



# The First Year

BY KRISTI JOHNSON SMITH



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Essays on the author's experiences in her first year of teaching: the mistakes she made, what she learned from them, and how she used them to become a better teacher — and how other first-year teachers can, too.



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The original web-based version, with enhanced functionality and related resources, can be found at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/firstyear>.

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# Foreword

BY DAVID J. WALBERT

Developing online resources for beginning teachers is not easy. What new teachers need most of all is a mentor — an experienced, thoughtful, successful teacher who can take the time to guide them through their first year. They need someone to steer them clear of potential disasters and remind them that what seems like a disaster now is not the end of the world, someone to answer questions and give them timely advice, and, sometimes, simply a shoulder to cry on. Unfortunately, not every first-year teacher can have a wonderful mentor.

*The First Year* was conceived as the next best thing — the closest a web resource can come to the face-to-face support a real, live, caring mentor can provide. The essays in this collection were written as a weblog over the span of the 2005–2006 academic year. The author, Kristi Johnson Smith, intended them to be read soon after she wrote them, and so you’ll notice that most of her stories and much of her advice pertains to specific times of the year. (The original publication date appears at the top of each page.) Kristi maintained email correspondence with some of her readers, and some of the essays answer their specific questions. All of them, though, discuss solutions to problems that teachers face every day.

Kristi writes with a warm, personal tone about her own experiences as a first-year teacher and what she learned from them. You’ll find that although she is an excellent teacher now, she was far from excellent then! She talks frankly about the mistakes she made — but, more importantly, about what she learned from them, and about how she used her mistakes to become a better teacher.

What we hope you’ll take away from *The First Year* is, first of all, the knowledge that *you are not alone*. You are part of a community of educators that stretches beyond your classroom, school, and school system. Even if we can’t see you — even if we don’t necessarily even know who you are! — we appreciate what you do, and we care about you. We want you to succeed, not just in terms of curricula and competencies and test scores, but personally.

Second, we want you to know that *teaching is hard* — and that’s o.k. Everything worth doing is hard. You will make mistakes in your first year, and you will wish that your life had a “rewind” button. But you will learn from those mistakes, and you’ll use them to become a better teacher and a better person.

We hope that *The First Year* will help you avoid some mistakes, learn from others, and know that you are appreciated. If we can’t give you the comfort and aid of a face-to-face mentor, we think that Kristi’s voice in these essays is the closest anyone can come on the

web. And please, let us know<sup>1</sup> what else we can do to support you and how we can improve these resources. Our support for new teachers is continually evolving, and we rely on feedback from teachers to improve.

All of us at LEARN NC wish you the best of luck as you embark on your teaching career.

David Walbert  
Editorial Director, LEARN NC  
June, 2006



## The First Year



# Introduction

Originally posted August 5, 2005

I remember my first day as a teacher. It was June 29, 1998, and I was facing a group of summer school students who needed to pass eighth-grade history to earn promotion to high school. I needed more time to prepare my room, a better grasp on the material I was teaching, and a much stronger sense of the school's culture. The list of school rules and consequences I had been given by the principal did not indicate who my students would be or how this community functioned. I wanted more time to learn about this new job I was doing. Instead, I had five minutes until my first students would be arriving. I positioned myself at the door with a smile on my face, sweat on my forehead, and a roll book in my hand.

The first few minutes went fairly smoothly. I handed each student a brief “get to know you” questionnaire as they entered the classroom and was pleasantly surprised that most of them began completing it after finding their desk.

That honeymoon period lasted exactly three minutes.

After a brief welcome and introduction, during which I emphasized that each of them could be successful in this class, I began to take roll. When I called the name Curtis, he let me know he was “here.” When I called on Kashay, she told me she was “here” too.

Student number three, Melinda, did not simply announce her presence. Instead of letting me know she was “here,” she told me where I should go.

## “What should I do now?”

How should one respond to that? At the time, the best I could come up with was marking her present and moving on. I had not prepared a “toolbox” of strategies for that type of encounter. I could not even mutter the “see me at the end of class” my own teachers had used so often with me.

The confusion and panic I experienced in that moment — and in other *What should I do now?* moments along the way — have served as powerful motivators as I have studied the craft of teaching. Those moments have posed questions, and those questions have inspired conversations, coursework, reflections and more trial-and-error events. As a result of these experiences, I have learned a little bit more about how to do this amazing job we call teaching. It is my hope that I can share a few of my insights in these writings, and that I can learn from people who have had different experiences and developed different ideas.

When I ask “What should I do now?” let me emphasize from the beginning the *proactive* element in that question. Although it applies in reactive situations — Melinda just had an outburst; What should I do now? — it also asks us to consider what we should do now, in August, to create that moment we want in November. What should we do *now* — in this moment — to prevent a problem from happening in May?

I have degrees in history and education and am working toward a third, but as much as I have learned in my own higher education, my real teachers have been my students. They are remarkably adept at telling me what works and what doesn't. While I was studying my books, many of them were studying the adults at the front of their classrooms. They shared their observations with me during the five years I taught secondary school history and the two years I served as a mentor teacher — a time period long enough to learn a few things others might find valuable, but not so long that I have forgotten the challenges that new teachers face.

It is my hope that these essays will give you some insights to more effectively approach the question that you, like every teacher, will ask many times: If I want to teach these incredible students effectively, *What should I do now?!?*

# 1

## Starting the year right

Preparing for a new school year can be overwhelming. Part one of *The First Year* will help you get off on the right foot by guiding you through the process of arranging your classroom, establishing administrative order, and communicating with students and parents at the beginning of the year.



# Twelve rules for arranging your classroom

Originally posted August 16, 2005

I was fortunate enough to have my own classroom during my first year of teaching. My school building was too small to provide every faculty member that luxury. Some colleagues taught in a different room every period, using carts to transport their materials. Others at neighboring schools settled into trailers that had been rented to handle an unexpected increase in the number of students enrolled.

I was grateful, but had no time to dwell on my good fortune. Students were coming in less than a week and I needed to focus on developing my course materials and management systems. I had a minimal amount of time to set up a physical classroom. Still, I knew my students would benefit from a positive environment. The previous history teacher had been kind enough to leave pictures to decorate the wall space, but those images did not create the atmosphere we needed. Every portrait displayed the head of a white male who had been a “Creator of Your Country!!!” There were no pictures of women, ethnic minorities or anyone under the age of fifty. Would my students feel a sense of belonging and engagement in a classroom like this?

I quickly replaced the pictures with a more diverse array of images and began moving desks, adding plants and organizing the board space. I created folders for students, a filing system for my materials and hung a “welcome” sign on the door. I thought I had covered the basics. I didn’t discover the infamous “guillotine window” until a few weeks later when it slid shut forcefully and unexpectedly, nearly removing the arm of a student. I didn’t learn that the carpet would be soaked after every rainstorm until I had ruined the teacher’s edition of our textbook by leaving it on the floor near my desk.

My point? If you’re a new teacher, one of your first jobs will be to set up your classroom. You’ll want to do it quickly so you can focus on other aspects of teaching, but you want to do it well so that it becomes an environment in which your students can learn. There will be some hurdles that you cannot anticipate — guillotine windows for example. But if you talk to teachers in your building about classroom issues that might affect you and your students — and follow these practical tips, you can save time, frustration and money as you begin a new year.

# Twelve rules

Consider the following before you start setting up your classroom.

## 1. CHECK SCHOOL POLICIES

Before designing your classroom, ask if there are any school policies that affect classroom displays. Some principals require you to post daily objectives. Many schools have fire policies that prohibit hanging paper signs on the door.

## 2. PLAN FOR INSPIRATION

Use a portion of your space to inspire students. This could mean hanging engaging posters about content or attitude. Or if you are planning to display student work, post a sign above the area that says “ALL of my students are capable of excellence. These really showed it on a recent assignment!” Make sure you print letters large enough for students to read!

## 3. SAVE PLENTY OF SPACE FOR INFORMATION

If you need students to access certain types of information daily, create a consistent space for them to find it. For example, you could post permanent signs at the front of the room that say “Objectives,” “Warm Up Activity,” and “Homework” and use the area near these signs to provide details about each. Also have a space where the date is consistently posted, and make sure your name is posted at the beginning of the year.

I also recommend having a section of the room devoted to students who have been absent. If you decide to do this:

- Label the space clearly. I have a sign that simply asks “Were you absent?”
- Hang a calendar nearby to help students identify the day of school they missed.
- Use a small filing cabinet to house an activity log (listing the work completed each day) and blank copies of all assignments (labeled with titles matching those in the activity log)

After you introduce students to the space, they become responsible for identifying days they miss, checking the log for work completed on those days, gathering the blank assignments, completing the work and submitting it to you.

## 4. PROTECT WHAT YOU POST

If you’re going to display any poster in your classroom for more than a month — or want to use a temporary poster again next year — laminate it before you hang it on your wall. Otherwise, you’ll need to recreate it after it is tattered and torn. Many of your schools will have laminating machines. If they don’t, other teachers will be able to tell you where the service is provided in your area. Make sure you check the school limits on use or prices at stores before making final decisions about what to laminate!



## **5. MAKE IT STICK**

Ask other teachers in your building what adhesives work on the school walls. I once spent hours creating a display only to find it on the floor of my room the next day. Tape works on some walls. Others require putty. I have heard that hot glue guns work on the concrete walls in many schools. Finally, you can nail things into the walls. The nails are especially good for holding clipboards (if you want to clip a sign in sheet near your door) and bathroom passes (if you use anything larger than a paper pass).

