

2012

## Abandoning Superman

John Spencer

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty)

 Part of the Education Commons

---

# Abandoning Superman

**A decision to return to being a classroom teacher is tempered by understanding that teachers measure their success in many ways.**

A student stops me before school and asks, “Can you talk like Apu from the Quick-E-Mart? My brother said you do it really well.”

I do my best to comply, and then he responds with, “Hey, do you want to hear my impression of Bon Iver announcing a soccer game?”

“Go ahead,” I tell him.

He starts with a melodic, mumbling, nasal-sounding voice. “He sends to the mid-fielder and then launches it toward the goal. Goal, goal, goal.”

I laugh hysterically at his impression, and then I scurry over to the office to pick up the test booklets for this week of standardized testing.

I didn’t think I was “out of touch” with students in my hybrid teaching/coaching position. I was still paid like a teacher. I was still making decisions about curriculum, planning lessons, and engaging with fellow teachers. I spent most of my time in classrooms rather than an office.

And yet, I’d forgotten what it felt like to be a teacher. I’d forgotten what it was like to agonize over a child’s test score, even when I claimed that I didn’t care about the test. I’d forgotten what it was like for a student to roll her eyes and sigh heavily and say, “that’s dumb” in a way that felt far more personal than it actually was. I’d forgotten the little moments of insecurity, where I wondered if I was doing it right. I’d forgotten, too, the joy of the journey toward mastery and the sense that I was guiding students who then could guide themselves.

I’d forgotten the intensity of class debates and the excitement over a new paradigm shift. I’d forgotten what it’s like to be trusted with a child’s story.

In the year since I left the classroom, I’ve seen the big picture. I’ve wrestled with ideas about instruction. I’ve modeled strategies in contexts other than my own classroom. I’ve coached teachers

**I don’t believe the system will change simply because I’ve decided to return to the classroom.**

and, in the process, realized that others see the profession from a far different perspective than mine. What I’ve lost, though, is the narrow perspective.

I know, in theory, what it’s like to be a teacher. However, being a teacher isn’t theoretical. It’s experiential and contextual. It’s tied so closely to my identity and to relationships that I can never speak about it too abstractly.

So, as I braced myself for another day of testing, I realized I wanted to be back in the classroom full-time. I missed being a teacher.

## Why I left

When I applied to be technology specialist, I wanted to use my classroom success with my students to push the district toward more authentic learning. My stu-

dents had the top scores in reading, writing, and math, and they had accomplished this through a constructivist framework.

But, the truth is that I moved from teacher to specialist because I was scared. I had worked harder than ever before, achieved some great results and then fled into a coaching role out of fear that I couldn’t repeat that success. I saw myself as a sort of Super Teacher, a Man of Steel, doing amazing things with my students. When the Clipboard Crew wanted the magic formula, I hoped they wouldn’t discover that I was simply a Clark Kent trying my hardest but unable to figure out exactly why it was working.

I refused to admit just how scared I was about failing — not when I was supposed to be a Man of Steel. I allowed shame and fear to determine my self-concept as a teacher. And the hard part, the scary part of it, was that I still loved teaching. I woke up every morning looking forward to my job. I spoke passionately about our class projects. I felt energized by the murals, documentaries, debates, and projects. I cared about my students.

I’d always assumed that teachers burned out when they were overworked or lost their passion and became packet pushers. Burnouts sat in the staff lounge complaining about students or spreading gossip and wreaking havoc with the administration. But, burnouts aren’t always bitter teachers who leave the profession altogether. Sometimes, burnout is a more subtle perfectionism, teachers in their own race to the



top. Sometimes, burnout happens with passionate professionals who are silently sinking in a standardized system and, like me, undone by the kryptonite of their own insecurity and fear of being unmasked.

But I had fun being a specialist. I taught lessons without having to grade papers. I no longer showed up at parent-teacher conferences or curriculum nights. My weekends were free. I got to geek out about educational theory with fellow specialists in conference rooms, and no one had to cover my class when I needed to use the restroom.

**Being a teacher isn't theoretical. I missed being a teacher.**

However, I didn't enter the profession for logical reasons. I chose it because it felt meaningful. I believe in the power of education to transform lives. Parent-teacher conferences were late, but they were also a valuable chance for a dialogue about learning. Grading felt tedious, but it was part of an assessment dialogue that ultimately led to more learning. And, while it's great to geek out about theory, I'm realizing that it's more meaningful to temper the theory with the nuance of a classroom context.

### **A better story**

So, here I am, trying to pull out of burnout and move forward into the classroom. Ideally, I would find a system that values teacher autonomy, creativity, and authen-

tic learning. However, the push toward merit pay and value-added teacher evaluations suggests that the hyper-competitive, standardized, scores-based environment will be stronger than ever.

As I reclaim a classroom as a 6th-grade ELL teacher, I know I

I want to be successful, but I don't want to view failure as the enemy. I want to take risks and pursue authentic learning without fear of failure. My students should feel safe and free from the incessant pressures of standardized



must avoid the Superman narrative. If this is my story, I want to be a protagonist who serves humbly rather than trying to save the day with superhuman strength. Moreover, I can't be a solitary superhero. I want this to be *our* story, the modest one of a community of child and adult learners fighting to

tests. I'm not sure what our story will look like. However, I hope that it will be a humble alternative to racing to the top and waiting for a superhero.

I'm OK with achieving high scores. But, that won't be my metric because that will not be my story. I refuse to be Superman. **◀**

### **MEET THE COLUMNIST**

**JOHN T. SPENCER** ([john@educationrethink.com](mailto:john@educationrethink.com)) has been a teacher coach and a classroom teacher in the Cartwright School District, Phoenix, Ariz., for nine years. Currently, he teaches English language learners in middle school. He ran Social Voice Media, where students created documentaries, created an online magazine, painted murals, and participated in weekly community service. Throughout his career, he has developed tech-integrated frameworks for teachers. Spencer has coached teachers in his district's 21st-century learning initiative and developed Teacher Commons, a hybrid online-offline, technology-integrated professional development program for his school. He blogs regularly at Education Rethink ([www.educationrethink.com](http://www.educationrethink.com)) and the Cooperative Catalyst (<http://coopcatalyst.wordpress.com/author/johntspencer/>).