The Day After

Submitted by Lauryn Mascareñaz on November 2, 2016

It’s the morning of November 9: Your students come into your classroom abuzz with talk of the Election Day outcome. The heated and divisive campaign season has come to a close. Yet how do you and your students move forward? How do you return to some form of normalcy?

As I write this, we do not know the outcome of the election or the fallout our nation will feel. If the campaign trail has been any indicator, it is likely to be a further bumpy road. But I do know that I have stood in front of a classroom the morning after two presidential elections and it wasn’t easy.

Despite my own desperation for things to return to “normal,” I knew my students needed to process and discuss the election. Think about that water-cooler talk at work the day after a big event—kids need that, too. So we discussed, analyzed and re-established our classroom values. We worked to remind ourselves of all the things we had in common. And then we focused on the future. This is not so dissimilar to what the new administration will be doing on November 9.

What will you do in your classroom the day after the election? Here are some suggestions:

- **Begin within.** Prepare yourself first to engage in difficult conversations surrounding the various topics—racism, civil rights, immigration and so forth—that the election has raised. Then develop a game plan to do so with students. The distinct life experiences, cultures, languages and backgrounds represented in your classroom can lead to high-stakes conversations that are uncomfortable at times. Work to draw a connection between the diversity of our country and the diversity in your classroom.

- **Get back to instruction.** This is not to imply that you have pushed instruction aside, but the election season has taken its toll on us all. So think of this as a time to press “reset.” Try new instructional strategies. Talk to a fellow educator about a lesson that works well in their class. Use a new read aloud or app. Step outside of your box and go for that project or unit you always wanted to try. Focusing on delivering new, exciting instructional content to your kids is a way to reinvigorate the classroom and yourself.

- **Strengthen your classroom community.** Think about the go-to strategies for building a classroom community. Choose some activities in which students build relationships and understanding with each other. For example, play a collaborative game together or break
out a classic morning meeting book. These types of activities can help transcend politics and breathe life into a divided classroom.

- **Create space for reflection.** As adults, we have our hopes for what this next presidency will accomplish. We have specific issues that are personal and close to us. The same is true for your students. Share with them your thoughts, and allow them to share theirs with you and their classmates. Students are often more apt to put these types of thoughts down on paper, so consider a related journaling activity.

- **Discuss what respect means.** In a recent Teaching Tolerance survey, teachers mentioned over 500 times that respect is the number one rule in their classrooms. Think about spending some time breaking down the essence of respect with students. What is it? Who gets it and why give it? Find ways to encourage students to pay respect to the democratic process and the office of the presidency itself, regardless of who occupies the executive seat. Emphasize that using a critical lens and holding our elected officials accountable is not the same as being disrespectful or uncivil.

- **Look—and plan—ahead.** New presidential administrations tout goals for their “first 100 days” in office. There is a great deal of strategic planning involved. How about the next 100 days in your classroom? What will you focus on? What standards will you cover? What accomplishments await your students at the end? Consider involving students in 100-day plans of their own (for example, class projects or individualized plans to reach a reading level or similar achievement).

- **Talk about losing with grace.** One candidate will lose this election, and countless people will have poured their time, energy and hopes into that person’s campaign. Take the opportunity to talk with your students about what happens when you try really hard for something—and you don’t get it. This could be in sports, academics, personal relationships or something else. Remind them that we all lose and confront failure, but it’s how we recover that matters.

In thinking about how I would handle the day after the election, I am reminded of my friend Charles. He and I send each other the occasional text message: “Tell me something good.” Sometimes the response is silly; other times it’s very real. And at times we struggle to find anything good to tell the other. But we always make sure to say something: It’s an opportunity to focus on the good, the best and harness the optimism of that moment. So take a cue from us or from the town hall audience participant who asked Trump and Clinton, “Can you say something good about each other?” This question was a bright moment of civility in a rather dark election year. Decide how to move your classroom in a positive direction, leaving the election season behind.

*Mascareñaz is a teaching and learning specialist for Teaching Tolerance.*