## **6. LEAVE SPACE FOR COLLEAGUES**

Leave space for other teachers who use the room. If you have your own classroom, but other teachers use it during your planning period or after school, leave them a drawer in your filing cabinet and sections of the board and wall. Have a conversation about what else they might need. This is important in order to preserve both your materials and your relationship with colleagues.

If you are a traveling teacher, initiate a conversation about space sharing with teachers you encounter in those travels. Get a copy of keys for each room in which you'll be teaching and ask the administration if there is a quiet corner where you can have a desk and filing cabinet that is all your own.

## **7. ARRANGE DESKS THOUGHTFULLY**

Consider your teaching style, management style and the needs of other teachers using the room when arranging the desks<sup>2</sup>. You may decide to use rows, clusters, a circle or some other configuration. Design with a purpose in mind!

## **8. LOCK IT UP**

Have at least one small closet or drawer in your classroom that can be locked, even if you have to add a small lock yourself. You'll need this area for confidential files and personal items.

Learning this lesson cost me one camera and some priceless pictures on the roll of film inside it. It cost another teacher her grade book the week before our grades were due.

## **9. BE CHEAP**

Save money on supplies! Ask a colleague what supplies are provided, how you can get them and if teachers are given a certain amount to spend on their classroom each year. If there are things you need to buy on your own, ask retailers if they have discounts for teachers. Office Max, Staples and Barnes and Noble all offer reduced prices on classroom supplies, and other stores in your area might too. For most, you will need evidence of your educator status — a school ID badge, union card or pay stub will work. Finally, save all of your receipts. If your school offers money later, you could be reimbursed for purchases if you still have the paperwork. Those receipts also help during tax season since purchases for work are tax-deductible.

## 10. KEEP TRACK OF TEXTBOOKS

Number your textbooks and create a system for loaning books out to students who forget theirs. Students have to pay up to \$60 for lost books, so you don't want any confusion about which book they had or whether it was returned to you. Track which books are assigned to each student by noting each student's book number next to his or her name in your grade book. Create labels with your name and room number to place on every textbook so that lost books can be returned to you.

Also, decide whether you are willing to lend books to students who do not bring their own copy to class. If you do loan books, track them with a sign out sheet — I've created a sample textbook sign out sheet (page 95) that you can use as a template. Finally, if you can, wait a few days to distribute the books. Students transfer in and out of classes at the beginning of the year, and when a student leaves, textbooks can disappear.

## 11. PREPARE FOR EMERGENCIES (BUT DON'T CREATE THEM)

Locate the emergency call button in your room and learn how to use the intercom system. You don't want to accidentally signify an emergency when you're trying to answer a page from the office on your first day!

## 12. BE READY TO FILE

Create your own filing system. You will need places to:

- record and store your lesson plans and resources
- file administrative materials such as: student IEP, notes from faculty meetings, a parent contact log, discipline log, a faculty handbook, student handbook, hall passes, sub plans, pass codes (for the computers and phones), and important contact numbers.

## Last word

I know it is overwhelming, but hopefully organizing your classroom now will save you time later. Doing it quickly will allow more time for developing your curriculum and management systems. Doing it effectively will create a space in which your students can thrive.

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### On the Web

#### Textbook Signout Sheet (PDF)

[/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/textbook\\_signout.pdf](/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/textbook_signout.pdf)

A form for keeping track of textbooks lent to students. (Also available as Microsoft Word document.)

# Templates to help you with paperwork

Originally posted August 19, 2005

Teaching is not an 8am to 3pm job. I knew that when I went into the profession, and I am happy to put in hours of extra time developing curriculum, working with colleagues and getting to know my students. However, during my first year, I was astonished by the amount of time I needed to spend on paperwork.

I'm not talking about the papers you will spend time grading. I'm referring to the papers you must complete — or create — in order to maintain a sense of administrative order and to keep track of your students' needs.

Below are some templates you may use or alter to fit your needs. Maintaining these forms is a lot easier than scrambling to pull sub plans together or trying to remember which parents you've called. They also establish you as a professional who documents his or her efforts, which helps your portfolio and your relationship with parents, colleagues and your students!

*Please note:* Your school may have specific forms for some of these documents. Check with a colleague before creating your own or using one of these!

## The templates

You can see examples of these templates in Appendix B, Paperwork templates (page 95).

### **PARENT/GUARDIAN CONTACT LOG**

Noting interactions with parents helps you remember who you've spoken to, how to reach them again and what you learn from each conversation.

- Parent/guardian contact log (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/ContactLog.pdf>) (PDF, 1 page; also available as Microsoft Word document)

### **DISCIPLINE LOG**

A log of student behaviors and consequences, especially useful during conferences with parents and administrators about student behavior.

- Discipline log (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/DisciplineLog.pdf>) (PDF, 1 page; also available as Microsoft Word document)

### **MULTIPURPOSE LOG**

This is one form that can be used to note several things, including parent contacts and discipline records. I called home for almost every discipline issue, so I found myself writing things twice when I maintained separate phone and discipline logs. Switching to this log cut my time in half.

- Multipurpose log (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/MultipurposeLog.pdf>) (PDF, 1 page; also available as Microsoft Word document)

### **SUB PLANS**

These contain all the information someone needs to keep your students on task when you can't be in school. Create emergency sub plans that can be used at any point during the semester (map work for history students, for example) and leave them on file in the office. Later, if you have advance knowledge of specific days you will be absent, create separate plans that are more aligned with the content you had planned to cover on those days. (Find out whom to call when you need a substitute before school starts. Keep the number at home and in your car, in case you are delayed on the way to work.)

- Sub plan template (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/SubPlans.pdf>) (PDF, 5 pages; also available as Microsoft Word document)

### **ISS (IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION) PLANS**

This is work for students to complete if they are unexpectedly removed from your room. Many schools require you to keep these on file in the ISS room or principal's office.

- ISS plan template (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/ISSPlans.pdf>) (PDF, 1 page; also available as Microsoft Word document)

### **IEP (INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN) NOTEBOOK**

Use this to track the modifications you provide for exceptional students. Many schools require exceptional students to verify that modifications were provided by initialing entries in your IEP notebook. IEPs are confidential documents, so keep this notebook in a secure location.

- IEP notebook (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/IEPNotebook.pdf>) (PDF, 2 pages; also available as Microsoft Word document)

## **GRADE BOOK**

You will either be given a paper roll book or access to an electronic grade program.

*If you receive the paper version, skip lines between your students' names to allow for later entries. Also, skip pages between classes to allow pages for attendance and for future marking periods. (Most teachers use one page for each class every quarter or six weeks.)*

*If your school uses an electronic grade book, find out if there is an official orientation to the program. If not, ask for a tutorial as soon as possible. The computer experts will be swamped with requests the week before grades are due. Save your grades frequently and print out a copy every time you update your grades.*

## **LOCKER LOG**

If you have a homeroom, you will need a list of your students' names, locker numbers, and combinations. Many schools will also require students to initial a statement on this page that says they will comply with all school rules about lockers.

- Locker log (available at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/LockerLog.pdf>) (PDF, 1 page; also available as Microsoft Word document)



# Communicating with parents at the beginning of the year

Originally posted August 23, 2005

My first communiqué to parents was a disaster. It was too long, too late and unintentionally insensitive. The worst part of it was a line that said all students were required to have certain supplies in class by the third day of school. Even reading it now, it seems innocuous enough. However, when day three arrived, and I began to note who had come prepared in my grade book, I also noted a marked change in the students' behavior. Some shifted in their seats. Others muttered under their breath. And one handed me a note from his mother. "Mrs. Smith," it began, "Like most people in this town, I work in the local mill. We get paid at the end of the month, and my child will have his supplies after that."

Oops.

I have always believed that you must build relationships with students in order to teach them effectively. At that moment, I learned that you must also build relationships with their families. My students needed supplies. I needed the support of their parents to make sure those supplies were put to good use at home as well as in the classroom. And I had just gotten off on the wrong foot.

## Getting off on the right foot

I have since altered my approach to communicating with parents.

- I ask colleagues what I need to know about the community before I meet my first students,
- I make sure I have a supply list available at open houses and orientations before school begins,
- I collect used notebooks and dividers from students at the end of each year (when they are cleaning out their lockets and heading for the garbage), and
- I let parents know that while those used supplies last, they are available free of charge to any student who stops by my room outside of class time to ask.

## Making sure parents are informed

In addition to the greeting and supply list they receive before the school year begins, I distribute a **syllabus** on day one that contains:

- course description and goals
- rules, policies and procedures
- notes on classroom culture
- description of the grading system
- list of promises to students
- a place for parents/guardians to respond

The response section should include a place for parents/guardians to indicate understanding of the information and a space for them to provide information of their own. They may note a phone number you should have or list facts about their child's learning style or medical needs. (Make sure that this response section is on a portion of the syllabus you can detach for your own record keeping while allowing the student to keep the syllabus!)

Finally, I **attach a welcome letter to each syllabus**, explaining who I am and how much I am looking forward to getting to know them. (I've drafted a sample welcome letter and syllabus (page 107), which you can use as a template.)

## Making personal contact

In addition, I recommend that teachers **attempt to call every parent during the first two days of school**. This is no small task. Many of the phone numbers you will receive from the school (and from some students) are incorrect. Furthermore, when you have 90–120 students at a time (not uncommon for secondary school teachers), just attempting to reach all of their homes can take seven or more hours. In other words, you won't get much else done during the afternoons on those two days! Still, I believe the rewards make the time and effort worthwhile.

