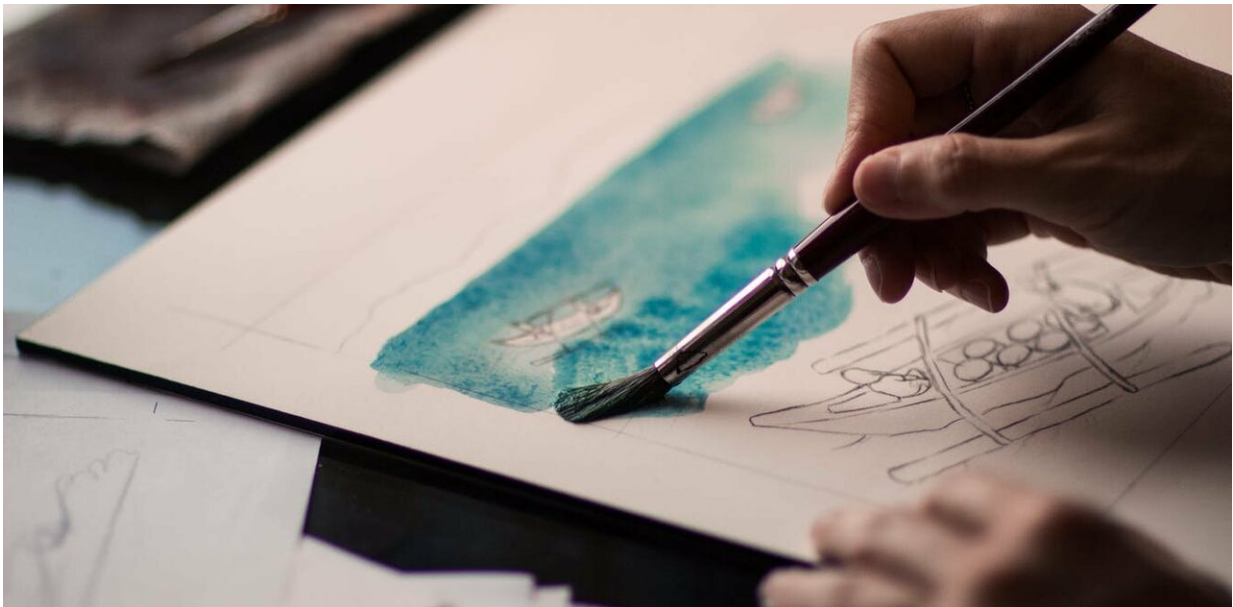


Helping teachers 'practise what they teach' could help them stay teaching for longer

March 28 2019, by Julia E. Morris And Wesley Imms



It's important to keep teachers passionate about what they're teaching. Credit: [Nik MacMillan/Unsplash](#)

Early career teachers are more likely to stay on if they practise what they teach in their own time. We [found that](#) practitioner-teachers – such as art teachers practising art and biology teachers observing nature – see themselves as better quality teachers when measured against key principles of learning and teaching. These principles include providing clear assessment objectives and tasks to students or developing activities

related to students' lives.

Those who identified as better quality teachers had a higher intention to remain in teaching than those who did not. In the case of art teachers, we found participating in an art exhibition had a significant effect for teachers at the important five-year mark. Those who had produced even one artwork per year as part of the exhibition had higher intentions to stay in teaching compared to those who did not.

While induction and mentoring programs have supported teachers well in their first year or two, our study shows that encouraging them to practise their discipline could be a solution to retaining quality teachers long-term.

Why teachers leave

Australia loses many teachers in their first five years. Research [consistently addresses](#) why teachers are leaving, including [burnout](#), [workload pressures](#), [physical isolation](#) (especially for those teaching in [rural areas](#)), and feeling underpaid and undervalued.

One solution to supporting early career teachers (those in their first five years of teaching) has been to introduce [induction and mentoring](#) programs. But these programs are often removed after one to two years, which means teachers don't have long-term support.

Our research explores if "practising what you preach" makes secondary school teachers stay in the game. Aspiring secondary school teachers generally enter the profession [because they are passionate](#) about their main subject area, be it art, sport or science. Our hypothesis is that actively engaging teachers with their subject discipline is one solution to the teacher exodus.

Why explore subject discipline?

While teachers might begin passionate about their subject discipline when they enter education, the issues of burnout, stress and workload can cause them to focus more on their teaching and less on their subject practice. As they hone their skills as an expert teacher, they might forget they are also an expert in their subject.

Maintaining relevant, up-to-date content knowledge is essential if teachers want to help students be active and informed citizens, ready for life post-school.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Our research [follows secondary teachers](#) once they graduate from university. Each year they are invited to participate in a subject-discipline intervention hosted at the university they attended.

We started the research in 2010 with visual arts teachers graduating from the courses we teach. The study has recently extended to include science teachers, and the exhibition has become a cross-disciplinary exposition of both art and science that has (and continues) to follow over 130 teachers.

Teachers who participate don't need to be professionals in their field as well, for example, an English teacher with a long list of published novels. It's more important for teachers to do what they love with achievable targets. For example, the art teacher who continues to develop skills by making art on weekends for fun or the science teacher who takes photographs of their garden for their biology class.

We receive over 100 responses to surveys from teachers every year which broadly show that teachers who practise what they teach see themselves as better quality teachers. One teacher said: "Everything I do in my practice affects my teaching because it provides me with more insight [...] and what I have to offer, as a teacher."

Those who believe they are better quality teachers had a higher intention of staying on in the profession. Another teacher told us: "This makes me want to stay. It gives me a much better perspective on who I am as a [teacher](#)."

It's fair to predict a similar approach for other subject disciplines such as sport and maths might elicit similar results.

Establishing a community

The reasons our teachers return to the exposition each year can be applied to any aspiring discipline-practice community.

- it's achievable: for time-poor teachers, contributing to one project or output in their subject area is more achievable than maintaining a career in their subject area as well as in teaching
- it keeps them connected: all participants have a common thread in that they attended the same university. A point of connection increases participants' sense of belonging to the group. In our study, teachers were both connected by a shared interest in their subject as well as maintaining a connection to their university peers.
- it has clear deadlines: submitting work for an event means teachers work towards the exposition rather than prioritising other tasks.

One remarkable thing about our intervention is its simplicity: a discipline-based intervention like this doesn't need to occur in a university setting to be successful. It could be equally effective in schools or with small clusters of teachers.

It has also surprised us that these types of interventions aren't more commonplace; supporting teachers to grow their subject skills while teaching seems obvious to developing better quality teachers.

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