

Lessons about Motivation and Classroom Management

The Little Things You Learn as a Student Teacher

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I am learning more as a student teacher than I did in all of my education and English courses combined! Learning about teaching is fun, and reading stories and discussing them in class is a good time, too, but nothing teaches you more about teaching than trial and error. As I near the end of my student teaching, I can't help but laugh at myself for the things I never knew.

One of these lessons concerns how many times a day I find myself saying, "That was not appropriate," or "Will you please stop talking? You are being rude," or "Where am I writing this pass to?" or simply the number of times I repeat myself before I say that I will not say it again. "Listen the first time," right? Well, as a student teacher, you seem to find more fault with yourself than with your students, and so you repeat yourself a lot at first until you realize that your students just aren't listening. Why would they listen the first time, I finally realized, if I was going to say it three more times anyway?

The other thing that hit me one day that I just never thought about before was that kids fail because they do not do the work, not because they can't do it. This frustrated me at first because I did not want to believe it. Then it saddened me because I had students who I knew were bright, just not motivated. So I began questioning myself: was I not challenging them enough, or was it too much of a challenge? Was I not making the subject interesting to them, or were there other issues beyond my control?

This whole semester I have tried to come up with activities that would make what students were

learning interesting. We have tried debates, journal writing, and presentations. Some of the activities were a success, and some weren't. I taught an eleventh grade remedial class, and we did spiral books as part of a twentieth century literature unit. We read different stories, went over the elements of a short story, and then the students worked by themselves or with one or two other people to create a spiral book. I thought they would love this project because it was "hands on" and visual, which is how most of these students learn best. Strangely, many of them were so used to a structured routine that they found this project frustrating because they had so much creative freedom. Many of them would say, "I don't get it, what am I supposed to write a story about?" I gave topics such as the Depression and the World Wars, but still the freedom was overwhelming. The one lesson I have learned well this semester is that you should always communicate your intentions to your students and be ready to answer the "so what" questions.

I have my own questions for those of you who are experienced teachers. What do you do with a student who in the beginning of the fourth quarter has no chance of passing your class? What do you do if you have five of these students in one class? What are some truly effective strategies for classroom management that you have used? Does it make a difference when you have the students from the beginning? Thanks!

Little Lessons, Big Lessons, and All Those In-Between

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Tanin, the student teachers I supervise in our teacher education program echo your claim that you are

learning more in the student teaching semester than in all the rest of your college experience combined. That's the beauty of the very hands-on practicum; you get to *do* what you've been learning *how* to do.

It is reassuring to hear you speak of the value of trial and error. That methodology will serve you well throughout your professional development. We learn at least as much—and probably more—from our failures as from our successes. This validates a willingness to take risks, to try uncharted territory, to step outside the box at times in order to be as effective as we can as teachers, and to promote the maximum learning experience for our students.

You mention the tendency to find fault with yourself, your performance, and your responses. Teachers do tend to be their own worst critics, but reflection, self-awareness, and self-assessment are critical to professional growth and enhancement. Reflection on instruction and student response is a critical component and a valuable tool in continuous improvement and increased effectiveness as a classroom teacher.

Your question about motivating students is a challenge facing most of our nation's teachers. We don't have easy answers to that one—or to most of the complex issues in education—but a few thoughts keep up the dialogue as we grapple with meeting student needs. Much about the structure of American schooling seems irrelevant to many of our high school students. Many of the students in our English classrooms perceive the system as designed to advance the American Dream, and they feel disenfranchised; that is, they feel they have no share in that reward, no place in that scene. What to do? Apart from my disclaimer about “no easy answers,” I encourage you to get to know your students. Who are they as individuals? What are their specific learning needs? What are their personal goals?

It is not easy to balance this with the mandates of school district goals and specific assessment models, but it is a challenge teachers currently face all over the country—matching the learning needs of students with prescribed conditions. Perhaps you could devise some means of surveying students' interests and goals at the beginning of the school term. Also, check with the chairperson of your department or another respected department member about additions or alternatives in your curricular choices to make the best selections based on what you know about your students. Also, knowing your students will help you articulate for yourself (and for

them) exactly what your objectives are in the curriculum choices you make.