Calling during the “honeymoon” phase of the year (which ranges from no time at all to three or four days and refers to a time when most students are still quietly gaining a sense of their environment), means you can connect in a conversation that is purely positive. James' mother may hear, for the first time ever, that he has been a model student in class so far. James receives the positive attention and may decide that he likes it and is willing to work to earn more of it. The best-case scenario is that you have just saved yourself countless hours of wondering what you could have done to get James more invested. The worst case scenario is that James still doesn't invest, but you already know how to reach his mother, and you have proved to her that you are not out to get her son.

Finally, remember to **note all interactions in your parent/guardian contact log (page 9)**.

And remember that you know your classroom, but these parents and guardians know your students. Working together, you can make sure that those students succeed.



# Helping students get organized

Originally posted September 2, 2005

It began as a calm day in my North Carolina History class. Early in the period, I had given each of my students a short handout and ten minutes to complete it. At the end of that ten minutes, I collected the work from everyone — everyone, that is, everyone except a student named Jermaine.

Jermaine didn't have his. When I asked him where he had put it, he told me he had "left it at home." When I reminded him that I had given it out only ten minutes before, and that no one had left the classroom since that time, he looked me square in the eye and asked me if I was calling him a liar.

Jermaine and I spent some quality time at the end of the period looking for the handout. To provide a very short summary of a very long process, the handout was never recovered. The time was not completely wasted, though. I did receive permission for a rare glimpse into the backpack of a student. Its contents consisted largely of crumpled papers shoved in with no sense of order. The only notebook I saw was sealed shut with a large wad of gum.

Jermaine, and many of our other students, have not learned how to organize themselves and their school materials. It is my hope that the few pointers provided below will help you facilitate your students' organization (and thereby their academic success!) as they begin the year.

## Guidelines for facilitating organization

1. **Be clear about the supplies your students need and the way you want those materials organized.** "Communicating with parents at the beginning of the year (page 13)" contains ideas about supplies and a link to a sample syllabus that describes notebook organization.
2. **Use class time to help students organize those supplies.** Allowing students twenty minutes to label dividers and organize handouts at the beginning of the year will save everyone countless hours of searching for assignments down the road.
3. **Don't make assumptions about your students' organizational knowledge.** If you want the homework assignments to go *behind* the *homework* divider, say so. Also, make sure that every handout is clearly labeled. Each should have a title and a clear indicator of the binder section to which it belongs.

4. **Keep a model notebook in the classroom** that students can reference when organizing their own notes.
5. **If you want handouts placed in a binder, three-hole punch them.** Your school's photocopier may do this for you. If not, let an administrator know that you believe organization is an important study skill, and ask if there is money in the budget to purchase a hole puncher for your classroom or department.
6. **Make sure students are committed to keeping their materials organized.** You can do this in a variety of ways, including:
  1. Celebrating those who demonstrate excellent organization. Give out stickers, make a positive phone call home, award a few extra points, or have the principal shake students' hand and compliment them on the excellent work.
  2. Grading students on their organization of class materials. (You can use this sample rubric (page 117) as a template.) You may have to figure out what types of grades your students care about. I found that many of my students were unmotivated by a 20-point notebook grade, until I made those 20 points part of an exam score.
  3. Emphasizing that mastering organization facilitates mastery in other areas. You are not asking them to organize their materials for the sake of "being organized." Organization serves a much larger purpose. Point out that learning the material is easier when students know where to find the handouts on which that material is located. Remind them that demonstrating understanding is simpler when they can locate the work they need to turn in.

I have found that most students are fairly adept at maintaining a system once they have established it. I have also found that many like the sense of control they have over their materials once the system is in place. Teach them organizational skills now, and it will serve them well later — in your class and in other settings down the road.

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## On the Web

### Sample rubric for student binders (PDF)

[/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/binder\\_rubric.pdf](/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/binder_rubric.pdf)

A rubric for grading (or awarding bonus points for) students' organization. (Also available as Microsoft Word document.)

# Getting to know them

Originally posted September 10, 2005

Demarcus told me I was “the bomb.” I told him to go to the principal’s office, and a look of complete and utter confusion covered his face.

It turned out that being “the bomb” is a good thing. I didn’t know that. I had apparently just received the highest compliment an eighth grader could give me, and I had punished him for it.

My mistake.

It was a mistake from which I learned, though. In fact, that moment made me rethink my classroom “discipline system” altogether. I began to wonder how many other times I had handed out consequences without understanding what had actually happened. Certainly my classroom needed structure — rules that were enforced and applied equally to all. But maybe I had admired the structure of the discipline system while neglecting the community foundation on which it needed to stand. Maybe instead of thinking exclusively about behavior — and the rewards and punishments it should elicit — I needed to think about my students.

Did I know them? I knew their names, had contacted their families and had reviewed their academic records. I had even distributed a Getting to Know You (page 113) questionnaire at the beginning of the year. Of course, I hadn’t really had a lot of time to look at their responses. There were lessons to plan and “real” assignments to grade.

But that afternoon I found the completed “Getting to Know You” handouts and really began reading them. After three weeks as their teacher, I began meeting my kids.

I won’t pretend that the change in classroom culture was instantaneous, but the change in me was. I began listening to the hearts of my students, instead of simply challenging their minds. And over time, the classroom culture did shift. I continued to make relationships a priority. As a result, the foundation we needed for our “discipline system” and our academic work was built and preserved.

And I loved it. And I began to love them. And they sensed my investment, were encouraged to interact, and through those interactions we all learned. And we didn’t just learn more about each other. They realized I was interested in them, and they responded by paying more attention to me and to the material I was teaching. Things weren’t perfect, but the number of discipline issues I encountered significantly decreased. As they did, we had more time to focus on each other and on the material.

Getting to know your students is a reward in and of itself, but it also helps in other areas. It creates student investment in you and in history, math, science, English or whatever subject you teach.

# Strategies for getting to know your students

How do you do it? It is actually remarkably simple. Start by asking them a few basic questions about what they do in their free time and who they are inside and outside the classroom. Then remember the answers, and follow up by inquiring about how those things are going for them. Pass a calendar around and ask students to put their birthdays on it. You don't have to buy presents or sing to make an impression. Just say a quiet "happy birthday" when they come through your door.

Every six weeks, assign work that students can do silently at their desks while you call them up one at a time for a conference. You can talk about academic performance, but also ask them how things are going in other parts of their lives. Attend an extracurricular event in which they are going to participate. One colleague of mine — who entered the classroom after retiring from the business world, and taught every day in a bow tie — would ask his students to recommend movies so that he could see them, then have a common experience to discuss with them after class.

In other words, figure out some way to connect with your students. Listen not just to what they say, but to who they are. Demarcus might — for a moment — think you're the bomb, and you don't want to miss that moment because you're not paying the right kind of attention. You also don't want to miss the chance to tell him that you think he is pretty amazing too.

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## On the Web

### **Getting to know you: A survey for students (PDF)**

[/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/getting\\_to\\_know\\_you.pdf](/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/getting_to_know_you.pdf)

This sample questionnaire asks students about themselves so that you can learn more about who they really are, outside of class. (Also available as Microsoft Word document.)

# Creating a safe space for students to take academic risks

Originally posted September 17, 2005

I wrote earlier (page 17) that when you build relationships with your students and demonstrate an investment in them, three incredibly positive things happen: You get to know a classroom full of amazing kids, those students become invested in their relationships with you, and as they become more invested in you, they become more invested in the material you teach. Those relationships provide an incredible foundation of trust that allows you to connect emotionally *and* intellectually with your students, and that connection can produce remarkable results.

That is good news, good news, good news.

Ready for the bad news?

Here it is: Just because your students trust you doesn't mean they are going to trust anyone else in your classroom. And to truly grow, they are going to need to take emotional and intellectual risks in front that group.

It's a group of their peers. They want the approval of their classmates, and many are not willing to risk that approval to engage in intellectual exploration. It is probably not "cool" to ask a question, even if the answer helps them with their learning. And when you, the teacher, pose an inquiry, many students are desperately hoping you won't ask them to share their thoughts.

So what do you do? How can you design a classroom climate that encourages risk-taking? And how can you get a group of students to support one another's efforts, even when some efforts result in answers that are obviously wrong?

## Encouraging risk-taking

Begin by having an explicit conversation about the climate you want in your classroom. If you want people to participate verbally even when they are uncertain, you should say so. If you want their classmates to support imperfect first attempts by applauding the participation, you must tell them how.

Then show them. Here's the method I recommend.

## **1. DEMONSTRATE RISK-TAKING**

First, find something at which you're pretty good and let your students see you do it. Then make the point that regardless of your current performance level, you will never improve at that activity unless you are willing to push yourself to the point of making a mistake.

I demonstrate this by bringing a basketball into my classroom and doing a ball-handling drill in front of my students. Then I tell them I have a choice: I can do it slowly and perfectly forever, or I can try to improve my performance a little and risk making a mistake. Well, I want to get better, so I start to move it more quickly and in few new ways. (Usually students in the front row start to get a little nervous at this point, so I move to an area of the room where I know a flying ball won't break a window or injure a kid.) Eventually, I mess up, drop the ball, take a bow, and remind my students that even though the ball escaped me this time, I'll be able to hold onto it a little longer next time because when you make a mistake, it's an opportunity learn. In other words, I will be better tomorrow because I was willing to take a risk in the classroom today.

