

Year Seven...Now What?

by Crystal L. Beach, The University of Georgia

I remember not too long ago when people said five years in the teaching profession was when I would decide if I loved it or not. What I realized, though, is that five years was just a marker for when most people left the field, and it didn't have necessarily anything to do with whether they loved it or not. After all, the media has increasingly highlighted the [statistics](#), [surveys](#), [reasons](#), and [stories](#) for us. We've known these facts, though, so it's not a surprise. Of course, there is also a lot of information out there that [supports teachers](#) and reminds people how we should [be valued](#)—stories that remind us why we [joined our profession](#) in the first place, why it's [our calling](#), and why a change may be what we need to get over [the five year bump](#) in the road. Yet, five years still remains the point that may make a teacher...or send one packing. Nonetheless, seven years later and here I am, still loving teaching and the adventure that each day brings in my classroom, room 103.

Now that I've surpassed the five year bump, I keep thinking, "Year seven...now what?" I've written quite a bit in my early years as an English teacher about advocating [what new teachers need](#), and I've challenged myself both in and out of my classroom to be innovative, inquisitive, and inspiring. Thus, as I continue my teaching journey, three key tenets stand out for me during the last days of this summer as I gear up for another year. The big surprise? These are the same three tenets that also stood out when I first started teaching: support, collaboration, and professional development.

To me, these three important areas are crucial for our success; after all, we have to learn to advocate for ourselves, which sometimes means we have to take care of ourselves to be the best we can be for our students, colleagues, and school communities. With this point in mind, I wanted to share a few ways in which we, as teachers, might begin to focus on "self-care" to help strengthen ourselves (and perhaps even our profession!).

Self-care reminder #1: Surround yourself with those who support your goals of becoming the teacher you want to be.

Not too long ago, I sat in a talk by [Kevin Carroll](#) and was reminded of the importance of surrounding myself with people who support me and my big

dreams. He reminded me that we remember our good teachers and mentors—and we don't remember the others. I am a firm believer that good teachers happen because of good leaders and mentors. In my case, I've been very fortunate to work for a principal who gets what it means to educate the whole child. His support, and that of my incredible school community, is one of the biggest reasons I am the teacher I am today.

However, I know that I'm lucky. From talking with colleagues across the United States, especially those in their earlier years of teaching, I've found that sadly many feel they don't have the support to dream big within their classrooms in today's testing culture. With this point in mind, look for leaders in your district or surrounding districts and reach out to them. Reach out to one or two colleagues in the building and collaborate on one "big" idea that you all want to try.

As I noted previously, I've been extremely lucky to have many great leaders and mentors who have continued to push me to think about what I have to offer to my students, colleagues, and the profession as a whole. Thus, I strive to surround myself with people, either face-to-face or online, who are positive, who are innovative, and who dream big, too. When teachers do this, they'll find that they can "play," or try out new ideas, and have guidance along the way through the communities that they build. Ultimately, the more we seek out other big dreamers, the bigger our support community becomes with others who share the same drive that we have.

(And if you still aren't sure where or how to build your support community, feel free to connect with me on [Twitter](#), and I'd love to be your first member!)

Self-care reminder #2: Collaboration is all around you; take advantage of the connections you can make.

While I collaborate daily with my colleagues, I've found collaboration doesn't just happen with teachers, but it happens in the classroom with our students, too. I'm investigating new ways to work big ideas into my classroom and how I can engage students within our collaborative, connected learning space. In other words, I'm thinking of ways I can be a [better listener](#), and what that might look like within my classroom.

For example, I set up a Google Form twice a semester for all of my students to complete. In it, they are asked three simple questions: 1) What have you liked and why?, 2) What have you not liked and why?, and 3) Is there anything else you'd like for me to know? They may or may not put their names, though I find that most end up adding them, anyway. With these questions, I am able to garner a better understanding of what I'm doing well, and more importantly, what I can improve upon in my teaching. And while students may not think of themselves as "collaborating" on lesson plans, their feedback helps me tweak and design better lessons in the end.

Another example is through using Google Documents to create opportunities for collaborative peer feedback on students' writing. Our end of the year writing assignment focused on vignettes of moments in students' lives that caused something to "tip" (pulled from [Malcolm Gladwell's notion from *The Tipping Point*](#)), and this assignment was where I saw all of our collaborative feedback really prove to be powerful. Not only were students the experts in the room as they offered suggestions to improve their peers' writing, but something else unexpected happened: a community of listeners was created. And this community valued the personal stories and voices that were shared through the vignettes; it was a community that was built on a simple, big idea—to improve students' writing. This community wouldn't have shaped into what it was, though, without the collaborative nature of the feedback process.

So, what do these examples mean? Think of it this way: A teacher's students all resoundingly note how creating a public service announcement about a social justice issue made them better understand how to craft an argument. Then, a teacher would have the "data" to suggest a project that addresses an issue that students identified within their own community. Maybe this project brings in other school or community stakeholders or supports why teachers needed more access to technology in the building...the possibilities are endless. However, the point is that when teachers collaborate with students, they can then advocate for what they need for their students by collaborating with administration to make those big dreams possible.

Self-care reminder #3: Find what works for your professional development and take advantage of any and all opportunities that will help you grow.

While my district provides great opportunities for us to grow (I attended a phenomenal [ISTE conference](#) previously, and I'm looking forward to an amazing [NCTE](#) this fall), I know that sometimes I have to speak up if there is something I feel that I need to attend. Teachers need to advocate for themselves to attend professional development (PD) that is meaningful to them. Yes, be prepared to answer why you need PD—I know I've had to—and be confident with your answer. Remind your administration what you will be bringing back to your own classroom and to share with your colleagues.

We all have unique needs for what is necessary to help us grow, so come up with an action plan. I know that sometimes I have to seek out even more because it's what I need. For me, this means checking out new [research articles](#) or engaging with various [Twitter chats](#). It also means thinking about how I can improve the ways [I use technology in the classroom](#). Thus, I've realized that I cannot sit back and become stagnant; I need to take advantage of any opportunities I can track down out there. (And don't forget your support community is a great place for informal PD to occur!)

As we head into the new school year—and I know some have already started—my advice for others around the five year mark (or anytime, for that matter) in the profession is to remember the three tenets above and seek out those people and opportunities for support, collaboration, and professional development. In addition, push yourself [to live](#), to be the [change](#), and to remember why you went into the profession in the first place. We also need to remember to advocate for and take care of ourselves, too, so that we can keep giving and be the best teachers for our students. Don't be afraid to tell your department head or administration what you need to make yourself a better teacher. (And remember, [you are not alone!](#))

For me, I'm not sure what my “now what” will be, but I know I'm headed onward and focused on how I can be the best teacher I can for my amazing students who inspire me each and every day. The future is very bright.



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