

## Just One More Thing

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We've all seen the teacher memes. You know, the all-too-relatable ones that depict teachers eager and energized on the first day of school, overwhelmed and exhausted on the last day (or at the end of the first week). We go in ready to roll, ready to do things bigger and better than we've ever done them and sometimes we do, but all of August's ambitions have tough competition when faced with dreary December days and the mania that is May. It's easy to feel dejected when you realize it's February and you haven't made good on your promise to infuse more poetry into your lessons, or when you realize you never made those bookmarks you've been promising students since October ... and it's now March. So much to do, so little time: the adage of the teacher.

That's why I've decided to focus my efforts, to identify one specific change I can and WILL make each school year that will most benefit my students and their learning. This one thing is a non-negotiable. Come what may (and May will come), I will make sure this one thing gets done.

I have Penny Kittle and Kelly Gallagher to thank for this shift in perspective. Last summer I had the good fortune of attending their conference hosted by CESA 6, where they started the first day with a quote from Steve Jobs: "To go forward, you have to leave something behind." Read: you can't do it all. Phew. Right from the get-go I was given permission to let something go. (Cue that song from *Frozen*. It's just too bad it can't be standardized testing.)

As the two-day conference continued, the sentiment shared in those first few minutes was reiterated in various ways. "We tell students what matters by what we pay attention to," I wrote in my notes after, I'm sure, one of them said it. It reminded me of a phrase a yoga instructor regularly used: "Where your eyes go, your body will follow." The conference was turning out to be a yoga session for my teaching mind. I was bending and stretching and centering my teacher self. I was finding focus.

Kittle and Gallagher's book *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* (2018) begins with a chapter titled "Start with Beliefs." It's more English teacher yoga, guided instruction for thinking through your purpose and approach. It guides you to find your focus and prioritize your efforts since, as they note in the closing thoughts in this chapter, "the budget of time is limited."

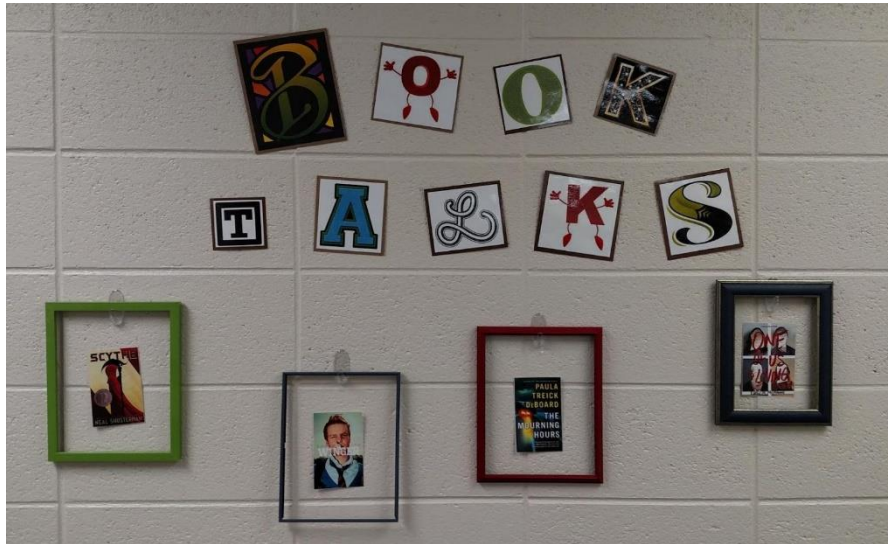
So it all comes back to that ol' adage: so much to do, so little time.

I'm no longer overwhelmed by this reality. Instead, I'm inspired. I have this currency of time and I get to choose how to spend it. I need to spend it wisely, of course, since there's not a lot of it, so I need to think about what will best help my students learn and grow as readers, writers, and thinkers.

Last year I determined that the one move I was going to make was to incorporate daily book talks. Every day I would talk about a different book. This was non-negotiable. And it was SMART. Not only is the practice backed by research by Wozniak (2011), Homan (2015), and Cremin et al (2014) (in which it is noted that "The will to read influences the skills as well"), so it's smart in the traditional sense, but it was also smart in the SMART sense. It was a goal that was Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Based. It provided me focus for making a move that would help engage and empower my students.

