

MODULE ONE:

Freedom from Comparison

Finally Free: The Teacher Toolkit for
Conquering Anxiety & Overwhelm



1: Freedom from Comparison

Read or listen when you're feeling not good enough and comparing yourself to others.

Created by Angela Watson and Dan Tricarico for the Finally Free Toolkit

Notice what is creating those feelings of comparison. (Angela)

Anytime you're feeling not good enough, challenge yourself to think about what you've been thinking about. Have you been running through a mental list of mistakes you've made? Have you been thinking about all the things you were "supposed" to do and didn't get done? Have you been thinking back to previous school years when you were in a different season of life, and contemplating how much better of a job you did back then?

Our thoughts create our feelings, so if you're feeling bad about yourself, consider what you've been spending a lot of time thinking about, focusing on, and talking about. Don't judge yourself or berate yourself for having those thoughts. Instead, examine them with curiosity: "I'm feeling insecure, overwhelmed, and like I can't possibly measure up. What have I been thinking about, talking about, or focusing on that might have created those feelings?"

Practice observing your thoughts when you notice your mood shifting so you can course correct right away in the future. "I'm feeling kinda discouraged right now. What have I been thinking about that might have created those feelings?"

"Let's see...I've been looking through all the amazing looking classrooms on Pinterest for way longer than I wanted to, and I started thinking about all the things I feel like I should have thought of myself. I also saw things that trigger thoughts about how I would never be able to pull that off, and that triggers feelings of comparison, too. And, I saw things that created thoughts about how I'd done something similar, but mine wasn't good enough in comparison. So that means it's probably time to get off of Pinterest and focus on something else."

When you can identify the triggers for those feelings of comparison, you can start to regulate the amount of exposure you have to them. Your trigger might be spending too much time with a certain colleague, for example, or looking at specific websites.

Social media is a big trigger for a lot of people, because we're bombarded with images and videos of what thousands of other teachers and schools are doing. We see not only how they're decorating their classrooms, but the amazing school culture they're creating, their fantastic immersive lessons, the adorable outfits they're wearing, the amazing-looking food they're eating, and the perfect-looking home they live in with an adorable looking family. We see it all. Or at least, we think we do.

What we're really doing, of course, is comparing their highlight reel to our real life. We see their best projects, the most attractive areas of classrooms, and their most engaging lessons, and we unintentionally compare them to our full reality. We think of our worst stuff, the ugliest part of our classroom where there's just a gigantic mess of stuff piled on a table and think, "My room is awful."

You have to actively push against that internal voice that says, "You're not good enough. You need to do more." When those feelings of comparison take over, tell yourself:

"I am enough. My efforts are enough. I have a limited amount of time and energy that I can dedicate to my work, and I choose to focus on my own top priorities, regardless of what everyone ELSE is doing. The purpose of my classroom is to help kids learn and to help me teach. I choose to stay focused on this purpose. I can be okay with having a classroom that doesn't look like a magazine spread. I'm going to stay focused on the kids and streamlining the learning process for them, because if I do that, I can't go wrong!"

The key to avoiding comparison is to stay reflective on your OWN vision for your OWN classroom, by getting clear on your WHY. Once you know the WHY--the reason behind the choices you've made--you'll no longer feel so much pressure to be like everyone else. It won't matter what anyone else is doing, or what they think about what you're doing, if you know your purpose and are focused on that.

So when you're feeling like you're not good enough and falling into the trap of comparison, observe your thoughts. Think about what you've been thinking about, and talking about, and focusing on. What you give attention to, you give power to. Observe your triggers and the people, places, and habits you have that tend to make you feel bad about yourself. Limit your exposure to those triggers, and have replacement thoughts ready whenever thoughts of comparison creep in. Tell yourself, "I am enough." Know your own strengths, and pay attention to your achievement. Stay clear on your vision and your priorities, and those feelings of comparison will lose their power over you.

The only person you have to be better than is the YOU you were yesterday. (Dan)

My 17 year old niece once proclaimed, "I have found The Secret of Life!" I asked, "What's that, Stacey?" And she replied, "The Secret of Life is confidence."

"Very good," I said. "You're probably right."

"And the secret to gaining confidence," she said, "is to act like you have confidence."

