50 Ways to Help Your Students Find Their Voice

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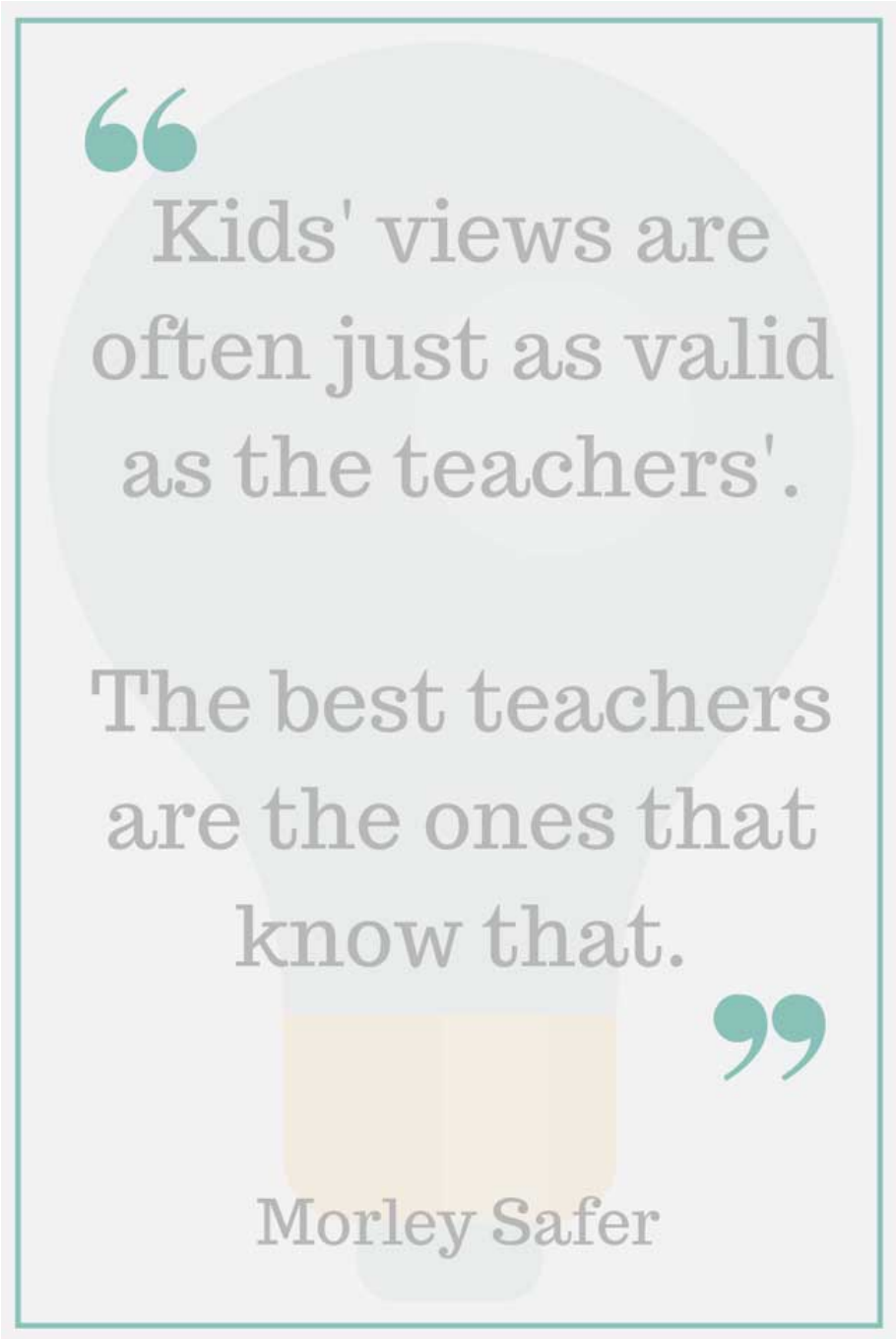

What does it mean to find your voice? Having the courage to speak up? Expressing your opinions more often? Having opinions in the first place? Or is it more than that? "We each have our own fingerprint; we each have our own voice," says Kylie Minogue, host of The Voice. A

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hackneyed analogy from a questionable source, perhaps, but somehow it satisfies.

Finding your voice can be as simple as piping up in class or as complicated as defining your life goals. As teachers, most of us would probably like to hear a little less of our own voice and a little more of our students'. So let's use our experience and authority to help our students discover what makes each of them unique and prevent it from going unrecognized.

1. Practice positive reinforcement.

Students should want to find their voice. Make it a positive experience.

2. Allow for creative expression.

Students should be given the freedom not only to voice what they think but also to voice it however they choose. Let them be creative with the how and you will most likely be pleased with the what.

3. Give students more discussion time to explore and develop their ideas.

Many of us are afraid that we won't be able to cover all the material we need to cover if we devote too much time to discussion. The truth is, discussion enhances learning and memory, as does forming an opinion about a topic. Use this to your advantage and you won't have a time crunch on your hands at all.

4. Offer more engaging prompts.

The best marketing and advertising provokes us on emotional, personal, or comical levels. Try using these same strategies to get students to speak out on topics covered in your curriculum.

5. Blogging.

Perhaps one of the best tools available for supporting student voice, blogging has become a common platform in schools across the world.

6. Storify or Storehouse.

With these apps, students curate the most powerful voices on the web and turn them into guided tours.

7. Podcasting or VoiceThread.

Tools like podcasting and VoiceThread bridge the gap between real-time discussions and standard video lectures or online presentations. This makes both great platforms for teaching, learning, training, and collaborating.

