

# What Are Our Roles?

## Pembroke's Friday Freebie

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### Student-Driven Learning

Small, medium, and big steps to engage and empower students



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**“Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything one learned in school.”**

— Albert Einstein

### What Do We Want Our Students to Learn?

What is the end goal of formal education? Is it important that students can recite the structure of the feudal system, describe what synonyms are, or make food chains? These tidbits of information are important and, if the students are engaged, they can be very interesting. However, in the end, when students leave the education system and step out into the bigger world, what do they need to know? In our rapidly developing world, we can no longer cling to the idea that everyone must know the same things, that with a “blanket” education all students will emerge from the system with the same information and the same skills. It is impossible to fully prepare our students with all knowledge that will be required in their unknown future. Teaching our students to sit, listen, and systematically move through routines and information will not guarantee them a successful future.

What we can do, as educators, is teach our students how to learn; we can instill a sense of inquiry and wonder. Rather than memorizing facts, our students will need to know how to source information. Instead of reciting things learned by rote, they will need to know how to react to facial expressions. Students will need to know what to do with all kinds of information when they access it. They need to understand how to connect information, critically analyze it, get creative with it, and apply it to their new surroundings. They need to know how to learn actively.

### What Are Our Roles?

As decrees our profession, the role of the teacher is never static. We used to be demonstrators, bearers of knowledge, dictators, social mediators, and even police officers, all wrapped up into one neat little package. As our classrooms have shifted to more engaged learning, increased use of digital technology, and collaborative structures, our role has also changed. Our students need different versions of “teacher” at different points in time. We continue to balance ourselves in various roles and juggle our interactions based on the needs of our students.

When asked *What is an effective teacher?* this is how our students responded:

- *The teacher would do a little bit of everything—a little working, a little playing, a little reading.*
- *Instead of doing regular math, make math into games.*
- *A teacher who makes it fun, not just work.*
- *Someone who makes real-life comparisons.*
- *Keeps you interested and engaged.*
- *Tells you about tests in advance.*
- *Does not give you praise when you don't deserve it.*
- *Someone who connects to the students.*
- *Funny, but knows when to be serious.*
- *They can be strict when they need to be, but not so strict that there is no fun.*

**FACILITATORS**

We are now the guides, facilitators, and meddlers. We need to help our students explore, wonder, ask questions, critically think, and ultimately learn important concepts in ways that promote active learning. We need to teach so that our students are engaged in and passionate about their learning, and we are guiding them to the end goal. As facilitators, we are listening to their ideas, collaboration, and goals. As meddlers we guide their process, model ideas, and push our students to think and explore ideas they might not have considered.

**SKILL DEVELOPERS**

We need ensure our students are prepared for the outside world. Certain basic skills are necessary, such as fluency with math facts and the structure of a sentence. More importantly, we also need to ensure our students have obtained the skills of learning, listening, and processing and adapting what they have absorbed. They need the skills of finding information, making connections, asking the right questions, and substantiating their answers.

**ARTISTS**

Our new role has us thinking outside of a textbook or procedural piece. We are not moving in a linear line. To facilitate and build our students' skills, we need to be divergent thinkers and consider which direction to push them in. We need to present options and think of problems and solutions that will extend their thinking. We need to think creatively about ways to reach our students and to inspire them to think creatively.

**RESOURCERS**

In our traditional teaching role of bearer of knowledge, we have been replaced. We are no longer expected to know all the information. The new bearer of knowledge is technology and our students have access to it. They can find information, match it to a visual, and possibly find a linking video to guide them step-by-step through a tricky concept. They do not need us to dictate facts or recite information; they can do that on their own in a few clicks. Their world is technology-based, and their future relies on their ability to find information quickly. Technology has not diminished our roles as teachers or the value of school. While students can access some information independently, curiosity needs fuel—that is the role of the educators. We also need to teach them how to sift through the information and to distinguish what information answers their questions, what information comes from a reliable source, and what information can be discarded.

**COLLABORATORS**

As we no longer deliver information, we are also learning with our students. We are guiding and facilitating, and also collaborating. We share directions or ideas to build on their ideas. We place them with an appropriate partner or push them in the direction of someone who will inspire them. We build a collaborative environment.

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**CRITICAL CHEERLEADERS**

As our students learn, experiment, and try different solutions, we are part of their feedback. We need to guide them with a belief that they can do anything and then cheer them on when they achieve their goals. We need to build their creative confidence. We also need to step back and be realistic, set targets for them, and offer critical and obtainable feedback for growth.

**“The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by private trial and error, to be sure—but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks.”**

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (1988)

**DETOUR: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

Endeavoring to do something different in our practice can be difficult if we feel we are alone in our decision to move away from tradition. While conversations in the staff room can give us some opportunity to share our experiences, these kinds of conversations are usually informal and may or may not be with people who are trying to do similar things.

In education, there has been a push to form professional learning communities (PLCs) at both grassroots and administrative levels. Richard DuFour, a leading figure in researching the efficacy of PLCs, describes a PLC as an ongoing process by which educators collaborate in inquiry and action research into best teaching and learning practices. The primary goal of any professional learning community in education is to improve student learning.

Sometimes these groups are formed within schools, across school boards, or through online communities. Online communities, with their global reach, can be especially enriching; you might be sharing and interacting with educators from all over the world.

Professional learning communities can provide

- Exposure to and development of new skills and capabilities
- Opportunities to share best practices with other teachers
- Increased communication and trust among teachers
- Possibilities to investigate different learning strategies
- Chances to develop new tools for teaching and assessment
- Reflection on evidence-based classroom research