSabato



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This book invites readers to explore the complexity of becoming a teacher through the stories of two novice English/language arts (ELA) teachers, Emelio and Rachel, over the course of their first two years. The authors' detailed, empathetic, and ethnographic approach allows space for the teachers to reveal little-seen and often overlooked "wobble moments." These moments illuminate the complexity and nuances that confront, confound, and compel teachers to remain in dialogue with practice. Documenting the journeys of two teachers with compassion and intellectual rigor, this book provides insights into and challenges preconceived notions of what it means to be a teacher. It is essential reading for preservice teachers, scholars, and researchers in English education, as well as individuals considering teaching as a profession.

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*To Rachel, Emelio, and all the teachers brave enough  
to share their stories with others. Your dedication  
to students and willingness to be vulnerable can  
make schools the supportive and engaging  
places all students deserve.*



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# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
1 The First First Day: The Excitement and Tension of Moving into the Role of Teacher	1
2 Emelio, Autumn of the First Year: The Necessity of Trial and Error	18
3 Rachel, Autumn of the First Year: Traversing Collegiality, Classroom Management, and Planning Challenges	35
4 Emelio, Spring of the First Year: Negotiating Classroom Order, Teacher Needs, and Student Expectations	52
5 Rachel, Spring of the First Year: The Importance of Collaboration and a Search for Balance	68
6 Emelio, Autumn of the Second Year: Authentic Assessment, Power, Positioning, and Peer Influence	85
7 Rachel, Autumn of the Second Year: Change Is Good! Change Is Good?	102



8	Emelio, Spring of the Second Year: Learning to Nurture Literacy Development Through Connection	119
9	Rachel, Spring of the Second Year: Teaching Dialogically, School Safety, and Uncertain Futures	137
10	A Place We Want to Be	154
	<i>Appendix</i>	<i>168</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>170</i>

# PREFACE

The stories that teachers share about their lives in schools are significant and not to be ignored. They interrupt and make complex the images of teachers rampant in popular media and the psyche of the general public. These images depict teaching as mainly about keeping order in a classroom, handing out and retrieving work, and administering standardized tests, that is, if the image held in mind is not one of superhero teachers who sacrifice all for their students only to be undermined by the inequities and vagaries of the system. Between these extremes is where most concerned, caring, and innovative teachers labor daily at becoming compassionate professionals who engage the lives of children and adolescents in ongoing efforts to make meaning of a swiftly changing world.

The quote below was spoken by Emelio, a middle school English teacher looking back several years later on stories he wrote about his first four semesters teaching. His words encapsulate much of the premise of this book—that courses in schools and colleges of education teach you how to teach, but you only become a teacher by teaching and engaging in a career-long process of being, doing, and becoming.

[You learn to become a teacher] totally through trial and error. That's why it's so wild and stressful. And ultimately, so necessary, because then you start building those experiences. If you make mistakes, it's not totally you alone. At least if you're a student teacher with a cooperating teacher, you can talk to people about these things.

As Emelio suggests, having mentors and colleagues with whom to share, unpack, consider, laugh about, cry through, and, perhaps most importantly, learn

from the stories in their lives helps ease the novice over the bumpy terrain that often dots the initial miles of a new teaching practice.

This book brings the stories of two remarkably dedicated teachers into dialogue with what Bob, Dawan, and Trevor—three longtime teacher educators—have learned across their own years in the profession about the ways in which ...

- teachers' stories and their efforts enacting a reflective, dialogical stance can support them as they think about their development and experiences in schools,
- the stories of new teachers working from a dialogical stance chart a path that can enable others to embrace wobble as a mechanism for learning from struggle, uncertainty, and success, and
- supportive colleagues are a central element in helping teachers navigate the arduous, yet infinitely rewarding process of becoming educators who can best nurture the academic and personal growth of students in contemporary classrooms.

The authors use stories that speak to new and experienced teachers, administrators, aspiring teachers, and anyone interested in what it's like to devote your life to the care of other people's children. Committing oneself to such a vocation requires vulnerability because, as Emelio noted, teaching means learning from experience—moments of success *and* moments of struggle. That learning, though, can be supported by reflection upon the stories we and others share. As Lisa Delpit (2006) wrote, we must “allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 47). Doing so makes it possible to embrace different perspectives and bravely ask how we can each do better tomorrow.

## Reference

- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. The New Press.

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Individually, we would also like to thank ...