## **2. BE WILLING TO FAIL**

Second, be willing to try something at which you are terrible, and insist that your students celebrate your willingness to try. I do this by using an old guitar to play a horrible rendition of "Happy Birthday." Let me be clear: I am absolutely awful, and it is a humiliating experience. But my students love it.

Throughout the year, whenever a student is afraid to give a verbal presentation, participate in a group, write an essay or draw something on the board, I ask them if I need to bring the guitar back in to remind them that we all need to be willing to try. Their classmates usually encourage them to get involved so that they can avoid the cacophony that is my musical output.

I still bring out the guitar on occasion. Sometimes a student who takes a risk needs to be celebrated by a short serenade that lets him or her know that the effort was appreciated. As an added bonus, my humiliation shifts the attention back off of them so they can recover from having taken the risk.

## **3. BUILD RISK-TAKING INTO YOUR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

Develop a management system that rewards students who support their classmates and provides consequences for those who bully, taunt or tease. The rewards can be as simple as extra points on assignments if the whole class applauds after each presentation. The consequence could be a seat outside the door researching the presentation topics instead of listening to what classmates have learned.

## **Other means**

Maintaining a positive classroom culture is not easy, and my means of introducing the topic may not be your style. If that is the case, find an approach with which you are more comfortable.

Somehow, though, you need to let your students know that you understand that trying new skills and learning new material can be intimidating, especially when so many of those efforts are taking place in a classroom that is full of their peers. Somehow, you need to let them know that you appreciate and support all of their efforts, and that you will insist that their classmates demonstrate that encouraging attitude as well.

Finally, make it clear that effort will lead to improvement. Your applause for the participation is sincere, but so is your belief that they can do better — that they can achieve mastery of the material. You will be there to encourage, guide and help them recover from missteps. You will also be there to help them celebrate the accomplishments born of their courage and work.





# 2 The first semester

Your students need you. You need a break. And we're only in the first semester of the school year!

Part two highlights important areas on which new teachers should focus early in the year, including engaging students, using assessments to guide instruction, promoting student understanding, and addressing classroom management issues. It also provides you with important tips for taking care of both your students and yourself.



# A successful day? Engaging your students may not be enough

Originally posted September 24, 2005

I thought the day was a success.

I was exhausted, but elated. For the first time ever, I had spent an entire day in my classroom without once seeing a student asleep (bad) or out of control (worse). Perhaps I had finally discovered the real key to managing a classroom. Certainly it was about building relationships with students (page 17) and creating a positive classroom culture (page 19) — both essential elements. But it was also about making the lessons engaging! Instead of just talking about the material, my students had explored it! They had done activity after activity, and I had learned an incredibly important lesson: If I put more energy into making my classroom interesting, I could expend less energy pleading with my kids to stay alert and on task.

One for the “win” column?

Not quite.

The next day, my students struggled to build on that knowledge, and I realized that my activities, while engaging, hadn’t really focused on what my students needed to know. I had lost sight of their learning objectives in the midst of my planning. I had gotten so excited about what we *could* do that I had forgotten to think about what they *should* learn.

## Backwards planning

Please don’t misinterpret my message. Engagement is critical. Get your students invested. Structure activities that excite their personalities as well as their minds. But never, never, never lose sight of what those activities are supposed to be teaching. You have a classroom full of students who struggle with reading, writing, basic math, critical thinking and many other essential skills. Those students are counting on you to highlight what they need to know.

Pay attention to the gaps in your students’ learning. Translate their needs into objectives, and determine how you can measure their progress toward those goals. Then create the lessons that will really engage them — never losing sight of the purpose each lesson must serve.

Educator Grant Wiggins<sup>3</sup> calls this “backwards planning,” encouraging us to design objectives first so we can create assessments and lessons with those objectives in mind.

Recognize the power of that process and the role you play in directing your students' attention. Know what they need, then consider how they best learn.

Did my class have a successful day?

You can't answer that question if I've only told you about my students' behavior. Success is attained when those kids have been engaged, encouraged, embraced, *and* educated. Students must feel appreciated, be invested — and they must learn.

# Listening while you work: Using informal assessments to inform your instruction

Originally posted October 3, 2005

Her map work was exquisite. The matching section of her test? Perfect. Everything I had asked her to examine, identify or explain had been done flawlessly. She had earned a score of 100 percent on a unit exam. She had even finished early enough to write me a note on the bottom of her test paper.

Ms. Smith. I really liked the unit on India. Maybe it's because my grandmother is Choctaw. It was neat to learn about where my family is actually from!

No!!! No. *No. No.* What had I done wrong?

I had planned the unit so carefully. My objectives were clear, and our activities had been centered around them. She had completed those activities and seemed able to answer any question I asked. But as a result of one misconception, she had created many connections in her mind that were inaccurate. They would inhibit her as she tried to build on that material. And if she hadn't written a quick, unsolicited note, I would never have known.

Her specific situation was fairly easy to fix. It involved an important conversation and some key clarifications. But it made me wonder about my classroom in general. Certainly there would be other points of confusion that I would neither anticipate nor recognize. Certainly there would be moments where students completely missed the concept or context — moments that would pass by unnoticed, then haunt the class down the road.

How could I catch these misconceptions before they caused additional problems? The answer is a profound action that can be summed up in one word.

## Listen

Listen to your students. Classrooms are intellectually crowded, with lots of objectives, assessments, and engaging activities. But within each of those elements, we have to make room for our students not only to contribute but to really *react* to their experience with the material. Paying that sort of active attention requires a certain mindset on the part of a

teacher, but it also involves practical approaches. Here are a few of the approaches I find most effective.

#### **LISTEN AS STUDENTS DESCRIBE THEIR PRIOR KNOWLEDGE.**

Some teachers use formal pre-assessments to determine their students' current understandings. I also like informal brainstorms. Now, when we start talking about India, we begin with two minutes during which each student writes down every word they think of when they hear me say "India." Then they share the words on their lists with the class. I write every word I hear on an overhead transparency, and each word is followed with a question mark. I do not edit the words at this point, since correcting their ideas may prevent more reserved students from sharing connections about which they are uncertain. The question mark I add at the end of every suggestion ensures that each student knows these are initial thoughts, not answers that have been evaluated and approved.

After all of the words are posted we revisit them, crossing out ones that reveal misconceptions and highlighting ones that have connections to our learning goals.

#### **LISTEN TO YOUR STUDENTS WHILE THERE IS STILL TIME TO ADJUST FUTURE LESSONS.**

Most teachers become aware that students are confused about Tuesday's lesson on Wednesday when they check homework (or worse, at the end of the unit). At that point, it is too late. Teachers need to know on Tuesday night, so they can plan to address the issue before moving on to the next day's material. There are a variety of ways to gain a sense of your students' understanding in a more timely fashion.

Some teachers insist on a "ticket to leave" from their students. Simply ask them to write something on a slip of paper and hand it to you as they go out the door. Some days you might ask them to solve a problem on the paper. Other days they might have to answer a question or list two things they learned. At any time, they could use the paper to note a question. As a teacher, you can review these tickets to gain a more accurate sense of what your students are learning. Then use that insight to plan the next day's introduction around their questions or your concerns.

#### **LISTEN AS STUDENTS RESPOND TO OPEN-ENDED ASSESSMENTS.**

Had my test — or any questions earlier in the unit — provided more opportunities for open response, I could have identified the problem area more effectively. Don't ask questions that only require simple answers. Have your students write, reflect, and show their work.

## **Conclusion**

In short, create space for your students to respond in your classroom. And when they do, pay attention to what they actually say. Listen, and allow what you hear to inform your instruction. When we allow their words to guide us, we design better lessons. And when we accomplish that, our students are more likely to learn.

# Making connections between concepts

Originally posted October 10, 2005

While I was writing this weblog, someone asked me:

I agree with you about engaging your students. I have had the same problem. I can do a fun science lab or other activity and also give an extended lesson beforehand to explain the content. The very next day, I still hear the comments “I don’t get it.” I don’t quite understand because I gave a lesson explaining the concept, did a demonstration, we had an activity and did a lab which demonstrated the concept being taught. Everything is explained with reasons “why.” The lab homework questions want the students to reflect on the lab and make connections. This is where I see problems. My students cannot make connections from concept to concept, like putting the pieces of a puzzle together. Is there anything else I can do?

The simple answer is yes. There are other things you can do. It is impossible for me to know exactly what approach will help most without really knowing your students, so I’ll throw out several possibilities and let you decide what might help most with your kids.

## Make time in class for students to respond.

If you create more room for students to respond *during class time*, you can identify and address the problem when their understanding breaks down.

When you listed the events that occurred during class, you mentioned periods of description, demonstration, activity, lab, and constant explanations of purpose. What do these activities look like? If the descriptions, demonstrations and explanations are coming from you, and the activities and labs are prescriptive (i.e. do this, then do that), then there is no space for the students to actually interact with the concepts in class. They hear the material, touch the material, even manipulate the material, but are never asked to respond to the material.

They are later asked to respond to the lab questions — which you describe as homework that asks the kids to “reflect and make connections,” and that is great — but those questions are exactly the type of assessment that will identify points of confusion, and those are the exact points at which they need your guidance.