Seasoned teachers understand your frustration that your students didn't respond enthusiastically to what should have been an enjoyable activity. We encourage creativity and autonomy when we offer students choices, but when they seem confused by the freedom of choice, we are discouraged and confused ourselves. The answer here is not in giving them no choice but in realizing we have to *teach them how* to be autonomous and take responsibility for project development and for their own learning. It *will*, by the way, make a difference when you can begin the term with your students, so keep in mind all the skills that must be taught and not assumed. For example, you might want to plan assignments that give them limited choices, and then deliberately plan how you'll help students develop decision-making skills.

What to do with a student the final quarter who has no chance of passing the course? This question most probably calls for input from your school administrator and guidance counselor, who may have specific suggestions. Other considerations would be to schedule a conference with the student and perhaps with the student and parents to devise a plan or contract for spending the remaining class time in a way that is productive. The circumstances may warrant individualization such as a prescribed or self-selected reading program or designated computer project, or may warrant the student's attention to the ongoing classroom activities.

What are effective strategies for classroom management? Those of us who have spent years in the high school classroom wish fervently that there was a formula for this that we could bottle for those of you beginning this important work. The “formula” is based on your classroom personality (What is your teacher persona?) and who your students are. For example, one of my student teachers made the astute observation that his advanced classes required less structure than the less advanced classes. (That would be true, I suspect, in the area of giving choices, too.) Less mature and less motivated learners need tightly organized structure in the classroom environment, procedures, and instructional presentation. Teacher educators, supervisors, and administrators often say the best strategy for classroom management is a well-planned lesson. Your concern for effective classroom management is another consideration for the beginning of the

year with your students. Setting the climate and creating an inviting learning environment where students can feel community are first steps in managing a classroom for effective participation and maximum learning.

There are a few resources that I have found helpful among the myriad volumes written about classroom management: Robert C. DiGiulio's *Positive Classroom Management* (Corwin Books, 2000) is subtitled "A step-by-step guide to successfully running the show without destroying student dignity;" *Classroom Management for Secondary Teachers* (Allyn and Bacon, 2000) by Edmund Emmer, Carolyn Evertson, Barbara Clements, and Murray Worsham is a textbook approach with explanations and case studies of classroom scenarios; the title of William Glasser's *Control Theory in the Classroom* (HarperPerennial, 1988) is a bit misleading at first glance in that it is not teacher control of the students he advocates, but self-control for students, and the book gives tips to the teacher for helping the students exercise control of and responsibility for their own actions and choices.

Tanin, you obviously have maximized your student teaching semester and made the most of the learning it held for you. No lessons are little when we are learning, even incrementally, how to be more effective in our teaching. Hats off to you and all our novice English teachers who are committed to young people and are willing to accept the challenge of making the world a better place through your work in the English language arts classroom.

Tanin Responds to Nelda

Thank you, Nelda, for taking the time to respond to my questions. I am now teaching full time as a seventh grade language arts teacher, and I find every day that I am reassessing my classroom man-

agement strategies. I have found, in the month that I have been teaching professionally, that structure *is* needed, especially in the seventh grade. I am also finding that I discipline almost as much as I teach, which at first was frustrating to me. However, after talking to other teachers and adults, I realize that much of the discipline is part of the structure that seventh graders so desperately need to be successful.

Student teaching in eleventh grade was a wonderful experience, but it is worlds away from where I am now. Seventh grade is a big transition year for the students because they are leaving the elementary school to begin their adventure in secondary education. I did not realize until recently that teaching the everyday rules of school was such a huge part of my job. For example, some of the rules I reinforce on a daily basis are when to be quiet, when students can visit their lockers, how to walk in the hallway, etc. I watch the teachers who have been teaching for a while, and I notice that it is almost second nature to them. I think it will be that way for me, too, someday. But now, as I begin my career and finish *my* transition from in front of the desk as a student to behind it as a teacher, there are these small things I reflect on that I had not thought of while in college preparing to be a teacher.

With all that I am doing to "survive" my first year as a teacher, I appreciate greatly your recommendations for books to read on classroom management. However, I find myself with little time to read, and so many times I am quite literally running to my colleagues for advice. I feel very fortunate to be working with such a wonderfully talented team. They have all been very helpful, and I look forward to the rest of my first year with great enthusiasm. And, like many teachers, I look forward to the summer, when I will be able to catch up on all of the reading I don't have time for now!