This touched a nerve for me because while I knew confidence was important, so many times when I looked around and compared myself to others, I still felt not good enough, lesser than. And my lack of confidence--especially when I was comparing myself to others--seemed to hold me back from greater achievement and accomplishments. Everyone else seemed to have it together. Why didn't I?

As a teacher, it's no different. We look around and we see the teacher down the hall who has the perfectly-designed graphic organizers or the Pinterest-worthy bulletin boards and we get this knot in our stomachs. We somehow feel that we're not doing enough or creating enough or accomplishing enough.

And then our confidence nose dives and our anxiety rises. Because it can be a HUGE source of anxiety and tension.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." And I agree.

Of course it would be easy for me to say, "Well, just don't do it." But we both know that's not going to work, so I won't do that.

But let me share some ideas for you on how to navigate your anxiety when you are comparing yourself to others and somehow feeling "less than."

First of all, the only person you have to be better than is YOU. If it's the first time I go into a gym and see someone bench pressing 250 pounds, I know that's not something I'm going to be able to do right away. Certainly not on the first time; probably not even on the tenth time. If there is a skill that someone else has that you want to do, you need to give yourself time. The only person you have to be better than is the person you were yesterday. And that takes time and small, consistent practice over time.

I remember one of the last times I was in a gym and I had to bench press something, the trainer said I should just start with the bar and they would add weight later. And beside me, these buff dudes were bench pressing hundreds of pounds as if they were lifting a grocery bag. It was hard to look around and see that I was enough. Sure, it was a little embarrassing. Sure my anxiety rose. But it was also a little funny! I had to recognize that I was on my own path and that I would eventually get where I wanted to go.

So remember: you don't need to be better than anyone else. The only race you are running is against yourself. Focus on what YOU'RE doing and strive to be a little better every day.

Secondly, focus on being HAPPY for your colleagues and their successes. You've heard the expression, "What others think of you is none of your business," right? Well, the opposite is ALSO true: "What YOU think of others is none of YOUR business." It's none of your business if another teacher just got awarded four grants and will be studying abroad for six months. I know sometimes it's hard not to be jealous when someone gets the fourth grade teaching assignment you wanted or gets that corner classroom right by the drinking fountain. But if you look around, there are plenty of things that YOU have to be grateful for as well. And there's probably someone looking at YOU wishing they had what YOU have.

Similarly, keep in this in mind: You have lived with your skills your entire life and so they seem natural to you. So you don't think of them as special or unique. They are just what you do. But the truth is: They're special and other people would love to have the skills you have.

So take a moment and look around. Ask yourself, "What do I do that other people cannot do as well? What am I good at?" And once you identify the skills that you possess, acknowledge them and appreciate them. Focus on the things that you do that are special and unique that others simply cannot do as well.

Next, focus on the journey, not the result. We all have expectations about how we want things to turn out--and that's fine--but we will compare ourselves to others less if we are focused on our journey and let the results take care of themselves. Be in the moment and live where you are, not where you WANT to be.

Finally, forgive yourself. When things don't turn out the way you want or if you aren't EXACTLY like everyone else, give yourself some grace and know that where you are is where you are MEANT to be and that's okay. Self-forgiveness is not an easy thing--especially for teachers--but it can be SO empowering and can reduce the need for comparison. And if you DON'T like where you are, you can always make changes. But learning to accept where things are in the moment will give you the time and space to make those changes more effectively.

Finally, if you can't completely stop comparing yourself to others, turn the comparison into motivation. Use the impulse to compete with others to push yourself to make the changes you desire.

When you compare yourself to others, it's so easy to to feel as if you don't measure up or that you are in some ways "less than." And this creates anxiety, stress, and tension. But if you make the race about being better than you were yesterday, find things to be grateful for in your own backyard and remember that what others are doing is simply none of your business, and if you remember that you have your very own special and unique skills, the anxiety of comparing yourself to others will diminish, leaving you the space not only to decrease your sense of anxiety, but to focus on your teaching practice as well.

Envision teaching as a marathon, not a sprint, and pursue excellence over time. (Angela)

Often our feelings of comparison stem from internalizing the pressure to DO ALL THE THINGS and do them all perfectly. That is not possible, and you cannot allow yourself to take on such a heavy burden, no matter what pressure you're facing from your school or district.

