

● The Top 10 Things New Teachers Should Know

by Catherine Wilcoxson, Ph.D.

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As teachers begin their careers, they are usually excited about their first “real” teaching position. This feeling is followed by one of uncertainty. Do I have the knowledge and skills to be in total control of a classroom? What do I do when a student talks back to me? How will I decide what topics to teach? How should I assess students' progress? What is the best way to maintain discipline in my classroom? Will the students like me? These are all valid questions, and you will find that as you evolve as a teacher, you will return to them frequently. As a first-year teacher, you have the exciting challenge of teaching students and learning what it means to be an effective teacher. The tips in this article will give you a head start on this process by giving you some basic ideas to help you be a successful teacher and to help your students become better learners.

College courses are filled with theory and a number of instructional and learning strategies that you can use to become a successful teacher. They give you—the future teacher—many ideas that you may incorporate into your classroom. The big question is how to translate these ideas into practice. How do I decide which strategy to use when? What are some practical tips that will help me in my day-to-day practice? How can I successfully survive my first year of teaching?

Here are my top 10 hints for successful teaching that your college professors and texts probably did not mention.

1. Don't worry so much about doing the right thing. There is no one right way. You must determine what works best with your personality, your students, and school policies. It will help if you have read your school's student handbook. The guidelines in the handbook will help you avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls and give you some insight into the culture of your new school.

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2. Relax. Get to know your students. Listen, empathize, and above all be patient. Your students are great people. Let them know that you care about them and their education. Also let the students know that you are not infallible—be comfortable enough with yourself that you can admit when you do not know an answer and that you are willing to learn with your students. Establish that “sense of presence” that conveys to students and anyone observing the classroom that you are confident, capable, organized, prepared, responsive to students’ needs, and able to make the class engaging for all students. Remember, stop worrying about yourself and what you are doing. Think about your students and enjoy working with them.

3. Teaching is hard work. It is much more work than you ever thought possible. It is essential that you are organized and use your time efficiently. Beginning teachers are generally surprised at the amount of time it takes to plan effectively. Determining objectives, deciding on activities, collecting materials, grading papers, and making informed decisions take a tremendous amount of time. And just when you think you have everything planned and organized, there is an unexpected fire drill, student assembly, or early dismissal that forces you to adjust your plans. It is essential that beginning teachers give themselves sufficient time to plan as well as learn to be flexible.

Flexibility in time management is also essential to accommodate the diversity of students’ background knowledge and the manner in which they learn to process information. Successful teachers are willing to stop and reteach if necessary or to modify lesson plans if it becomes clear that more or less time is required.

It will help if you thoroughly think through your day’s activities and objectives, keep careful records and notes, and prepare to explain and give common everyday examples. Don’t be afraid to ask for suggestions and opinions. Talk to colleagues. Most teachers are flattered that you asked.

4. Standards cannot be ignored and should not be feared. There are pressures of test scores and state standards that must be met. Standardized tests are often used to determine school and district performance, allocate funds, and gain public approval. These test scores may even be published. Look at the standards as an aid to good teaching. Standards help you decide what to teach, support your decisions about what and how to teach, convince the public that you are familiar with the field of science teaching, and focus curriculum so that you do not spend too much time on a favorite subject and ignore important concepts that must be taught. To relieve your anxiety about standards, offer to serve on the committee that implements standards in your school.

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5. Write objectives that focus on student learning, not on today's task.

For example, "Build a model of a dam" is a task while "Simulate the principle of how dams work" is what you really want students to learn. Focus on what you really expect students to learn and to be able to do. Thinking about the criteria for student success before giving an assignment will help you determine your expectations. Critics will say this leads to grade inflation, but I disagree. Almost all students want to succeed. Clearly stating your expectations upfront helps students to know what they need to do to be successful and helps to build student confidence in you as a fair teacher.

Expectations need to be realistic and challenging for all students. Creating a list of expectations that provides for a range of abilities and skill levels can be difficult; however, students of all abilities must have the opportunity to succeed. Having clear expectations (objectives) will help you focus your lesson plan by allowing you to ask yourself, "How does this lesson or activity bring my students closer to meeting expectations?"