Perhaps you could either ask them to do the homework questions in class, have them respond more to the other in-class elements of the lesson, or both. You may think those things will take too much time, but my response to that concern would be threefold:

- You're spending the same amount of time going back to clarify the material anyway.
- Insisting on responses along the way may require less time than you think. For example, you could say, "I've just done a demonstration. Everyone turn to their neighbor and tell him or her what they think will happen if I alter one element of the system. Now let's do that. Were you right? If not, let's review the concept and try to make another prediction." Or, after an explanation, you might say, "I've just explained this. Now I am asking everyone to please summarize what I have said on a small piece of paper. I'll collect them all, read a few summaries aloud (without revealing your names), and we'll discuss what key points are present in, or missing from, each." These activities require very little time, but force kids to respond to the material and allow you to identify and address points of confusion before moving on.
- If you really need to get the time back somehow, do it by assigning a simpler element for homework. For example, have students read the description of the concept and your explanation of purpose for homework the night before, then use the time that frees up for in-class responses.

One last note on this point: Make sure those in-class responses are answers to *real* questions that address the concept, its relationship to other course material, and its applications. Only then will you have an accurate idea of whether the next step is to review or to move on.

## Make the connections you want them to “get” explicit.

I support the idea of students figuring things out on their own, but if they are not getting there, draw them a map. You can physically do this with graphic organizers. Some teachers use advance organizers that highlight concepts students have already learned and show them where new knowledge fits in their present schema (like highlighting what they already know about the properties of solids and liquids before introducing the properties of a gas, then having them compare and contrast). Other teachers provide unit organizers that summarize new concepts and clarify how they relate to each other (“Today we’re learning about the interaction of heat, pressure and volume. Here’s how they interact. Now, predict what will happen when this bottle is heated.”)

Remember, giving students a map is not giving them the answer. Maps help identify how points are connected. Students must still be able to intellectually travel from point A to point B. Note that both of my examples asked students to do something with the map they were given: predict, compare and contrast, and so on.

To frame this point in the language of your own question (which mentioned that they couldn't “put the pieces of the puzzle together”), I'll state this one other way that might be helpful: Make sure they know what the final puzzle should look like. It would be much



harder for us to put a puzzle together if no one provided us with a vision of the final product. That's why puzzle manufacturers print the image on the top of the box!

## Ask your students what is working, and what is not.

Ask them explicitly where they are getting lost or if they have experienced a different teaching strategy that worked especially well for them. If a majority responds well to a particular approach, then make sure you try it, but don't forget to use a variety of methods so that you reach all of your kids.



# Connecting with colleagues: No tricks, all treat!

Originally posted October 18, 2005

Some teachers dress up for Halloween.

During my first year of teaching, I was too busy to even anticipate the holiday. I certainly didn't think about it in the context of school — especially since October 31 fell on a Saturday that year. So when the Friday before Halloween rolled around, I was shocked to enter a building full of teachers who were dressed as movie characters or wearing crazy wigs.

No one had told me.

My kids had plenty to say once class started, though. “Oh, Ms. Smith, we thought for sure you would dress up. You seemed like one of the fun teachers!”

Well, my face turned red and I'm sure smoke came out of my ears. Perhaps that provided the illusion of a costume. One thing I could not mask, however, was my sense of hurt. Why hadn't someone thought to let me know? Even if including me was not a priority, it would seem that the education of our students would have been better served if someone had warned me that the kids might be in costume. Ever tried a cooperative learning activity with Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in the same group?

The day was an educational, and an emotional, disaster. However, it did bring an important oversight to my attention.

I hadn't been talking to my colleagues.

## Making time for conversation

Who had time to chat in the teacher's lounge? Every minute of my day was packed. The mornings were filled with last-minute preparations. During lunch, I was either monitoring students or frantically trying to catch up on administrative work. After school, I was either coaching, tutoring, calling parents, xeroxing or trying to lesson plan. Every minute, I had to get five minutes of work done. And even at that pace, I felt so far behind!

The truth is, I didn't have a moment to catch my breath. So it took getting the breath knocked out of me on that holiday to pause and regroup. I needed to meet my colleagues.

I began getting to school five minutes earlier, so that instead of making a beeline for my classroom, I could pause at other teachers' doors to say “good morning.” On days when the mornings were just too packed, I made sure that at least five minutes of lunch was

devoted to either sitting at the adult table in the cafeteria or stopping by the teachers' lounge. I dropped my secret belief that "those teachers sure waste a lot of time chatting" and adopted a new mentality. "I am a part of a team here. I should invest a little time getting to know the other members of my group."

It added five minutes to my day, but improved my work environment tremendously. I looked forward to a few moments with adults at lunchtime. I developed relationships that provided emotional and professional support. I even found out that the other teachers had misinterpreted my "I'm overwhelmed — no time to play" work ethic. They thought I was aloof, unfriendly and uninvested. Talk about irony! I cared too much about my work to waste my time chatting, and they assumed my aversion to conversation meant that I cared little for them or for our school.

I know you are overwhelmed. I know there aren't enough hours in the day. I know it often seems like every moment you are making a choice between working for your students or doing something else. However, I also know that one of the best things you can do for those students is develop a relationship with other teachers, and find emotional and professional support in your building.

So today, I am encouraging you to meet a colleague. Start by taking a little more time to say "good morning" as you walk to your classroom. Or let them know that you admire the bulletin board they created across the hall. Or actually sit down for a five-minute lunch in the midst of the craziness. Or let someone know if you're overwhelmed and need help.

Or simply ask someone if the school has any rules or traditions surrounding Halloween. Don't feel pressured to participate if it is not a holiday you celebrate. Just appreciate having a sense what to expect. Since my first year, I have discovered that some schools have rules against costumes, while others give prizes to the teachers, staff and students who are best dressed.

My point is that the best way to learn about your school's culture, and about so much more, is to begin investing in relationships with other adults in your building. Value their insights. Even more importantly, value them and the relationships you are creating. We are educators. We invest in our students. Let's invest in one another as well.

# You (yes, you!) are making a difference: The power of a single phrase

Originally posted October 24, 2005

We were a group of teenagers, trying to forge our own identities while seeking peer-approval and social acceptance. She was a first year teacher, struggling to engage a class that was off-task and out of control. Together, our characteristics combined to create a chaotic environment. As a result, years later, I remember very little about the content she tried to cover. But I will always remember the day she introduced one simple phrase.

Because that phrase changed me.

It was an excerpt from Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. We weren't even studying that book at the time. Still, she wrote eighteen of its words on the board and said our only homework that night was to think about them. Her reason? She was worried about some of the choices we were making in the face of peer pressure, and thought it might help if each of us reflected on the following quote:

I don't want everyone to like me; I should think less of myself if some people did.

The words were only posted for one day, and my teacher never mentioned them again. Still, for me, they marked a turning point. In the midst of figuring out who I was and which friends would influence me, they helped me steer away from some popular, but damaging activities. For some reason, in the midst of parental talks and after-school specials, it took those words to reach me. They triggered a thought process that helped me develop my own sense of integrity.

They also revealed the power of a teacher and the effect of one phrase.

She was a first year teacher, and she was struggling. Nothing seemed to go as she planned. In spite of that, she made a difference in my life. She introduced one idea that simmered in me for years, affecting my development as well as my decisions. In spite of all the first-year confusion, she had a powerful impact on an impressionable kid.

You may be able to relate to some of her struggles. I hope you can also relate to her desire to continually improve. But more than anything else, I hope that her story can convince you to take heart. In the midst of all your concerns about management, content and strategies, recognize that you are making a difference. You are affecting your students in important and sometimes intangible ways.

So keep working on your classroom culture, your curriculum and your pedagogy. Don't forget that our goal is to reach every kid. But while you are working on those big issues and ideals, take advantage of the small moments that your position affords you. Find a student who is struggling, and say something positive. Tell them you are impressed with their effort. Admire their work, their character or something they say. Let them know that you've noticed their potential. Or simply reveal that you enjoy having them in class every day.

And recognize that even if you feel like everything could be so much better, you are already making a difference. You are a teacher. When you care, students notice, and it affects them. You (yes, you!) are affecting them in incredible and wonderful ways.

# It's November. Do you know where your energy is?

Originally posted November 5, 2005

We had just completed a summer of pre-service training, and a speaker had been invited to congratulate us and wish us well in our new teaching jobs. She began by asking how we felt, and we responded with overwhelming enthusiasm. We felt energized! We were becoming teachers! We were optimistic, determined and eager to start changing the world!

I expected her to ride our wave of emotion. Instead, she smiled, waited for the noise to die down and then spoke very softly. "I wish I could bottle up some of your energy now and store it for a few months," she told us. "If I could, I would mail it to you — in November."

November?

Why had she picked that month?

Maybe she knew something about the first year of teaching.

By November, I was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. Most of the ideals I started out with had become fuzzy images somewhere in my sleep-deprived, over-worked brain. They were there — somewhere — but I couldn't think about them. I had abandoned my visions of grandeur and entered into survival mode. Maybe some of you can relate.

If so, what do you do? How do you find energy reserves midway through the year when you have already tapped every emotional resource available? How do you find the energy to focus on teaching when you're wondering if you're going to survive?

## Six ways to sustain your energy

During my first few years, I discovered several means of sustaining my energy level. Here are the top six.

### **GO EASY ON YOURSELF.**

This year is not going to be perfect. Accept that now, and recognize that your classroom doesn't have to be perfect to make a difference in the life of a student. Do the best you can. You are doing valuable work in your classroom, even though some of the kinks may not get worked out this year.

### **SOLVE A MANAGEMENT ISSUE.**

Pick **one** management issue that is really draining your energy, and create a classroom procedure to address it (page 41). If you become overwhelmed by everything, then just pick one thing and improve it. Addressing it will allow you to redirect the energy consumed by that issue.

