

# Choosing What Actually Matters

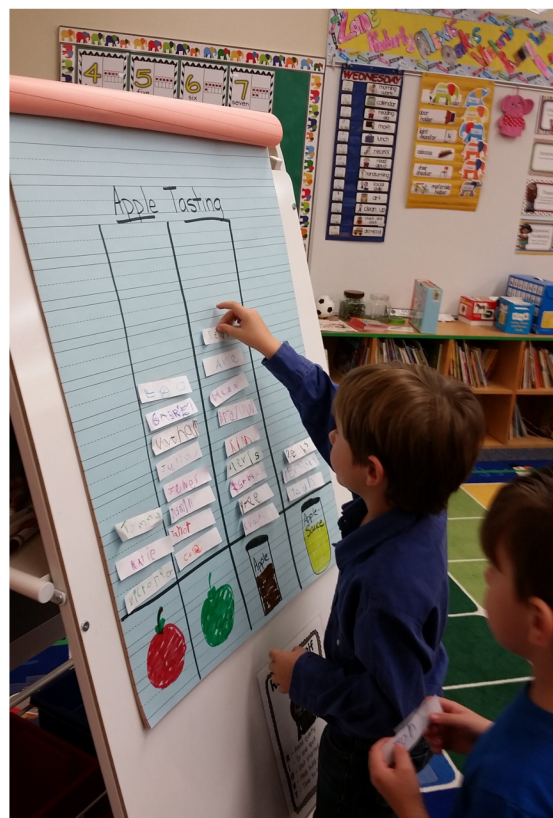
by dottysplace

There was a point, in my teaching career, where it felt like everything was changing. Teacher autonomy was disappearing. No Child Left Behind was growing. And state and local standards were being replaced by the Common Core.

If you were a teacher during this period, you were bombarded with a lot of new ideas and strategies. I remember taking courses showing novel methods for classroom management. I remember unpacking and empowering standards. I was learning new ways to teach Math. And encouraged to offer more hands-on experiences with Science.

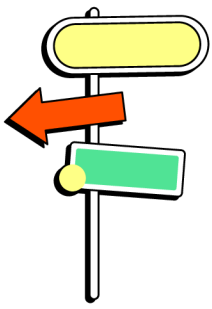
I have to admit, I loved all the knowledge that I was learning. I would often volunteer for book studies and discussion groups. I would attend classes and watch videos. Even our weekly Professional Development meetings became showcases for leaving old practices behind.

Everywhere I looked, I was witnessing amazing examples. Most of it was inspiring. I feel like this is when I really began to become a practiced teacher. I was challenged to become better. And, I tried as many new strategies as possible. But after a while, it became too much. It started to feel more like I was being pressured.



This is a class graph. Students had tasted different apples, including juice and cider, and identified their favorite.





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## The Need for Discernment

The constant exposure to things that were beyond my level began to feel overwhelming. Instead of feeling motivated, I started to feel like I wasn't doing enough. I saw my activities, in their meager state, and knew that they were just the tip of the iceberg. I felt like I was always behind. And that I should be doing more. At some point, I had to remind myself that I wasn't being asked to be perfect. The purpose was not for me to implement every strategy I encountered. These were simply options. And a means for me to find my niche.

It was up to me to use discernment. To determine what would work for me, my teaching style and my comfort zone. Using discernment was how I regained my own power. It meant that I felt less shame and stopped feeling forced to do anything. Discernment caused me to look at each option for the value that it would hold for me and my particular situation. I continued to take classes and learn. I continued to see amazing examples. But using discernment meant that I was looking at them from the view of a shopper or designer. This felt empowering. It moved me away from the viewpoint that my performance was constantly being judged.

That change in perspective was important. But that was only one of the types of pressure I was feeling.

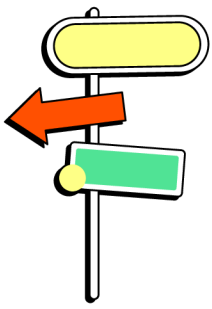
## Curriculum and Pacing Guides

The second kind of pressure came from curriculum and pacing guides. I have to admit, I did not start off being a big fan of either. Sometimes they made me feel rushed. I was bothered that I wasn't always allowed to provide the level of depth that was needed. This was especially hard those years that I taught English Language Learners or Special Needs clusters.

I eventually developed several solutions. I won't go into all of them here. But they helped ease my stress and moved me toward a more balanced approach. One that was able to offset outside expectations with my own constraints.

One method had to do with connecting STEM activities to subjects like Reading, Writing, and Math. It allowed me to add depth and enrich my teaching, without feeling like I was stepping off course. My students became more engaged overall.





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My secret, if I can call it that, hinged on my understanding of the standards. I felt it was important to know them well. I would spend time defining what each standard would look like in practice. I looked closely at the verbs to determine the minimum level my students should reach. Once I saw the standards as a guide, instead of an obstacle, they became useful. In a way, they granted me permission to do more. They allowed me to justify the steps I took. They were aligned with what was expected. At the same time, they helped me to discern what to teach. They gave me the courage to begin saying, “no.”

## Discernment and Lesson Planning

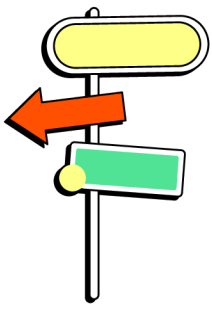
Once I brought discernment to the equation, there were activities I began to turn down. Not because they were bad. Not because they didn’t have value. But because I couldn’t afford low-yield activities when my students needed depth. I was facing the reality that I no longer had the time to do all the things I would have wanted to do.

Here’s what it looked like. If something required only a minute of real thinking, I couldn’t justify giving it fifteen minutes of class time. Sometimes that meant limiting my “cutesy” seasonal projects. I still enjoyed those kinds of things, but now I rarely did them. And when I did, I found ways to regulate them. Drawing and coloring were often moved to open exploration periods. That’s when students were free to create without slowing down the pace of learning.

And as I became more comfortable evaluating lessons, I realized I wasn’t interested in activities that offered limited practice. I wanted the most “bang for my buck.” That phrase became my quiet measuring stick. For me, it meant that I was being intentional and using what I had in the best possible way.

I often combined work so it served more than one purpose. For instance, if my students needed practice with a specific writing form, I would embed it into their STEM recording sheets. If we were practicing how to work or display data, I might connect it to a hands-on investigation. I learned how to look at activities and ask, “Can this pull double duty?”





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## The Benefit I Didn't Expect

For me, using discernment was a way to protect my time and protect my students. It eased the pressure I felt to find more hours in the day. By compressing lessons or combining them thoughtfully, I found that I could piggyback hands-on STEM learning without it feeling like a deviation from the plan. And the best part? My students practiced a variety of skills without hardly noticing that learning was taking place.

## A Final Note

If you take anything from this article, I hope it is this fact. There is no single right method for teaching. What you prepare should serve your particular needs. It should support your teaching style. It should support the various learning styles of your students. It needs to work within your pacing guides and align with the standards you are required to teach.

You don't need to go out of your way to find more activities. For most topics and skills, a simple web search will give you more than you could ever use. That's the easy part. What you really need is discernment.

That thoughtful ability to evaluate what is worth your time. And, also the ability to insert meaningful learning experiences in ways that produce optimal growth. This means having the ability to say no, even when something looks impressive.

You don't need more ideas. You need the confidence to choose wisely.