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Mirror, Mirror: Why I Love the NBPTS

I'm shy. But when I'm with my students, I feel full of energy and assertiveness. Teaching has gifted me with my voice, and I've learned to use it in all corners of my life.

Yet, despite so much evidence of my worth to my students, in my deepest heart (and often at the forefront of my brain), I often felt like less of a teacher than the guy next door. Regardless of my professional successes, insecurity began to undercut everything I achieved in my classroom. I moved in and got comfy with some serious shame.

Let me explain. Today, the teacher next door is hosting a circus-themed bash to celebrate the end of AP exams. I am not. He is running a game of Survivor for his Academic Team after school. I am not. His class includes what feels like thousands of competitive games that often result in spontaneous whooping and applauding that float through the walls. Mine does not.

I' ve taught next to this guy for 13 years. I coached him during his first year of teaching, and we' ve shared many professional experiences since. We' ve eaten lunch together more than 2,000 times.

To complicate things further, I teach juniors and he teaches seniors. My students move from a year with me to a year with him. Naturally, the kids make comparisons, talking frequently about our differences and our relative worth to their academic futures. This gives me tons of time and opportunity to dwell on my real and perceived failings. (To sum: I concede success to the fabulousness of my students, and I claim blame for the rest. Sound familiar?)

When this teacher and another remarkable young man from my department decided to work on earning National Board certification, there was no way I wasn' t going to play, too. The three of us undertook that journey together, and some things finally started to make sense to me— in both my heart and my mind.

Teachers, like anyone, cannot help but compare ourselves to those around us. My wall-mate sets a high standard. And, given the daily scrutiny of our every move by our students, we have to steel ourselves against self-doubt. Nothing cripples a teacher faster than that negative monologue that can run endlessly in our heads, pointing out every possible flaw in our work—and in ourselves.

Teaching is very personal. So, how do we separate others' judgment of our performance from our worth as human beings?

The National Board process asks teachers to take a mirror, hold it up, and look insanely closely at our professional selves. I worried that as I went through this intense process of dissecting my work, I would confirm my worst fears and come up short. I don' t like hearing my own voice on my voicemail, much less watching hours of video-recorded lessons as I critique my word choice, organization, lesson plans, and hair style.

Yet, I did it. During this process, I wrote pages of descriptive rationale for my

choices. I reflected on why I made the choices I did and analyzed the results they proffered. I made new plans for next time. Teachers often do this in their everyday practice. Yet, because this certification process requires such close examination, as well as substantive data to support conclusions, my judgments felt directly connected to my students' success or failure in a more meaningful way than my usual, more informal connections.

More importantly, with the [National Board Core Standards](#) winding around in my head, I began to push and pull at what I knew—and thought I knew—about my work. I questioned my core assumptions and reexamined practices I'd used unthinkingly for years. Because I deeply respect these standards, I desperately wanted my work to reflect them.

It's funny how we make all sorts of allowances for weakness in our students but rarely do that for ourselves. Every kid we teach is different, and so are we. As it turned out, opening my classroom doors and my mind didn't reveal my failings so much as offer me an opportunity to explore and rejoice in what I know and love, what I have yet to understand, and what I didn't even know to ponder about my job and myself.

In the end, this practice helped me see not who I wasn't, but who I could become. What myself and my colleagues could become together.

Thankfully, all three of us earned National Board Certification that year. The next year, a fourth member of our team successfully undertook the process. Now, we spend a lot of time celebrating the marvelous adventure our students undertake as they move through high school, every teacher affording them a distinctly unique experience. We each have passion and creativity that manifests in different ways. No wonder we flip out when others raise the idea of a standardized daily routine. It feels like an attempt to standardize us.

Today, the rock-star teacher next door is having a party (he just came over and offered me some food – we're friends like that) while my kids are doing some reflective writing (me too). I didn't organize after-school Survivor, but I did stay

after to sponsor our Gay-Straight Alliance. My students don't compete much, but they do collaborate. And, it gets noisy in here, too. Just a different kind of noisy.

And most days? We both offer a rigorous, engaging, well-rounded experience that gives kids the chance to learn, push themselves, and inspire all of us.



"Me" by me in 1993