In addition, making progress on that matter will give you confidence that things can get better in other areas and provide a foothold in the mountain of management issues over which we are all trying to climb.

### **INVEST ENERGY AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS.**

This will save you energy the rest of the day. You may be exhausted, and it is tempting to conserve your energy during that first few minutes while students are entering the room or while you are introducing the agenda. Don't do it!

The first five minutes set the tone for the entire class period. Greet them eagerly, even if you don't feel like it. Convey enthusiasm about the lesson at its outset, even if you are beaten down or tired. Getting students started in the right direction early means you have to spend less effort redirecting them later. In the long run, you'll have more energy to deposit in your reserves.

### **SAY NO.**

Say "no" to something at school. It's November. People at school have gotten to know you, and they'll begin asking you to do everything — including sponsoring activities, coaching teams, serving on committees or using your planning period to cover a class. Be honest with yourself, and with your colleagues, about whether or not you can do those things right now. Help out when you can (to build relationships with colleagues and to become part of the community), but know that you can't do it all.

One nice way to say it is: "I really wish I could, but I have a few students and classroom projects that really need my full attention right now." Remember, sometimes saying no to an request is the best way to say yes to yourself and your students. And speaking of saying yes...

### **SAY YES.**

Say "yes" to something *outside* of school. Do whatever energizes you. It could be as small as allowing yourself a nap one afternoon (with your cell phone turned off!) or as big as making fun plans for the weekend or winter break. Give yourself some time away from the school building. Your classroom will survive, and the survival of your sanity may depend on it!

### **CELEBRATE YOUR SUCCESSES.**

It is easy to focus on what went wrong during the day, but pay attention to the good moments too. One of the great things about teaching is that you have thousands of small opportunities to connect with students, even when the big things seem out of control. So tell a student you are impressed with something about her, or simply let a student know



that you really enjoy having him in class. Then let yourself celebrate the fact that you were a bright spot in the day of that individual. Let the memory of that moment become a bright spot for you as well.

## Conclusion

Let me end with a plea that you take care of yourself for two reasons — you are important, it's the only way you'll be in any shape to take care of your students. It's November. You may be exhausted. Like that speaker, I wish I could package summer energy and send it to educators everywhere. In lieu of that, I hope these tips will help you make choices that help you rejuvenate, discovering energy within your classroom and within yourself.



# James and the Giant Pencil: Lessons in classroom management

Originally posted November 13, 2005

“James, as soon as you pick up that pencil, we’ll continue with class.”

I said it with authority and with the best of intentions. James needed to take notes. That required having a pencil in his hand. Instead, he had dropped his pencil — eraser down — on the floor. Apparently, he wanted to see how high his big pink eraser would make that small pencil bounce.

“James, did you hear me? I said as soon as you pick up that pencil, we’ll continue with class.”

Well, James never did pick up that pencil. Instead, he resisted, and that resistance turned into agitation. Eventually, the situation escalated to the point that I had to get another adult to escort him out of class.

James was not a model student that day. He had not been paying attention. He had distracted other students who were trying to learn. But what had I done? The truth was, while attempting to manage his behavior, I had created a horrible moment. I had focused the entire class on our situation, and framed that situation in such a way that one of us was going to come away looking powerless and unworthy of respect. I had issued an ultimatum. Class would not continue while that pencil was lying there. James refused to lose face by retrieving it. And the only way I could pick it up while maintaining any sense of authority was by first having James removed from the class.

## What should I have done?

It was a learning moment for me — one of many that forced me to reconsider my approach managing the classroom. Below, I have listed the basic principles that now guide my approach to addressing daily management moments, and I have illustrated them by reflecting on how I could have better managed the situation with James.

### **ISSUE CHOICES, NOT ULTIMATUMS.**

I needed to know James was learning. I should have offered him a choice that highlighted that goal and (carried a consequence that supported, rather than undermined the academic environment in my classroom. For example, “James, either begin taking notes, so I can see

that you're paying attention, or you'll need to write two pages summarizing our discussion for homework so I know what you've learned."

### **MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE THE EASIER FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**

I should not have stood at the front of the classroom, looking at James to see what he was going to do. It made him the center of everyone's attention, and he began thinking more about how his classmates would respond than the consequence of his choice.

I have since learned to speak to students about behavior issues, then quickly refocus my attention on teaching. James can make his choice after I, and the rest of the class, have moved on. As a result, the class as a whole maintains its academic momentum, and James can make a decision outside of the spotlight. In other words, I have found that students are much more likely to pick up the pencil if you ask them to do so, then re-engage with other kids in the classroom. Students will do the right thing more often if they feel respected by you and can make a good choice without completely losing face.

### **WHEN APPROPRIATE, USE POSITIVE MANIPULATION.**

Serious misbehaviors deserve serious attention, but minor missteps can be addressed in more lighthearted ways. Sometimes the positive approach is the best way to deliver the subtle message that you noticed a problem and want to ensure that it does not become a recurrent issue. If your students already see you as a positive person, this approach will feel even more natural.

For example, my students know I am a little goofy, and I tell them how smart they are all of the time, so I could easily have said, "Oh James! You dropped your pencil! Let me get that for you. I don't want one bit of your brilliance lost because you weren't able to write it down!" If it works with your personality, give it a shot sometime. James still gets the point, and you quickly get back to class.

## **Don't let management distract from learning**

Always remember, management should improve focus within your classroom, not become a distraction. Address an issue — or make an appointment to address it individually later — and then move on. We cannot control our students, but we can offer them choices and steer them toward the right one. In other words, when James makes the right choice, the experience should enhance, rather than undermine, his sense of personal dignity. And the encounter should improve, rather than threaten, the culture of our class.

# 'Tis the season...for observations

Originally posted November 20, 2005

The lunch bell interrupted my third period class every day. At 11:03, it signaled my students to close their books, race to the cafeteria, and consume as much caffeine and sugar as possible. At 11:25, another bell would ring, indicating that it was time for them to return to my class. Getting that third-period group refocused after mealtime was one of my greatest daily challenges. So it was just my luck that my administrators would choose that particular segment of the day to observe my interactions with the class.

I wanted to impress those administrators. My normal routine — welcoming students back from lunch, reminding them where we'd left off, and encouraging them to continue their work — seemed unimaginative and thus unimpressive. As a result, I wanted to try something different on the day of my administrative observation. I decided to use a technique I had learned in a workshop. The technique was a method of regaining students' attention, and it was called "If you hear me, clap once."

In an ideal world, it would work like this: My students, chatting to one another as they entered the room, would gravitate toward their seats. In my normal voice, I would say, "If you hear me, clap once," and the few students who heard me would respond with their hands.

*Clap.*

That would earn the attention of a few more students, so a greater number would be listening when I repeated the statement, in the same tone, "If you hear me, clap once."

*Clap.*

Pretty soon, everyone would stop chatting, listen, and clap on cue. Then instead of repeating the instruction to clap, I would thank them for their attention. At that point, we would continue our work.

Beautiful!

At least it was beautiful in theory.

In reality, my students were so thrown by this new approach that they seized the clapping as a rhythmic backdrop they could use to display their latest dance moves. MTV would have been incredibly impressed with the scene I created. My administrators were less impressed. They simply watched as I spent five minutes trying to stop the soul train and calm everyone down.

# Tips for observations

As far as administrative observations go, mine has to be one of the worst on record. Still, I survived (and even benefited from) that observation and many others. I am still aware of the anxiety that surrounds observations for many teachers, but after years of being observed (and later conducting observations), I have come to a few realizations that might help reduce your stress.

## **ADMINISTRATORS WANT YOU TO SUCCEED.**

Administrators are responsible for a school full of students. They want teachers who care for those students, and who are eager to improve their teaching. If you demonstrate those forms of investment, administrators will recognize that, even if there are missteps during a particular lesson. I expected my administrators to be judgmental about my “soul train” situation. Instead, they were sympathetic. I thought they were reflecting on my horrible moment. Instead, they were reflecting on what advice they could offer that would best help me manage the class.

## **ADMINISTRATORS RESPECT HONEST SELF-EVALUATIONS AND GENUINE REQUESTS FOR HELP.**

I knew that I had botched the first five minutes of our post-lunch session. Instead of defending the technique, I admitted that I needed help in structuring that portion of my class period. That led to a conversation about how I could manage the transition from lunch-time to class-time more effectively. It also made me realize that instead of hiding management issues from my administration, I could approach them with questions. They were happy to serve as a general resource and to offer specific advice.

## **DESIGN THE LESSON FOR YOUR STUDENTS, NOT FOR YOUR ADMINISTRATORS.**

I decided to try something new, not because it would best serve my students, but because I thought doing something flashy would impress the people observing my class. I lost focus. My job was to make sure my students were learning. Facilitating learning — in whatever way works best for your students — is the most impressive accomplishment. It is what your students need and what your administrators will respect.

## **UNDERSTAND WHAT OBSERVATIONS MEAN AT YOUR SCHOOL AND HOW THEY WORK.**

The unknown can be scary. Thus, accessing information about observations can be the best way to help you relax. Learning more about the process certainly alleviated many of my fears.

For example, I was initially concerned about the fact that both administrators took copious notes during my lesson. I thought there must be something really wrong if they had to write that much down! I later learned that my school had a procedure for

observations that required administrators to record as many quotes from the classroom as possible.

I also found out that observations happened during specific weeks of the school year, which reduced my anxiety around spot-checks.

