

## In Class Persona by April Carter

“Greetings Scientists! Let us begin today’s observation, consideration, and experimentation!” As the echos of the bell fade away, I recite this practised and familiar greeting in an energetic voice that overemphasizes every syllable, rolls the Rs, and elongates the vowels in a way I hope sounds like Robin Williams playing Dr. Frankenstein. I then launch into the demo that serves as my Minds On for this lesson. Do I speak like this in my everyday life? No, it’s part of my in-class persona.

In modern education, we endeavour to move away from the traditional “sage on the stage” in favour of a “guide on the side.” (King, 1993) So, the idea of the teacher having a persona like an on-stage performer may seem counter-intuitive. Teachers, though, have to engage students. Plus, teaching is still a public job and we present ourselves to students, parents, and the general public on a daily basis. That means we have to manage our public image. Developing and selectively using a well-considered and fully realized classroom character can be the next step in that process. In this article, I want to give you a few ideas to consider as you craft or alter yours.

### **Honesty is the best policy:**

The most common objection I’ve heard to having an in-class persona is that it isn’t the teacher’s true self and therefore a lie. It’s unethical for teachers to lie to students. Plus, students can smell fakery which destroys the trust vital to creating a learning environment.

But is it fake? Everything that influences my persona is part of my real personality. I’m just taking parts of myself that I feel are the most useful in teaching, bringing them to the forefront, learning from what I feel are the best examples, and turning them up to 11. Even that amplification is real because I get an adrenaline rush every time I teach so, instead of trying to force that “teacher energy” down, I let it into the classroom. It’s all still me, just a carefully crafted version of me that belongs in the school.

When considering your in-class persona, be honest to yourself. That combination of elements exists inside you, you just have to mix and match until you figure out what works for you. As long as it all comes from your true self, the students will sense that honesty and respect you for it.

### **Getting ideas:**

First thing to think about when considering your in-class persona is where to get ideas? The answer: Anywhere! Teachers find ideas for lesson plans everywhere and your in-class persona is no different.

My persona is a mixture of my favourite masters of my personal interests. My favourite magician, Paul Daniels. My favourite author, Sir Terry Pratchett. My favourite Doctor Who actors, Tom Baker & David Tennant. A few comedians such as Rowan Atkinson, Richard O’Brian, and the aforementioned Robin Williams. A couple of game show hosts, a few professional wrestlers, and most importantly by far, my father, a master teacher in his own right.

One commonality is these people are all communicators. Writers, actors, comedians, TV hosts, magicians, and pro wrestlers all use words and actions to

communicate something to the audience. That means their techniques have something to offer the teacher in their quest to communicate with their students even if they have to be adjusted to the task at hand. Never be afraid to borrow from even the most unlikely places when improving your practice.

### **(Over)thinking it out:**

When it comes to teaching, there's no thinking like overthinking. Let's look back at that greeting at the top of this article and see how much thought goes into a silly voice in the first seconds of class.

Why do I call them scientists? First, it's inclusive of all students. Second, it doesn't talk down to them. They aren't kids in this class, they're *Scientists!* That word respects them and their potential to generate science knowledge. Third and most importantly, calling them scientists helps them see themselves as scientists. (Chambers, 1983) The earlier we get across that anyone can be a scientist, the better.

Why do I say, "Observation, consideration, and experimentation?" First, that's my brief summation of the traditional scientific method. Second, repetition of that phrase followed up by a demo that uses that process before I ask them to use it in their own work helps hammer the idea home. Third, those words sound cool in the voice I'm using.

That's a lot for something that's going to be over before all the students have sat down, but that's the level of thought that needs to go into your presentation. Fortunately, with enough practice, a lot of these character moments become instinct. Just like an activity you've done so often that it comes to you naturally.

### **Benefits to the students and teacher:**

If a teacher has an interesting persona, it's more likely students will be engaged. If that persona is, dare I say, entertaining, they'll actually look forward to your class. These things add up to a better learning environment, fewer behaviour issues, and hopefully better outcomes.

The teacher also has a lot to gain from an in-class persona. In fact, I sometimes suffer from a lack of confidence in my science content knowledge. But that's *me*, April. Ms. Carter, on the other hand, knows exactly what she's doing and if she doesn't, she'll figure it out as she goes. Her confidence actually helps my recall of deeply buried content knowledge.

On a more personal note, we talk a lot about self-care and work-life balance. In a job that requires as much emotional investment as teaching, simply switching off and focusing on yourself can be nearly impossible. That's where having an in-class persona can be the most helpful. A well thought out in-class persona gives you something you can mentally put on and take off as you cross the school gate helping you leave the stress of life outside and the stress of teaching in the classroom.

### **References:**

Chambers, D.W. (1983). Stereotypic images of the scientist: The draw-a-scientist test. *Science Education*, 67(2), 255-265.

King, A. (1993). From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 30-35.