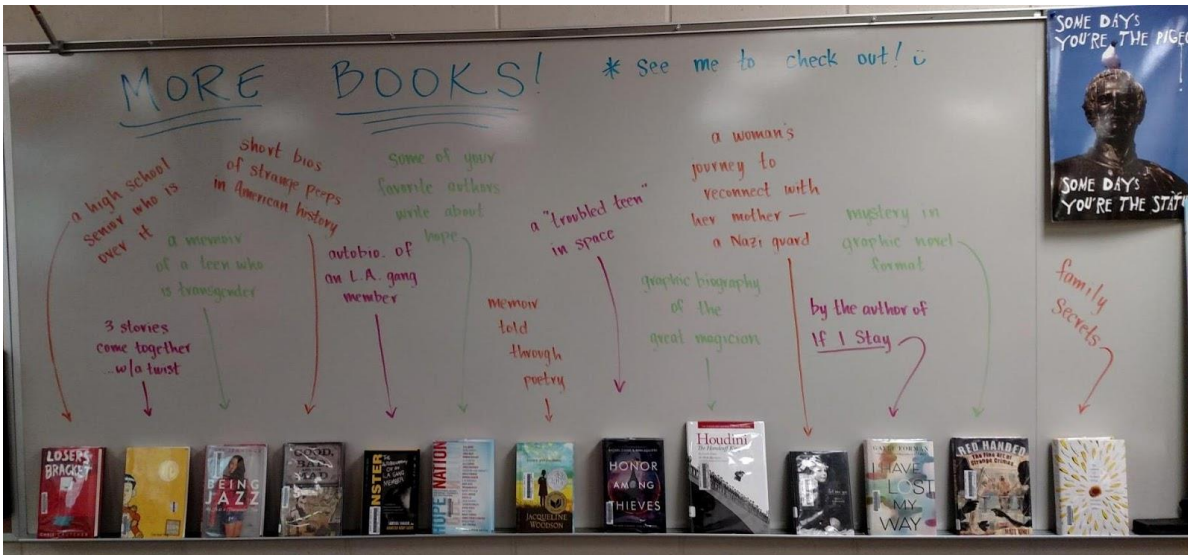
I think transparency in teaching is important and spend a significant amount of time discussing the rationale behind my teaching and our practice, so I shared my SMART goal with my students on day one. I told them why I was going to book talk every day (beyond the fact that it would be a ton of fun), and I told them that I wanted to be held accountable. I made a book talk display to preview the week's coming literary attractions and to keep me honest about my efforts. "If you don't see new book covers in the frames each week, call me out!" I said. I also told them to let me know if they felt I wasn't providing enough suggestions in a certain genre or if they weren't feeling any of the titles I was suggesting. "These book talks are for you, folks, so let me know what you want to hear!" I took requests and sometimes created themes for a week of book talks. One week was designed in response to some not-so-tactful feedback I received from a self-

identified “non-reader.” “This week’s for you, Bobby!” I said, determined to make a reader out of him yet.



I see each of my classes four times each week. Every day a new book talk.

And I kept at it. I read about books and I talked about books, and the interest, if not the love (but, yes, sometimes the love) spread. While I was focused on this one thing, I realized that I was telling students what matters by showing them what I pay attention to. Reading matters and I was focused on reading so that they would read and become better readers, better writers, and better thinkers. My eyes were focused on books and my students’ eyes followed. It was all because of just one thing.



I added this approach after seeing it modeled on social media. More books, more talk, more reading.

I finished the year having book talked a different title every single day. I dropped the last book after my last book talk of the year--like a mic drop, because I'm nerdy like that. And because I was proud. I was proud of having completed my goal, but more proud of the progress my students had made as readers, writers, and thinkers. It was all because of just one thing.

Now that I have the book talk routine down, I'm going to focus my efforts this year on daily notebook work. It'll be like the research-based practice I started at the beginning of last year--the practice that fizzled as the year went on. This year, there will be no fizzling. There will be writing. Every day. I will pay attention to this because it matters. Students will come to understand it matters because it will be what I pay attention to. When everything else vies for my teaching attention and I feel frazzled and overwhelmed, I will find my teaching center, and further student success, in just this one thing.

I'm already envisioning our collective celebratory pen drop after another successful year.

## References

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