Finally, I learned that at the end of each observation, the administrator had to evaluate my teaching against a checklist that was readily available to anyone who requested it. Once I had a copy of that, I knew what they were looking for during the observations. (The checklist emphasized items like “monitors independent work effectively” and “provides positive feedback.”) I became more conscious about including those elements in each of my lessons. Doing so served my students well and improved my observational feedback.

### **INVITE ADMINISTRATORS TO VIEW PARTICULAR LESSONS.**

If there is one lesson you are particularly proud of, invite someone to observe it. Doing so means there is less pressure next time you are observed. On the flip side, if you struggle to manage cooperative learning groups, consider asking an administrator to observe a few minutes of a cooperative learning lesson and then give you advice. In addition to learning something valuable, you will identify yourself as a teacher who is attempting improvement. Any good administrator is going to be impressed with that.

## **Treat observations as opportunities**

Observations are opportunities for you gain new perspectives on your classroom, as well as new insights into how to best serve your students. It can be stressful when you feel like you are being evaluated. In reality, though, most observations are intended to point out areas on which you should continue to focus and identify ways in which the administration can provide additional support. Reduce your stress by familiarizing yourself with the process and by recognizing that you are on the same team as your observer. Both of you care about your students and want the best for your classroom. Together, you can explore what works best for your students more fully, and that can produce amazing effects.





# Three weeks and counting: What winter break might really mean

Originally posted December 4, 2005

I loved teaching, but I was *really* looking forward to the holidays. So when winter break was only a few weeks away, I began an unofficial countdown with my students. Vacation coming up in three weeks...two weeks...one week!

Underlying my expression of enthusiasm was the assumption that my students were as excited about the break as I was, if not more so. They had certainly been more difficult to manage during the early December class periods. Certainly that was a sign of their impatience for their winter break. They had energy, likely inspired by the vacation they saw as the light at the end of our academic tunnel! I was determined to channel that energy into some serious studying. We could push hard now, recover over vacation, then return to school rejuvenated and refreshed.

## The flip side of vacation

Ah, the danger of assumptions. The flaws in mine were exposed during a single conversation with a school counselor. She nodded as I described one student whose December demeanor was much different than what I saw the rest of the year. And she listened to my theory that he was over-excited about the upcoming break.

Then she pointed out that she knew these students and their families a little better than I did, and revealed a huge flaw in my theory that winter break was something everyone would enjoy anticipating. The counselor pointed out that this particular child and several of my other students were not acting out because the excitement of a holiday was too much for them to handle. They were acting out because for some, winter “vacation” was an involuntary dismissal from the school setting, and school was the most stable part of their lives.

For several weeks, there would be no cafeteria breakfast at 7 am, and those who received free or reduced lunch at school might have no lunch at all. The school building was warm, while some of their houses were not. Most came from loving families that were simply facing economic struggles, but others came from homes that were less than loving. One of my students was facing her first holiday season since losing her mother.

In short, for many of my students, the days away from school would be hard. While several students anticipated those moments, I constantly emphasized how much we would

all enjoy our vacations! After my conversation with the counselor, I realized that my countdown had heightened some students' anxiety. And my overwhelming, often verbalized enthusiasm for time with my family had left some of my students feeling even more alienated and alone.

Look forward to your vacation. Let students eagerly anticipate a break from seven hours of class work a day. But be sensitive to the fact that for some of our students, time away from school means time in more difficult settings. Let them know you will miss them, and that you'll be thinking about them from a distance. Let them know that you hope they enjoy their break, but that you also hope they know how much you will enjoy seeing them again after the new year. Even if you are among the secondary school teachers whose students leave to start new courses in January, you can tell those students that your door will be open to them even after they've moved into a new semester's classes.

In other words, this December, provide a sense of constancy in a time that may be unsettling for some of your students. Balance your celebration of the school holidays with a celebration of the kids in your classroom. It's the perfect time of year to pause and let students know that while you enjoy vacations, you also enjoy being with them.

# They're all on the same page...and I'm grading page 1 of 700

Originally posted December 11, 2005

I had figured out the secret! Planning lessons for three history classes was exhausting, but I had finally found a way to streamline the work. Each group was required to complete research projects at some point during the semester. I would make sure that they all did so at exactly the same time!

I congratulated myself on this approach after completing the first lesson plan for our research unit. It involved creating only one instructional handout, then varying it slightly for use with my other two classes. Brilliant! Two weeks were devoted to helping students conduct the research, create notecards, write essays, footnote sources, craft bibliographies and peer-edit their materials. During those weeks I worked extremely hard during class time, helping students who were new to the process, and even harder after school assisting anyone who needed extra help. But my nights, usually consumed by lesson planning, offered much more free time than usual. By aligning my classes' schedules, I had reduced my lesson planning efforts by more than a third.

Ah, those two weeks were beautiful. One lesson plan each night, and students working and writing all day. By the following Friday, they had made real progress on lengthy first drafts, each with substantial bibliographies. One student even remarked on how much he had learned.

Well, guess what I learned?

I learned that when *every class* does *every step* of the research process on the same schedule, *everyone* turns in their rough draft at exactly the same time. How had I failed to anticipate that?

I also learned that carrying more than 700 pages of student writing home to evaluate requires making more than one trip from my classroom to my car. Granted, I was only using one hand to hold the materials. The other was busy dialing numbers on my cell phone, ordering a pizza for dinner since there would be no time for cooking and canceling plans since my schedule suddenly consisted solely of wading through ninth-grade research.

I didn't finish the grading. I eventually made a dent over a holiday weekend we had a few weeks later. But by the time I handed the rough drafts back to my last class of students, many of them had returned their sourcebooks to the library. Others had lost parts of their notes. A few complained that by the time their rough draft had been evaluated, they had forgotten what they wanted the final draft to look like. At the mention of final drafts — more papers I would be evaluating — I internally groaned.

Were the benefits of aligning my classes' schedules worth it? Honestly, I don't know. I believe my students profited from the fact that I was completely focused on the research process when they needed guidance, and I enjoyed a brief respite from an overwhelming lesson planning load. However, we both suffered from my inability to provide timely evaluations of their essays. They needed feedback, and by the time they had it, I needed a break!

## Plan for yourself, not only your students

I share this story not to advise you, but to give you the opportunity to make a choice about scheduling instruction with your eyes fully open. If your objectives allow for schedule alignment between your classes, and you can do that while still meeting the needs of individual groups and students, then by all means consider adjusting the schedules. For two weeks, doing so provided me with much needed rest. But be aware of the price tag when you decide to purchase that respite. Does that adjustment necessitate concurrent evaluations? How long will the projects take to grade? Can you complete the assessment in a timeframe that will respect your students' efforts? If not, aligning the schedules may be a mistake.

Regardless of how you choose to structure your classes, remember that there are always two considerations: the effect on your students' learning and the effect on your mental health. Find a system that enhances both, allowing you to serve your students while acknowledging the method with which you are personally most comfortable. If lesson planning drains you more than marathon grading sessions — and you can complete those sessions in a more timely manner than I did — occasionally aligning your classes' schedules may be the answer. If not, take an alternate approach. Either way, begin noting what processes and pacing strategies work for you so that you can take care of both yourself and your students. Acknowledge both sets of needs when making classroom decisions. That way, everyone benefits from your considered approach.

# New beginnings

Originally posted December 18, 2005

It was the last day before winter break in my first year of teaching. Students were bouncing off the walls, and I was ready to go home. I truly thought that nothing would focus everyone's attention, so I was amazed when my students took the handout I gave them and approached it quite seriously. I quietly congratulated myself on scheduling a final activity that seemed to hold everyone's interest.

I stopped congratulating myself once I read everything they handed in.

You see, I had given them a student feedback form (page 119) that asked them to evaluate my teaching. (It was amazing how focused they became when given an opportunity to grade me!) I had administered the form because I thought that over winter break, I would attempt to balance relaxing with family, reflect on the semester, and make decisions about what my classroom would look like in January. I knew that soliciting feedback and suggestions from students would help me with the process of reflecting on, and improving, my teaching. And it did! Their comments were an invaluable part of the time I devoted to the "classroom restructuring" process. Still, some of that feedback was a little hard to read.

Only one section of their survey responses surprised me. I knew that there had been problems, so their pointing out some issues didn't shock me. I knew that they would suggest that certain elements of my teaching be changed. What I did not know was that almost every student would answer question six in an identical fashion. It was not a question about management or instruction or classroom environment. It simply asked them what they would remember about my class in ten years.

I thought they would describe an activity. I thought they might remember a speaker or a unit or a project that they had enjoyed. Instead, almost every student responded with some version of the following statement:

I will remember you, and I will remember how you treated me.

## Relationships matter

In the midst of all the lessons, projects, tests and school activities, they had seen *me*. It made sense once I actually thought about it. What did I remember from my elementary and secondary school classrooms? I recalled some academic content and a few classroom

experiences, but even more clearly, I remembered all of my teachers. And to this day, I can tell you how each of them chose to treat me.

It was a powerful reminder as I approached my classroom again after winter break. My students had pointed out so many things that I needed to do differently. My own reflections revealed even more classroom elements that needed to change. I couldn't do them all. Some were out of my control, and others would require a summer's investment. I became overwhelmed with the idea that this semester would also be imperfect.

At the same time, I clung to what my students had almost unanimously revealed. In the midst of all those external imperfections, they would remember me, and they would remember how they were treated. At the very least, I could make sure that my time in the classroom conveyed the message that they were important, and that what they learned and did and became was important to me.