Mentally, you have to tell yourself, Nope, I am not expecting myself to be an expert in every single area of curriculum, instruction, pedagogy, and classroom management. This is complex stuff that takes years to master, and I refuse to feel guilt or shame because I'm not further along in the process. I'm learning more every day, and that's all I can ask of myself.

Creating those boundaries is something that will feel easier as you practice trusting yourself. You are the only person in the world who truly understands what needs to be done for your unique teaching situation and group of kids. You know your classroom dynamics better than anyone else. And so you can learn to trust that feeling in you that rises up--trust that inner voice that says, *I can stop here. This is enough. I am enough. My value and worth as a teacher is not defined by what I do, but who I am.*

This is true regardless of whether anyone in your school system tells you that. YOU are responsible for drawing your own boundaries around your time and figuring out how much energy you're going to expend on every task. You decide. You can't let guilt or comparison sway you from what you know is right deep in your heart, or cause you to sacrifice your health or your family.

When you're tempted to compare yourself to others, or to your own standard of what you think you should be able to do, think about what season of life you are in. If you have a family member in hospice care, you are in a season where you're focused on end-of-life issues and grieving. If you have young children at home, you're in a very long season of pouring a tremendous amount of time and energy into being a caregiver. Becoming a better teacher and everything else you care about will be a priority in another season. You can improve your effectiveness in the classroom at any time, but you cannot get this season of life with your loved ones back ever again.

You'll find yourself growing frustrated and overwhelmed if you pressure yourself to accomplish goals now that are properly addressed in another season of life. It will take twice as much effort and you'll get half the results. So, it's critical to know which season of life you're in and plan your priorities accordingly.

In this way, balance is not a daily achievement: it is a lifetime achievement. You want to look back at your life many years from now and see that you spent seasons focusing on yourself, on your significant other, on your children, on making a home, on your career, etc. and that was exactly what you were supposed to have done at each point in time. If that's not the path you're headed down, don't worry--it's never too late to change something that's not working.

The goal is not to do everything you CAN each day but everything you SHOULD. Don't try to fit in more. Instead, think about what season of life you are in, and which priorities you SHOULD be focusing on in that season in order to get the best results.

Summary & Key Takeaways

- Notice what is creating feelings of comparison.
- The only person you have to be better than is the YOU you were yesterday.
- Be in the moment and live where you are, not where you WANT to be.
- Practicing self-forgiveness will give you the time, and the space, needed to improve.
- Envision teaching as a marathon, not a sprint, and pursue excellence over time.
- Thoughts create feelings: notice what you're thinking about, in order to avoid the comparison spiral.
- Respect the season of life you're in now, and remember that balance is a lifetime rather than short-term goal.
- Create boundaries around your time -- the goal is not to do everything you CAN, but everything you SHOULD.

Reflection Exercises

MODULE 1: FREEDOM FROM COMPARISON
by Angela Watson and Dan Tricarico

Actionable Steps/Challenge

Whenever you're feeling stuck in comparison mode, identify your triggers. Who or what is leading you down that path? How can you limit your exposure to the trigger or reframe the way you think about it?