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**Dawan Coombs:** Mom, Dad, and the rest of the motley Coombs crew; and all the mentors I name in this book, as well as those not mentioned but who have left their indelible signatures on me.

**Trevor T. Stewart:** Mom, for showing me how to do difficult things while still caring for those around me.

**Rachel Knecht:** Mom and Dad, for always listening and encouraging; D, K, and M, for wobbling with me through the first two years of teaching; Bob, Dawan, and Trevor, for transforming the mess into meaning; and Alex, for all your love, support, and laughter.

**Emelio DiSabato:** Noah Gordon and Jake Wizner were my first mentor teachers and early teaching models. Roommates Hannah Gallo, Amelia Fortunato, and Hunter McCurry kept me sane, as did snacks from Mackenzie Brown and Carson Cornbrooks. My extended family, many of whom work in schools, raised me right and rooted me on. My sister Callie became my thought partner and collaborator. And my mother, a school librarian and the best fifth-grade reader in Ohio, is the source of anything I do well in a classroom. Thanks finally to Beihua, who saw me through the hardest school nights and knows that a night in the woods cures everything.

# 1

## THE FIRST FIRST DAY

### The Excitement and Tension of Moving into the Role of Teacher

*Narrated by Trevor*

Imagine you're a teacher. Day One of a new school year, your first school year. Nervous, expectant, hopeful, semi-confident, a little unsure. Your eyes bounce between the class roster in your hand and the door as you watch strangers who are the people with whom you'll spend the better part of the year trickle in, bunch up, and spill through the door as the first bell rings. The once-quiet room fills with the rattle and hum of student conversations that began in the hallway, their energy bouncing off the boards both white and smart. The late bell rings. Two stragglers scurry through the threshold. You close the door. Now what?

You've arrived at this watershed moment in the career of any teacher: the very first, first day as teacher. The brief moment of silence that occurs (if you're lucky) is not unlike the nervous hush that falls over a field of marathon runners as they wait for the sound of the starter pistol signaling the moment when they can take their first strides of the race. You can feel your pulse quickening in this transitional pause that is both the culmination of dedicated preparation and the first steps of the marathon that will be your teaching career.

Every teacher has their first, first day, their first, first week. Although all teachers share the common experience of first days, they all experience them as individuals, as someone whose collective efforts across years of education have led to this juncture—this room, this school, these students. Most teachers, even those well into their third decade of teaching, can tell you stories of their first day fronting a classroom of students who, more often than not, are also nervous, expectant, hopeful, semi-confident, a little unsure. And every successive year, teachers have a new first day and first week because each school year brings new students to engage with, new content to teach, new policies to manage.

Much like the experience of distance runners as they test themselves against the clock on the road, a teaching career has a series of significant moments as they work their way through the course. For runners, there are always races within races. There will be splits where the pace is planned to maximize endurance and efficiency. Progress, success, and struggle are measured mile-by-mile. Some splits intentionally slower than others. These lower-effort splits conserve physical and mental energy for late race surges.

It's not so different for teachers. Each class, day, week, month, season, and year can be explored, unpacked, and reflected upon. At times, the classroom slips into something akin to a relaxed first three-mile pace where a teacher can learn to reflect upon the fine details of their teaching. But then, like a final two-mile surge, the pace quickens—perhaps harmoniously, perhaps discordantly, but always charged with energy. Each time you break through the finish tape at the end of a year is a unique experience offering lessons learned from that first, first day until you turn out the lights on the final class.

### **Trevor's Origin Story**

I majored in English—not education—after coming home from a six-year hitch in the Marines. I never imagined I would become a teacher, but when I finished my degree, I was offered a job teaching ninth grade English. However, the position teetered on the condition that I complete an alternative path to licensure, which included taking a series of graduate-level foundations of education courses that began in the spring before I started teaching in August.

One of the licensure courses I took was a curriculum class where we learned to follow a template and write lesson plans. I'd been told that detailed lesson plans that plotted every moment—"bell to bell"—would make me a successful teacher. As a Marine, I had come to see clear plans as a comfort. If you know where you want to end up and exactly how you want to get there, the unknown is less daunting. By making a detailed contingency plan for what you'll do if there is a physical obstacle or enemy soldiers on your path, you can deal with that in ways that will keep you safe. That ethos had become part of the fabric of my soul.

