Tales from the Classroom: 
The First Day, Two Teachers, One Extraordinary Comparison

On the first day of school: Copper Creek veteran Kindergarten Teacher Lisa Hoelzen (left) answers a question from a student, while at Sandra Day O'Connor High School, brand new Chemistry Teacher Tyler Hill talks with students about setting academic goals for the new year.

As teachers, Lisa Hoelzen and Tyler Hill are worlds apart.

Hoelzen has been teaching preschool and kindergarten for more than two decades, mostly in the Deer Valley Unified School District. Hill, who graduated in May from Northern Arizona University, entered a classroom as an instructor for the first time on August 10.

But, despite their experience gap, Hoelzen and Hill were very much alike as the 2016-17 academic year opened across the district.

“I had no idea what to expect,” Hill explained a few minutes after wrapping up his last period chemistry class at Sandra Day O’Connor High School and his first day as a teacher.

For Hoelzen, despite all her years in front of students, Wednesday was no different.

“I am so nervous, but I am so excited. There are still so many anxieties about ‘are they going to feel happy in here? Are they going to learn? Am I going to be able to reach all of them? Are parents going to approve of what’s going on in the classroom?” Hoelzen said minutes before her first class of the day at Copper Creek Elementary School.

For both teachers, preparation was a big key to overcoming any hurdles.

Hill said he began his first hour class trying to solve technical issues.

But, by the end of the day, things were rolling more smoothly. Using index cards, Hill asked students questions about their likes and dislikes, hobbies, activities. He also spent time telling them about himself. And he completed each period with an exercise designed to help students with goal setting by fashioning a replica of a laboratory coat out of paper and listing what they hoped to learn, what they wanted to do after high school, and a little personal background.

Hill even made his own coat, listing a top goal of being the best teacher he can with a second priority of making chemistry fun for his classes.
“What will do it for me is when students ask more questions about beyond what I want them to get to. If I have done my job right, they will keep asking questions and have a desire to learn more, so it pushes them to deepen their understanding,” he explained.

Three months removed from earning his bachelor’s of science and bachelor’s of science in education degrees, Hill was advised by the teacher who recruited him to keep classroom management in mind when leading his students. For Hoelzen, that has been a staple to her approach for years.

“I do have a routine -- a schedule that keeps me on track. I expect my kids to be able to follow that schedule by the second week of school. I expect them to be independent learners. Once I show them something I expect them to be able to do it, but of course I’m always there as a support. In the classroom, I’m a facilitator for learning,” she explained.

Hoelzen’s approach was evident even as she led her young group of about two dozen 4- and 5-year-olds to begin a journal in which to record classroom experiences.

“What are my blue bears?” she asked, looking around for the group of youngsters who had been assigned to sit at the “blue” table and find their names.

Hoelzen’s journal exercise was similar but expectedly simpler than Hill’s lab-coat activity.

The motivation for each of the two teachers to enter the profession was not all that different, either.

Hoelzen recalled landing a job with a computer firm that supplies school districts, and – while enjoying a good salary and a few perks – she longed for an experience that transformed children’s lives through learning.

“When you have a little kid you’re sitting next to and they’ve realized, ‘I just read that page all by myself,’ and their whole body starts shaking and they look up at you like omg, I can’t believe I just did that. It’s the most amazing thing ever,” she said.

Hill was equally motivated while studying chemistry in college.

“As I kept going, I realized education was where I wanted to be. I didn’t want to just be in the lab every day, I wanted to be working with kids and getting kids inspired about chemistry. Chemistry is all around you, in everything you do. In household items, one of the things will be showing them how applicable it can be,” he said.

While the opening day nervousness is nothing new for Hoelzen, the veteran teacher said there have been changes in students and how they learn.

“They’re a lot more tech savvy. That’s the kind of thing they want to be working on. They don’t have the background in phonics awareness, playing with language, having social interaction.”

To counter that, she leads children in nursery rhymes to reinforce word patterns and the English language.

Hill said he expects some learning on his part -- including reacting and adjusting, as he did solving the early technical issues.

“I’m really excited. The first-day jitters are out of the way,” said Hill. “It will take time, but I’m really excited.”