



## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Linda Alloju

# REFLECTION STRATEGIES PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE

**Current role:** Science teacher at Plano West High School in Plano, Texas.

**Originally from:** Round Rock, Texas.

**Years teaching:** 14.

**Subjects taught:** Biology, chemistry, environmental science, environmental systems, anatomy and physiology, earth and space science.

**Other responsibilities:** District curriculum writer, new teacher mentor.

### Current professional focus:

Helping my students become future-ready. They are so smart, but they don't yet have the skills to show their worth and succeed in the world, like presenting out loud or navigating tricky situations. So while I'm teaching them science, I focus on teaching them how to study and be self-reflective and on other life skills like communication.

I didn't learn those things when I went to high school and college. When I went to college, I did what I had always done — memorize the material — and I cried when I got a 35 on my first test. And I thought, "How come none of my teachers prepared me for this?"

**Why she emphasizes reflection:** You have to reflect on yourself to make yourself better. But I find that a lot of science teachers don't do that kind of work with their students. After my students take a test, we analyze the test results together. We don't just go over which answers are correct. We also talk about why they missed the questions they did. Did they misread the question, get overwhelmed by it, or something else? Then we talk about different strategies for comprehension and studying, and I ask them to reflect on what they will do differently next time.

At the end of the semester, I have them reflect on what works and doesn't work for their learning, and I also ask what I can do and what they can do themselves to help them improve. I can't help them improve if I am not reflecting on my practices based on their needs.

**How she's helping other teachers learn from her experience:** I shared some of these reflection strategies with a colleague at my school, then it started to spread. So I decided to apply to present about it at a district professional learning meeting. It really resonated, and not just with high school teachers. A lot of middle school teachers came to my session, and nine out of 10 of them said, "We should start doing this now, in middle school." Now I'm applying to present at a national biology teachers conference about it.



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**Why and how she's learning to write curriculum:** Plano ISD has a standard curriculum across the district that is written by teachers. The goal is to make sure that all students are learning the same content, although teachers may teach it in slightly different ways.

Any teacher can attend a curriculum design institute the district holds and then apply to be a curriculum writer. If you're selected, you receive training and support and you write the curriculum together over the summer. The district then provides professional learning to roll out the changes to teachers.

I decided to be part of the curriculum writing program because I have so many ideas I want to share. Working with a district team allows me and the other writers to reach as many students as possible, not just those in our own classrooms.

**How she got involved with Learning Forward:** Learning Forward participates in Plano ISD's externship program for teachers. The city has a very successful and competitive internship program for students, and they built on that to develop something similar for teachers so they could see what it's like to work in an environment other than school and

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see what they are preparing students for. Through that program, I found out about all the amazing resources Learning Forward offers and decided to apply for the externship. I ended up getting to help with the 2019 Summer Institute in Boston.

**What she and her students learned from the externship:** The students who were applying for internships had to do the same application process that I was doing for the externship, so I shared with them how I did my resume, helped them prepare for interviews, and used strategies like small-group discussions and presentations during class and explained why it's important to be able to do those things.

Since the externship, I have been sprinkling stories and examples during class. For example, I talk about how it's important to find a need and fill it. During the institute, one of my responsibilities was making sure presenters got where they needed to

go on time. Because of some severe weather, a lot of flights were delayed, and it caused a lot of stress.

I tell the students how I needed to be flexible, but also how I needed to figure out what was needed and fill that need without waiting to be asked. I also tell them about how important it is to communicate well and respectfully with people, even when people are complaining a lot or being difficult. I explained that you have to decide how you're going to react when people say all kinds of things to you.

**Her best and worst professional learning experiences:** The worst are workshops that tell and don't show and that focus exclusively on why to do something without explaining how. So much of the time, a presenter is reading from a PowerPoint slide with super small letters.

I want to be engaged in a conversation, or discuss a "what would you do?" scenario, so I can learn about the how. The Learning Forward Summer Institute was my favorite experience — honestly! — because I had so many deep, meaningful conversations with people I wouldn't have met otherwise. I got so many ideas of things I would like to try. ■

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**CALL TO ACTION** / Tracy Crow

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But offering voice and choice is not enough. Educators need the knowledge, skills, and tools to understand and use data — student, educator, school, and district data — to plan their learning. Leaders must intentionally support educators to build those skills and resources.

Our responsibility as the membership association for professional learning means Learning Forward will continue to use *The Learning*

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*Professional*, our Annual Conference, and many other outlets to support leaders of learning to expand their expertise and influence. We will also continue our campaign to ensure every

educator is an advocate for his or her learning and the learning of his or her peers.

The teacher I spoke with at the conference clearly knew he deserved more and that his learning is a priority. We thank him and all of you for taking steps each day to abolish practices that waste time, money, and most importantly, educators' valuable energy. ■