I tend to push all my chips into the middle of the table when I think something is a good idea, so I spent the summer planning lessons for every day of the entire first semester for each of my classes. My plans were so detailed that I had bullet points that included the page numbers in the textbook we'd read each day and the discussion questions I'd ask while we read. Now, I look back and laugh at the folly of planning a lesson that purports to account for every contingency. But in my defense, I didn't know what I didn't know about teaching high school.

Those plans calmed my nerves as the students filtered through the door on my first day as a teacher that August morning. Things went smoothly as they settled

into the seats I'd assigned. The first day felt easy. We got to know each other a little. We got along. The students did what I asked. Maybe they just did what I asked because word had spread that "Coach Stewart was a Marine sniper" and they were ninth graders who are easily influenced by legend. But the first lesson plan went off without a hitch in each of the three 90-minute classes I taught that day. I went home that first night feeling like this teaching thing was going to be easy. It was not.

That lesson from the first day included asking my students to write me a paragraph about something they liked. It was a simple, low stakes task. The paragraph wasn't for a grade. It was just one of those activities teachers use to get to know their students as people. In those graduate courses I was required to take, I'd read about how important it was to build relationships with students. I fully embraced that idea back then, and I've become even more convinced in the years since that strong relationships with students are a crucial part of the teaching and learning process (e.g., Hargreaves, 2000). These essays were also an effort to get a baseline idea of where each student was in terms of writing ability. I figured it was important to know who might need a little help with commas or some other small writing skill.

But reading those paragraphs at home that night, I realized the range of writing ability they represented told me that I had wasted time writing lesson plans that summer. I had written plans for students who had mastered the learning goals of the eighth-grade curriculum they'd been taught last year. Following those plans would be a disaster. It had taken me hours longer than I thought it would to read the paragraphs, and now I also needed to write new plans for the next morning and *every day* for the rest of the semester. You might call what I was feeling at that moment tension, but when I think back on it, panic might be a more accurate term.

The conditions and situations that create tension for each new teacher will be different because teachers are humans whose unique experiences have informed their journeys toward the front of the classroom. Teachers' cultural contexts, how they experienced school as students, and what was modeled for them as students can all have a significant impact on their development as teachers.<sup>1</sup> I was not too worried about managing behavior in my classroom because my time in the Marines had taught me a lot about how to keep people focused and on task, but I had grossly overestimated my ability to write useful lesson plans. We all start somewhere, right?

## Who's in the Crew

If you expect yourself to be fully formed at the moment when you first step into a classroom, it can be all too easy to become despondent and think teaching is just not for you. Viewing teaching from this perspective also makes it easy for



those outside of the profession to sit in judgment of teachers and chastise them, instead of recognizing that there are lessons to be learned and growth to be had when one does precisely the wrong thing or does nothing because they don't know what to do. There's also much to be gained when, often unexpectedly, the lesson you planned turned out even better than anticipated.

Across this book, we—Bob, Dawan, Trevor, Rachel, and Emelio—share stories that ask you to pay attention to the complexities, nuances, possibilities, and tensions with which all teachers engage as they follow the courses of their teaching careers. For Bob, Dawan, and me, that means reaching back across time and recounting our early experiences as we sought to become teachers. For Rachel and Emelio, it means sharing stories they wrote across their first two years as novice teachers, stories that, as we suggest, caused them to wobble, to isolate an event in their practice and wonder what import it had for their continuing teaching practice. These wobble moments frequently reflected the complexity of planning instruction that meets the needs of diverse students in the context of standardized schools, the challenge of managing classrooms, and the nuances of navigating relationships with students, fellow teachers, administrators, and parents.

The wobble stories we have cataloged in this book offer a deeply personalized view of what it is like to become a teacher while also dramatizing the importance of being open to learning from struggle and success. Yet, across these personal experiences, there are common threads that unite all the stories we share, the key thread being this insight: we learned how to teach in colleges of education, but it was in the doing—the day-to-day work in classrooms—that we became and continue to become teachers. The value of the stories in this book can be found in their ability to bring success and struggle into dialogue with one another and inform one's understanding of what it means to embrace the process of becoming a teacher.

Reading this book will give you a chance to get to know five different teachers who each found their way to teaching for their own reasons. Many teachers know from an early age that teaching is where they will end up spending their professional lives. Over my years in teacher education, I have lost count of the number of students who've told me stories of lining up their teddy bears and dolls to "play school" when they were still in elementary school themselves. But not all teachers fit into this mold. Teachers are people—not robots—so their motivations for choosing teaching over another job are deeply personal.