8. YouTube Channels.

Invite students to create their own educational videos to post on YouTube.

9. Digital storytelling.

If you haven't tried this one yet, give it a go. The topics used in digital

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storytelling range from personal tales to the recounting of historical events, from exploring life in one's own community to the search for life in other corners of the universe, and literally, everything in between.

10. Writing in the voice of a character.

Emulating a character from a book or a film is a great way to "try out" different voices.

11. Help students find their passion.

Passionate people don't remain quiet for long.

12. Recognize those who speak out.

This doesn't mean saying, "Thank you for volunteering, Greg" in front of the whole class or giving extra credit points to your more vocal students. It means pulling Greg aside after class and telling him privately that you appreciate his courage, or referring to his comment later in the discussion as "Greg's comment." It's the personal touch that is most rewarding.

13. Showcase inspiring stories.

The more evidence of successful self-expression students see, the more likely they are to try it themselves.

14. Support innovation.

Making something new both necessitates and perpetuates new thinking.

15. Make lessons personally relevant.

It's easier for students to see where their voice might fit in to a situation if that situation is relevant to their daily lives.

16. Let students disagree with you.

Most of us relish arguments we haven't heard before. Make sure your students feel comfortable enough to express them.

17. Encourage casual debate.

Debate is one of the best excuses to exercise your voice.

18. Reward risks.

Students will find their voices much more quickly if they aren't afraid of taking risks.

19. Give second chances.

Nothing's worse than a failed attempt at self-expression. Be aware of attempts when you see them and encourage students to keep trying.

20. Don't dismiss fleeting interest.

Interest is interest, and it's always a good thing–or can at least be channeled

into a good thing. Encourage students to satisfy as many curiosities as possible so that they may find what they truly care about.

21. Welcome feedback on your teaching.

This is one of the best ways to show your students' voices matter.

22. Be a better listener.

No one admits to being a poor listener. We all think we've got the gift. The truth is, no matter how good we are, we can always be better. Our students' voices depend on it.

23. Inquire, think, reflect.

Have students ask questions on a topic, consider possible answers, and evaluate the accuracy of each. This can be a great voice-strengthening exercise.

24. Let each student solve a unique problem.

Don't make every problem a competition; let students feel personally connected and responsible for their own issue from time to time.

25. Promote research.

An opinion backed by research makes for a stronger voice.

26. Brainstorm with your students.

Be part of the process in order to treat all voices equally.

27. Show that you don't have all the answers.

Having a voice doesn't mean you are always right.

28. Recognize progress and performance.

While all of us appreciate effort, it's the progress we really want to see. Make sure students know the difference between the two, and help them understand what you expect.

29. Help students elaborate and dig deeper.

Not all analyzing is over-analyzing.

30. Have patience.

Let each student finish their thought, and don't immediately step in when they struggle with words.

31. Practice visualization techniques.

Students who visualize self-expression will be more likely to express themselves in real life.

32. Help students determine what they want.

Knowing what you want can lead to knowing what you think, and feeling motivated to express it.

33. Build respect for one's opinion.

A student's voice doesn't have to be "right" or "popular" but it does have to reflect self-respect.

34. You don't get what you don't ask for.

Emphasize the cold hard truth: no one will magically guess how you feel or what you want if you don't express yourself.

35. Personal missions.

Get students thinking about personal missions early on in the year and have them conduct "self check-ins" every few months.

36. Reflections on the past.

It's sometimes easiest to view your present self in terms of how your past has shaped you. Ask students to reflect on their "old selves" and they may learn a thing or two about who they are today.

37. Identifying patterns.

Urge students to remain aware of their own interests, passions, and ideas, and to try to identify themes and patterns when present.

38. Sharing triumphs and challenges.

You can get to know yourself better by sharing your experiences with others.

39. Documenting new ideas.

Encourage students to record new ideas, in the moment, as they arise.

40. Invite each student to lead.

Students should be asked to lead, whether they accept the offer or not. Keep asking, throughout the year, and eventually, having watched so many others do it, they will realize it's not so scary.

41. Practice empathy.

And teach it, too. Empathy is one of the most powerful tools students can use to make themselves heard. It's all about knowing your audience.

42. Talk about resilience.

Students need to know that people will try to shoot them down, stifle or change their views, and reject them for thinking and acting the way they do. This is a given; what's harder, and more important, is how students respond.

43. Explore different forms of leadership.

Not all leadership requires standing at the front of a conference room and running meetings. Leadership can come from art, social media, teaching others, and much more.

44. Don't force participation; inspire it.

Cold-calling or requiring participation won't help students find their voice. If you can spark participation with an engaging lesson or controversial question, you're on the right track.

45. Urge students to explain their views.

Agreeing or disagreeing with a concept is a start, but if students can explain why they agree or disagree, they'll be one step closer to turning all those opinions into a single voice.

46. Emphasize the right to voice your opinion.

Students should understand that they have a basic right to voice their opinions and find their calling in life.

47. Teach a lesson on freedom of speech.

If finding your voice is supported by the law, it can't be that scary.

48. Encourage emulation.

The best and brightest learn from the best and brightest before them.

49. Provide a platform.

Whether your students like writing, speaking, or building–you'll need to support their means of self-expression with an appropriate platform.

50. Expose students to radical ideas.

Non-radical ideas are cool too, but they don't supprt unique voices the way radical ones do.

About Saga Briggs

Saga has taught and tutored writing at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. Her educational interests include psychology, creativity, and system reform. She earned a B.A. in Creative Writing from Oberlin College and lives in Portland, Oregon, USA.

You can reach her on Google+ , @sagamilena or saga.briggs @ oc.edu.au.