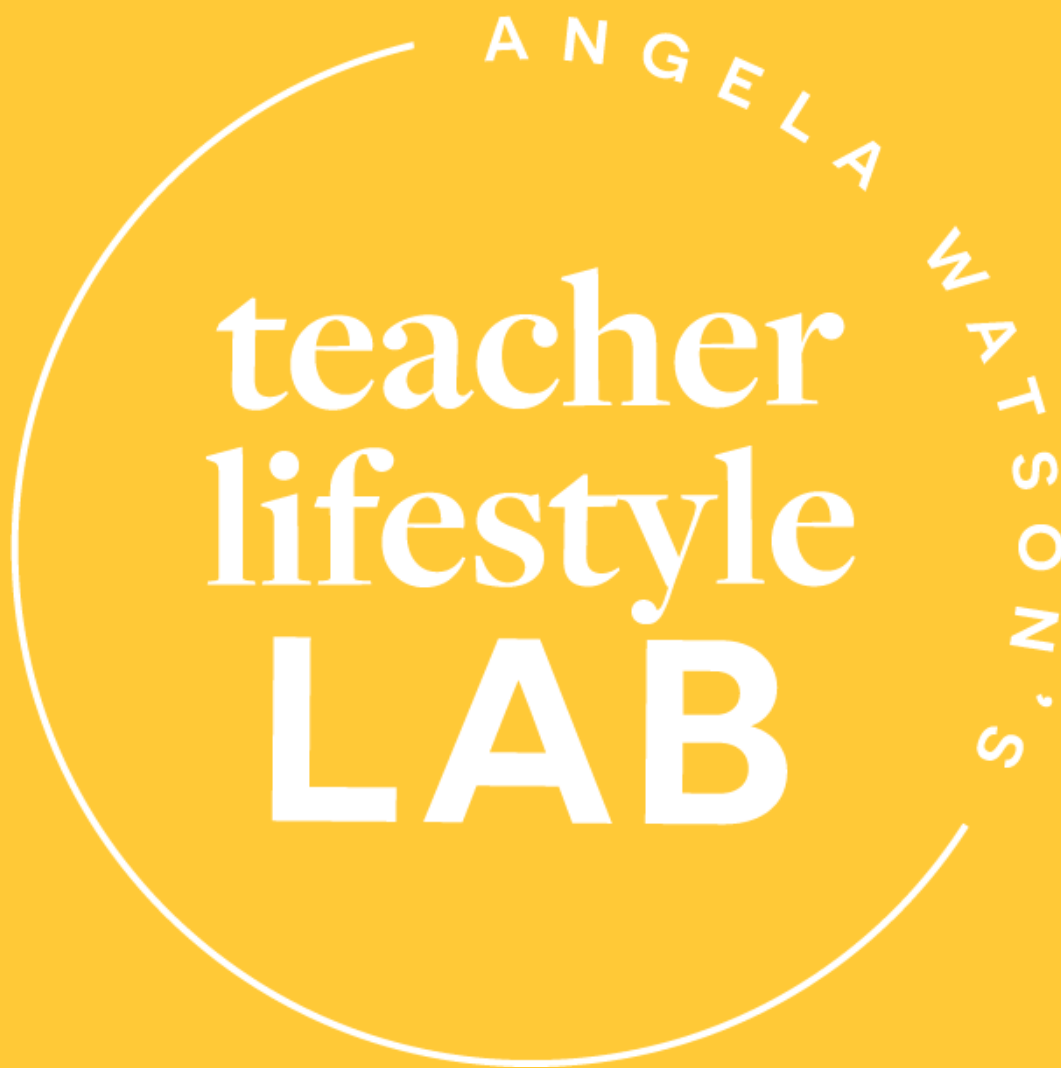
Reflection Questions

1) The challenge for this module is to identify your triggers. For this exercise, focus more closely on the people, websites, or other external factors that seem to launch you into a futile comparison session. Why do you think those sources keep drawing you in? Is there a specific insecurity or belief about yourself that they're triggering?

2) In this module, we talk about the need to find your "WHY." The WHY is the reason behind your choices. Once you clarify your WHY, it's a little easier to resist the temptation to start comparing your achievements to those of others, because you understand your own purpose, values, and teaching/life philosophy. So, what's your WHY that can help you stay focused on the choices you've made instead of feeling like you should be doing what others are doing?

3) Everyone goes through periods when certain aspects of life take priority over others. We can think of these as “seasons.” If you find you’re often remembering a more energetic, more ambitious, more dedicated version of yourself from when you first started teaching, consider what season of life you were in then -- and, more importantly, the one you’re in right now. Is there something going on at home -- good or bad -- that requires much more of your attention? The situation(s) you’re dealing with are defining your current season. What is your current season of life--the things you need to be most focused on as a priority? How can you show yourself grace when you feel like you should be focused on other things?

4) Dan suggests “turning comparison into motivation” when you truly can’t stop comparing yourself to others. Consider whether you find it challenging to shift your thinking from “I’m not good enough” to “I think I can do that, too.” When you look at others’ achievements, do you tend to focus only on the ones that you believe you couldn’t attain because of circumstances, money, or other factors? How can you turn comparison into motivation?



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