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## What Tina Fey Teaches Us About Cage-Busting

By Guest Blogger on April 27, 2015 8:00 AM

**Note:** Rick is taking a hiatus while he's off talking about his new book, [The Cage-Busting Teacher](#). Meanwhile, this week's guest posts will be written by Jacob Pactor. Pactor is an English teacher at Speedway (Indiana) High School, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow in Educational Leadership, and a former Teach Plus Teaching Fellow.

In *Bossypants*, Tina Fey explains how improv comedy spurred her career. She outlines four basic rules, which—if followed—will result in a successful act. The four rules are: agree with the situation, add something of your own, make statements, and "there are no mistakes, only opportunities." (An excerpt can be found [here](#).) Basically, in improv, the actors create their cage. If one person says, paraphrasing Fey, you are a hamster on a bicycle, you are. You accept the created situation, contribute, propel the scenario forward, and reap the rewards.

Likewise, teachers create our own mental cage. Except our cages limit our possibilities and prevent us from moving forward. It's self-perpetuating, dangerous, and entirely unneeded. We should follow Fey's same rules to make sure we have a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. Doing so both enhances our professional standing and improves the learning outcomes for all our students.

*We need to agree with the situation.* This doesn't mean we agree with everything going on, but it does mean we recognize, understand, and acknowledge the multiple realities at play. Like an improv actor, we only can do that when we pay attention to both big picture conversations—ESEA reauthorization—and local decisions. For example, I'm serving on a strategic plan committee for a local school corporation. At one meeting, a special education teacher had no understanding of how either federal or state policies impacted programmatic funding. As such, the teacher spent 10 minutes spinning a fantastical tale. The rest of the room ignored her, damaging both that individual teacher's desire to help her students and people's perception of teachers as professionals.

Too many of my colleagues spend so much time perfecting their lessons that they have no time left to read about the political realities that affect our classrooms. I get it. My first year teaching, I worked 12-hour school days. Just trying to stay one day ahead of my students, I didn't have time either. But the reality is that's a cage of our making. It's a cage we can break, too.

*We need to add something of our own.* Once at the table, we need to contribute. We need to say "yes, and." Five years ago, Indiana began making big changes to education policies. Three years ago, I became a [Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow](#) (one of the organizations Rick Hess spotlights in *The Cage-Busting Teacher*). I began to appreciate and use the voice I had.

Earlier this year, TNTP conducted focus group sessions around educator evaluation. I was on one and added substantive responses—I knew the political realities at play and crafted solutions that could work. For example, Indiana requires a fixed number of evaluations. I suggested we move to a fixed minute amount and allow local corporations to determine the best allocation of that time. TNTP then suggested that I serve on the State Board of Education's teacher evaluation stakeholder design committee. Surrounded by Indiana's education experts, I'm helping to craft the long-needed vision statement and core beliefs for educator evaluation. It's exciting. The end product will empower and equip teachers to improve their classroom instruction for all students. I'm at the table because, instead of complaining on social media, I said yes to additional meetings and then contributed.

*We need to make statements.* Questions are fantastic. As a former journalist, I love them. I pepper my students with questions all the time. This year, however, my assistant principal encouraged me to explain to my students why we were doing what we were doing. In essence, he wanted me to make statements. He wanted me to explain to them the why, not just have them experience the how. That 30-second conversation transformed my instruction.

Instead of being complicit in the high-stakes rodeo, I still teach what and how I teach, but make sure my students can explain how our understanding of why Elie Wiesel wrote *Night* prepares them to be more empathetic and readies them for similar critical thinking questions on various assessments.

*"There are no mistakes, only opportunities."* We tell this to our students all the time. And then we repeat it more. As an English teacher, it is sometimes hard not to see all the mistakes on my students' papers. But, since becoming an AP teacher, I instead look for places to reward. I look for my students' opportunities to grow. This mentality is the most important lesson Fey shares. It's also the most important one teachers

look for my students' opportunities to grow. This mentality is the most important lesson Fey shares. It's also the most important one teachers need to internalize.

If we have a great idea, and our principal says no, it really is just an opportunity to have a conversation and find out why. It's an opportunity to build a guiding coalition. It's an opportunity to think about all the other creative solutions that will net the same result. Opportunities are endless and the most important tool we have.

We have opportunities to engage parents, community members, students, politicians, school board members, and each other. When we don't, the cage envelops us more. When we do maximize those opportunities, we will see that the cage, like a great improv sketch, is something we are on the outside of, laughing at.

--*Jacob Pactor*

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