There are, though, ties that bind teachers together and common themes that cut across the various motivations that lead people to choose teaching as a profession. For Bob, Dawan, Emelio, Rachel, and myself, the importance of community and a love of reading and writing figured into the choices we made as we were choosing a career path. We also share a desire to have a positive impact on others. Teachers are in a unique position to have this kind of influence on the world because they play a role in creating moments when people realize that

they can exceed their own expectations and accomplish things they might have never thought possible. Despite our shared motivations to enter the profession, the paths we took to get here were all a bit different. Here is how we each described how we found our way to teaching.

### ***Bob Fecho***

I was going to become a writer. At least that was the plan. But, being married young, trying to make it as a writer didn't seem to be a practical way forward. Still, I put off declaring my major as long as I could, finally opting for a BA in English coupled to teacher certification. Still, teaching remained a fallback, a Plan B, something to bring in a steady income until I could get some writing established. Although I recognized that I had some talent for the work—I felt I could teach better than the ways I was taught during most of my K-12 education—I was primarily trying to find employment to tide me over for a time.

My decision to become a teacher came in that first year of teaching at Gillespie Junior High School. Under the formidable support of Mary Smith, my department chair, and the camaraderie of colleagues, many also early in the process of becoming teachers, I found the classroom, the connections with students, and the complexity of engaging across cultural boundaries to be a place of intellectual and creative nourishment for me, but also for my students. I would be a teacher, fully committed and whole-hearted. Curiously, I did become a writer, just not the one I initially imagined, but perhaps the one whose work influenced others just as much, if not more.

### ***Dawan Coombs***

I majored in English (at least in large part) because that was the section of the ACT where I earned my best score. This is an embarrassing confession because no one should make pivotal life choices based on standardized tests, but, much to my chagrin, I did. I didn't know any better. However, I had really enjoyed reading as a kid and reading in college was no exception. There was just one catch: I didn't know what people did with English degrees after graduation besides teach. I had occasionally thought about teaching so, about a year before graduation, I decided I'd give the English teaching program a try.

I anticipated my first classroom observations with equal amounts excitement, fear, and dread, but I quickly realized that I enjoyed working with teenagers. Many of them reminded me of my younger brother who struggled with reading. I saw how his self-worth often became tangled up with his success in school and whether or not his teachers believed he could succeed. I recognized that the literature, writing, and grammar represented valuable content to be learned, but the real magic and most lasting change happened when students realized their

own potential to succeed. Some of them just needed someone else—often a teacher—to recognize it first. This was the game changer for me and now, years later as a teacher educator, this continues to hold true. For me, the best moments that happen in the classroom occur when students realize they can exceed their own expectations.

### ***Trevor Stewart***

I was what you'd call a late bloomer academically. I managed to just barely sneak in the completion of my undergraduate degree right before my 30th birthday after six years of traveling the world with a sniper rifle and a heavy rucksack. Being a college student was certainly safer than reenlisting in the Marines, even if it was boring by contrast. Teaching had never been on my radar. It was not even a backup plan for a backup plan when a good friend of mine suggested that I consider teaching at the local high school. His wife worked there, loved it, and knew they had an opening the following year. The school district was willing to hire me on an alternative license, which meant they'd let me start teaching while I pursued a teaching license via a Master of Arts in Teaching program at the local university. The support of some wonderful colleagues and the students drew me into a profession that has given me more joy than I could have imagined.

### ***Emelio DiSabato***

I have many family members who work in schools. My mom was my school librarian from preschool through eighth grade, and my stepdad was my school's computer/technology teacher (my mom still teaches; she's at a private school for girls in Columbus, which is another overlap, as I'm at a private school for girls in Seattle). I have cousins who work as school psychologists, aunts and uncles who teach, an aunt who's a principal, another aunt who's a college administrator, and other family members who work in student life roles at colleges. And my sister, just like me, teaches seventh-grade English.

I've always loved nerding out, and I took the nerdiest route I could in high school: Latin! I had vague thoughts of continuing to study Classics in graduate school, maybe become a professor, maybe try to become an archaeologist. I didn't plan to work in secondary education.

Instead of those dreamy academic visions, I moved to Cleveland after college because I landed an AmeriCorps position at a community development corporation. This was 2009—the financial crisis meant that jobs were scarce. Working at a community-based nonprofit in the city was exciting and eye-opening; I came to realize that academia wasn't the path that would satisfy me. Engaging meaningfully in community was energizing and satisfying, and it was while living and working in Cleveland that I thought of moving into teaching.