



THE GUT-LEVEL TEACHER REFLECTION

5 QUESTIONS THAT PINPOINT
YOUR REAL NEEDS

Jennifer Gonzalez



Sometimes I will be going about my normal day and I'll notice a negative haze has descended on me — some vague feeling of apprehension, guilt, or maybe self-pity — but I won't have a clue where it came from. If I ignore this feeling, it just gets worse. But if I stop and try to trace it back to where it came from, I can usually pinpoint something: An off-the-cuff comment that sparked jealousy. A news preview that spun me into a worry spiral. The facial expression of an acquaintance that planted a seed of insecurity. Once I nail down the source of a bad feeling, I can think it through and make a plan to deal with it.

This practice can be applied to our teaching as well. The end of a school year is a natural time to reflect, and while it's easy to find good questions for reviewing accomplishments and setbacks, I believe that to learn as much as possible from a reflection on your teaching, you have to let your gut talk, too.

Here are five questions that can help you listen to your body's emotional responses and uncover problem areas in your teaching. Use when the year is done, before the start of a new semester, or any time it feels like things aren't going well, but you just can't figure out why. They will work best if you process them at a quiet time, when you can do each one slowly. If that's not possible, just looking over the questions should sharpen your awareness of how your body responds to the different facets of your work.

1. Look around your classroom (or picture it in your mind). What parts of the room make you feel tense, anxious, or exhausted? What parts make you feel calm, happy, or proud?

Sometimes the reasons for these feelings will be clear — your back table is always cluttered, the traffic patterns in one part of the room were awful, a particular shelf contains materials that never got used, for an activity that never ended up happening. In other cases, the reasons may be deeper: You were hanging that poster right before you gave your class the worst yelling you've ever unleashed. Two kids

got into a fight right by the pencil sharpener. The classroom phone reminds you of a terrible call you received.

After considering all parts of your room, pick 2 to 3 hot spots that need the most attention. These should be your priorities for change.

2. Open up your plan book (or spreadsheet, or wherever you keep your lesson plans from the year) and just start browsing, paying attention to how you're feeling as your eyes meet certain events. What days and weeks give you a lift when you see them, a feeling of pride or satisfaction? Which ones make you feel disappointed, irritated or embarrassed?

You may not know exactly what made certain lessons great and others not so great, but your gut-level reaction will tell you there's something to investigate. Did you take a risk that paid off in some exhilarating learning gains? Did you try something new that completely flopped? Do you see a lot of the same thing, over and over again? Were there times when your plans fell apart because you said yes when you should have said no?

Try to find common themes or patterns. What changes do you need to make so you feel less stressed about your workload, and more satisfied about how you design your students' learning experiences?

3. Take a look at your student roster. What do you feel when you see each name? Which names make you feel relaxed, satisfied and proud, which ones make your chest tighten with regret, and which ones make your stomach tense?

Look for patterns here, too. If several students give you the same bad feeling, try to find the common thread between them. Is there a hole in your [classroom management](#) style? Are there quiet, well-behaved students you haven't given much [attention](#) to? Do you need to learn more about working effectively with [minority](#) students? Do you lack confidence when working with [autistic](#) students?

Once you have identified some themes in the relationships you have with your students, choose 2 to 3 areas where you need to grow. And next year, consider [collecting student feedback](#) in a systematic way.

4. Mentally travel from classroom to classroom, picturing each teacher in the building. What are your feelings as you approach each one? Which coworkers

give you a generally positive feeling, which ones are neutral, and which ones make you feel nervous, angry, or annoyed?

Your relationships with your colleagues have a huge impact on how you feel about coming to work every day. Are there [Marigolds and Walnut Trees](#) in your midst that you've never identified? Are there some strong, positive teachers in the building whom you feel intimidated by, but should probably get to know better? Is it time to fix a relationship that has been damaged?

After going through the faculty and staff, choose a few people with whom you need to change your relationship, whether by repairing it, limiting it, or nurturing it.

5. Look at the following professional practice “buzzwords.” As you read each one, do you have positive, negative, or mixed feelings? What other words have you heard a lot this year that give you a strong feeling one way or the other?

technology

differentiation

data

research-based strategies

Common Core

higher-level thinking

flipped learning

standards-based

student choice

PLC

If any of these words give you negative or hard-to-name emotions, chances are you're feeling insecure about these topics. The struggle may be caused by policies you have nothing to do with, or they may indicate an area where you need to grow. If it's the latter, this is an opportunity to take one weakness and face it head-on — make it a priority to develop your skills in that area.

IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES AND CREATING AN ACTION PLAN

After working through each question, take what you learned and turn it into a plan of action. For each of the five areas (classroom, planning, students, co-workers, professional practice) identify one or two priorities for change. They may be positives into which you want to put more energy, negatives you want to correct, or ambiguities that need more investigation. Then, jot down a concrete plan to address each priority, including deadlines when possible. Here's a sample completed action plan, using the worksheet that's available for download:

Priorities and Action Plan: For each of the five areas above identify one or two priorities for change. They may be positives into which you want to put more energy, negatives you want to correct, or ambiguities that need more investigation. Then, jot down a concrete plan to address each priority.		
	Priorities	Action Plan
Area 1: Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- figure out what to do about make-up work and work for students out for discipline- warm up room	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Research make-up work organization on Pinterest.- find area rugs at yard sales by August 1
Area 2: Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- revamp whole research unit- apply project-based principles to more units	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- talk to Patty and Grace about theirs, adapt plan- add open-ended project options to nonfiction and narrative assessments
Area 3: Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- focus more on reinforcing positive- give shy kids more participation opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- goal of 2 positive parent contacts per class, per week- compliment 2 kids per class period on something specific (keep track)- research this one.
Area 4: Co-workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- repair relationship with Morgan- get to know Simon and Tessa better	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ask her to lunch by July 1.- Start going to happy hour on Fridays next year
Area 5: Professional Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- get on Twitter and quit being afraid of it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- set up Twitter account and follow 30 people by July 1.

THE FINAL STEP: SHARE WITH A FRIEND

The positive effects of doing this kind of reflection will be maximized if you and a few other teachers do the exercise, then share your results. We work too often in isolation, but we all have the same struggles. [Opening up to other teachers](#) is one of the best ways to grow as a teacher and love what you do.