6. Smile, and do so frequently. Forget the adage, "Don't smile until Christmas." Smiling and demonstrating a sense of humor will not compromise your authority. You may be the only adult who smiles or greets an individual student warmly today. You may never know the importance of those smiles or other expressions of caring. Remember, you do not know what has happened to your students before they entered your classroom. Maybe they have had a fight with their mom or dad or with a sister or brother before leaving for school; maybe they haven't eaten; maybe they are feeling sick or have been teased in the hallway. Give them a break. Make them happy to be in your classroom every day.

Think about the difference in the following scenarios: A student has been absent from class for several days. As you greet students coming into the classroom, you might say in a stern and authoritarian voice "Tommy, you have been absent for three days. Your homework is in your folder. You have until Thursday to turn it in." Or as you greet the student, you smile and say, "Tommy, I'm so glad to see you. I was beginning to be concerned. You have been gone for three days. Your homework is in your folder. Please pick it up and complete it by Thursday. You may ask me or your fellow students for help." In both cases, you are the person in charge of the classroom. However, in one case, a positive classroom environment is established where a student feels important and cared for, while in the other, rules or procedure is more important than the child. Which classroom would you rather be in?

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7. Respect your students. Treat your students as intelligent humans beings. Avoid categorizing them as lazy, bright, unorganized, etc. Rather, look for each student's unique qualities. Do not allow put-downs or sarcasm in your classroom. Show by example that every comment is valued and must be constructive or helpful to others. Students can be taught responsibility for their own actions by following your example. This means you should always be prepared, return papers promptly, and provide feedback that is quick, helpful, and thoughtful. Chances are that if you respect your students, they will respect you.

8. Believe in your students even if they don't believe in themselves. Treat students as valued members of society. Give them hope and confidence that they can develop as strong individuals. Giving students answers or taking over and doing an experiment or activity for them leads to learned helplessness. The students begin to feel incompetent and doubt their ability to succeed. It is also important that discipline is not perceived as being personal. The act is criticized, not the student who has erred in judgment. We are all learning acceptable modes of behavior. Help them learn.

9. Don't isolate yourself. New teachers are often overwhelmed with the demands of their first teaching job, fear of failure, and uncertainty about the best course of action. Compounding this situation can be a feeling of isolation and the need to talk about work and the problems you have encountered. It is essential that beginning teachers become proactive in developing a support system. Often, experienced teachers become entrenched in a day-to-day routine and are so busy with their own concerns that they do not realize that a beginning teacher might need help or support. Take the initiative to develop personal and professional relationships in your school. If possible, establish a mentor relationship with an experienced teacher. A mentor relationship encourages you to cooperatively seek solutions, increases your awareness of alternatives, provides a sounding board to vent frustrations, and allows you to learn from the experiences of a colleague.

10. It is not appropriate to teach the way we were taught. Chances are that your students are growing up in a world completely different from the one you grew up in. Technology, lifestyles, economics, and many other factors have created a different world than when you were in school. Students at this level are still curious, imaginative, enthusiastic, and talkative. The classroom environment

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tends to be very lively. However, as a first-year teacher, you may be surprised to learn that students are not as you remember yourself as a middle school student. Today's students seem less motivated to learn and more interested in other things such as listening to music, going to the mall, or playing video games. You can capitalize on your students' energy and enthusiasm by making connections between what you teach in the classroom and your students' everyday lives. Before you can do this, you need to know what students' lives are like outside the classroom.

A good way to learn about your students is to allow them to choose their own topics for projects. This gives you the opportunity to see what your students are interested in and helps make the learning relevant. An added benefit is that when students are involved in deciding what to study and how to demonstrate their understanding, they develop a sense of ownership and generally try to exceed your expectations.

In conclusion, effective teachers are constantly learning from their successes and failures. To be effective, teachers must look back on their practices and assess what works well, what doesn't, and how they might improve as teachers. Keeping a journal is an excellent means of keeping track of your performance, and it can provide valuable information for your own professional development.