

Lisa Samra, faculty at Triton College
“Tea Time” talk

As you know, I’m full-time speech faculty, and I’ve been here for 10 years. Before that I taught speech for many, many years as well. But some days I drive to work and I wonder: what else could I be doing for a living? A therapist, a lawyer? Could I be a college administrator? Could I be an entrepreneur? Or a restaurant owner? (That’s one I think about a lot.)

I want to talk today about self-doubt, the kind of doubt we might all experience at one time or another in our lives.

So for teachers, particularly teachers in the Liberal Arts area, this kind of uncertainty is really built in. We know that profound learning often occurs well after the course has ended. We have tests, we have assessments, we have rubrics, we “close the loop,” right? (That’s teacher speak.)

But the continuum of learning is such that we also know that many of the Aha moments that students have occur in some distant point in the future. We’re just laying down the groundwork for this moment to occur, right? And knowing this is challenging because you could go down the path of wondering whether or not what needed doing matters. Is this making a difference at all? And it’s particularly hard when students come in and they may not care about what you’re talking about.

And that’s really hard to see as well.

One day last summer, I was at my neighborhood farmer’s market. I really love the farmer’s market. I love food. I love to eat. And I love to cook. The farmer’s market is my very special place.

So I’m walking in the market and I’m looking. I like to look at everything in the market first before I buy anything.

So I’m looking at everything, and my kids want to have some money to go get a treat and they’re scurrying around . . . so I give them what they need to get out of my way and let me have my happy place.

So I’m standing in the middle of the market and I’m pausing to figure out where I’m going to go next. And up comes this lovely young man in sunglasses. And he says, “You probably don’t remember me.” And I said, “Take off your glasses.” And he did. He’s like, “It’s me, Jesse. I took your speech class.” I said, “I *do* recognize you.” I didn’t remember his name, though, or any details about the class. But he was very excited. He says, “Yeah, you really kicked my ass in that class. Yeah, you were really hard.”

I started thinking: was I too hard? Did I not support this person enough? Am I asking too much? And he goes on, “I graduated in the spring, I got my associate’s and I have a job! I have a job . . . speaking! I go into schools, I teach little kids about healthy eating and I use the stuff from your class *all the time*. Everything we talked about, I’m using.”

Well, I was excited after hearing this. This is a really special moment for me. And we were both grinning and we were so happy and I was slapping him on the arm. We weren’t really teacher and student anymore. This was a moment where I get to see that loop closing, that you don’t get to see in class.

So I go home from the market, I've got my bags of vegetables and I looked the guy up in my records. And he was a terrible student in my class. He did horribly: turning in stuff late, not following the format, you know, no bibliography. And I didn't find him to be a particularly expressive person either.

So I was very surprised. Like, here's this guy, he's so excited and I'm excited. You know what, even the students that struggle, or missed the mark completely, they're taking things in. And they have their own Aha moment coming. This guy got a job. And he got something out of that class. And in return I got something because I got up really big dose of hope and faith in what we're doing and the tremendous impact that we as teachers have on students. And I think about it, I think about it as I'm planning my classes. It's been great keeping me going all year.

And I especially think about it on those days, not all days, just some days that I drive to work, uh, wondering what else I might do. So, what I want to say to you today is that doubt, uncertainty, these are all important parts of the journey. They give us a moment to reflect. And that reflection is such an important thing for us all to do as professionals, as teachers, as administrators. They are there to remind you that you're in the right place.