## Starting over

You get to start over in January. Some of you will have an opportunity to start over with the same students. Others will begin anew with a different group of kids. Reflect on the past semester. Make changes that will enhance the learning in your classroom. Consult your students, experienced colleagues, and your own memories to discover what those changes might need to be.

Some of you may want to create a new physical environment to reveal in a tangible way that this semester will be different. That may involve redecorating walls or rearranging desks. Others may want to implement new classroom procedures. Or you may want to attempt a new instructional technique. Seize next semester as an opportunity to explore any or all of these avenues, but all the while please remember what my surveys revealed.

Your students will notice outward alterations, but they will also notice your inner person. During this break, make a renewed commitment to believing in your students. Give each child a chance to embrace a new beginning in January, regardless of his or her past experiences in school. Determine to be firm in your management style, your commitment to instruction and in your acknowledgement of each student's potential.

We cannot lose faith, especially when confronted with a new semester's opportunity for brand new beginnings! We must continue to see each student (and each semester) as ripe with possibility. This approach is critical for so many reasons, one of which is best expressed by our students: "I will remember you, and I will remember how you treated me."

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### On the Web

#### **Student Feedback Survey (PDF)**

[/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/student\\_feedback.pdf](/lp/media/collections/newteach/forms/student_feedback.pdf)

A survey form that gives students the opportunity to offer feedback on your teaching. May be used as a template. (Also available as Microsoft Word document.)

# 3 The second semester

The stage was set during first semester. Now, later in the school year, how do you improve the performance? And what unexpected moments might this part of the year bring? Part three offers more insights into classroom management and instruction and gives you advance notice of what you might expect during official (and unofficial) second semester holidays.





# Welcome back!

Originally posted January 6, 2006

Many of my friends are in professions other than teaching, and one January evening I listened as one of those friends described how much he loved the first day back at work after the winter holidays. He detailed that day, depicting a slow morning devoted to catching up on colleagues' travels, long coffee breaks discussing New Year's resolutions, and a general sense of "easing back in" to the workplace.

I didn't know whether to pinch him or try to steal his job.

My first days back are *never* like that. The school is generally freezing, since the heater needs a few days to reverse a week of closed doors and 40-degree temperatures. And students alternate between talking incessantly to friends they missed during the holidays and sleeping through the morning section of my class. Over a one-week winter holiday, it seems, some have grown accustomed to waking up around noon.

As I struggle to get everyone back into "school mode," I sometimes envy those in jobs that allow them to ease into anything. I think about how nice it must be to start work at nine am, to go to the bathroom without the permission of a dismissal bell, and to take more than fifteen minutes for lunch.

But then I remember why I love this job.

I love this job because I get to spend my days with students. Every day, those students touch my heart in some significant way. And in return, they allow me to touch their lives. Those exchanges make our work with these kids incredibly important.

If you're reading this at the time of year when I wrote it, you're just starting back to school now. So, welcome back! I'm glad you're here, and whether or not they articulate it, your students are happy to see you too. Thank you for being a stable force in their lives and a positive part of their development. We are educators. We don't get to ease back into the workplace, and it will be months before we enjoy a long weekday lunch. But as we re-enter our classroom, we are re-entering our students' lives, and reclaiming our status as their teachers.

Welcome back, and have a great year.



# Snow days

Originally posted January 15, 2006

Remember snow days as a kid? Waking up in the morning, seeing the powdery white stuff outside and running to the television or radio to find out if the list of school closings included your school's name?

Well, as a teacher, I learned to look at that list a little more closely. Because sometimes, when my school's name appeared, it would be followed by a hyphen and the words "teacher workday."

Initially, I assumed that "teacher workday" was my cue to immediately strap on my boots and warm up my car. On one snowy day early in my teaching career, I did exactly that. By 6:45 am, I was pulling into the school parking lot. It made sense to me. 7 am was the time teachers were normally required to sign in.

But by 7:30, there was only one other car in the parking lot — the car of another new teacher. None of the veterans showed up until well after nine-thirty, and many of them never arrived.

A little research into my school's official policy, and a little insight into the unofficial practices everyone seemed to adopt, revealed that snow days at our school had very loose requirements. Although my district insisted that its schools label all snow days as teacher workdays, and that those labels be posted on all television and radio stations, in reality that simply meant that teachers would be required to "somehow" make up those seven hours of missed time. We could come in on a Saturday (if the building was open) or stay late on a few regular school days (something I was already doing anyway and simply needed to document). I learned that even if I did decide to come in on the actual snow day, the building would never be opened before nine.

## Know your school's policies!

I don't know what your school's policies are, but I do know that it is worth looking into before that first snow falls. I spent a very cold morning on dangerous roads because I wanted to meet my administrators' expectations for an unanticipated workday. Only later did I realize that I had never really asked what their expectations were.

So ask how snow days work at your school. What television or radio stations will announce your school's closing? If those stations post a teacher workday, what does that mean? Is there a specific number you should call to let someone know that you can't make it in for a "mandatory" workday if the roads near your house are too risky for travel?

Remember that, regardless of administrative expectations, safety should be your primary concern.

Finally, ask if there is ever a time when all of the rules get thrown out the window. I once worked in a school that used a phone tree to inform teachers about the expectations for snow days. The rule was that we should assume that every snow day was a teacher workday, with required attendance by faculty and staff, unless we received a call from someone in the administration by 7 am. One night, this school received a ten-inch snowy blanket. Everyone who worked in the school, which was located in a southern state, was completely shocked and overwhelmed by the snow. Having grown up in a similar area, I knew that the town would be completely immobilized. The administrators, deciding that the impossibility of travel would be obvious to everyone, decided to cancel the workday without actually making the calls.

That would have been fine, except for the two new teachers who had just moved to our town from Alaska. When they received no phone call by 7 am, they assumed their attendance at school was required. To them, the roads seemed completely navigable. While the rest of us were sleeping, reassured by visions of a snowy school parking lot and locked doors to the building, they were putting on the snow chains and starting their commute!

So new teachers, check your school policies, and veterans, don't forget to keep those new teachers notified. Everyone, stay safe if you're out in snowy weather. And if you don't feel comfortable on the roads, regardless of your school's policy, know it is ok to call and let someone know you simply can't make it. Don't risk your safety by making a dangerous drive.

# The thirty-second system for managing tardies and misdirected attention

Originally posted January 22, 2006

I thought my tardy policy would create order. It was clear, and I would be consistent about enforcing it. If you weren't in your seat when the bell finished ringing, you were tardy. First tardy of the quarter meant a warning. Second tardy — a fifteen minute detention. Third tardy — a phone call home. And on the fourth tardy of the quarter, school rules dictated that the administration would become involved. Surely, I thought, the policy would encourage students to begin class on time and in a calm fashion.

It turned out I was completely wrong.

Instead of signaling quiet, the bell was a trigger for chaos. Some students would hear it and dive toward a desk, pushing aside smaller classmates. Amid the confusion, I would hear loud exclamations, “\*@#%! I thought I had time to sharpen my pencil before the bell rang!” Also, once a student realized that the ringing had stopped, there was no more incentive to take a seat with any degree of efficiency. “Mrs. Smith is already marking me tardy,” a student would think. “I might as well finish my conversation with Amanda before settling in for the day.”

Something had to change. We had to begin class promptly, but this wasn't working. The chaos stirred up in our first five seconds set a horrible tone for the rest of the day. What could I do to get us off on the right foot as we began our class experience? I wanted the bell to signify the beginning of order. How could I use it to inspire both punctuality *and* civil behavior? My current policy had turned it into a starting gun, signaling an out-of-control, two-second race.

## Time to settle in

A good solution would require my students to maintain their “I must get there” mentality while introducing the idea that “I can behave civilly and still get there on time.” Perhaps the best way to achieve both goals was to alter the bell's meaning for my students. Maybe the bell could serve as a thirty-second warning. When my students heard it, they would also hear me begin a countdown.

There's the bell. In thirty seconds, I expect you to be seated. Once seated, you should read and follow the instructions that are written on the board. We're at twenty seconds now...now down to ten...in five seconds everyone should be reading the instructions...two...one...and now, if you are not seated and focused, your tardy will be marked down.

When introducing the idea to my students, I told them the extra thirty seconds of “settling-in” time was part of an exchange I was offering. They could have that extra time to get to their seats and get started. In return, I expected them to be completely focused when that thirty-second count wound down.

The difference in my room was remarkable. Instead of catching students off guard and inspiring mass panic, the bell became a force that moved students into their desks. My willingness to invest thirty seconds in the new approach actually saved us time on a daily basis. Under the previous system, it had taken us several minutes to recover from the chaos created by the bell.

## Countdowns for classroom management

The countdown method was so effective that I began using it to manage other moments in my classroom. Whenever I needed students' attention, I would give them a set time to conclude their current activities.

I realize that you are all working on your essays, but in thirty seconds I'm going to need your attention. Finish up the sentence you're writing and then please focus on me.

In thirty seconds, I'm going to give your group its next set of instructions. Finish what you're saying now or make a note of what you need to continue discussing. You can return to that topic once we've gone over a few points as a class.

All of a sudden, instead of writing and whispering while I was giving essential instructions, my students had time to quickly finish a thought or activity then turn their attention to me. At its most fundamental level, it was a response to respect. I was giving them a few seconds to bring an idea or statement to conclusion. Most would do so, then focus on me.

Of course, no system is perfect. I still have students who receive tardies on a regular basis, and I still have a few who want to continue talking to group members when I need them to listen to me. However, there is a critical mass of students who will follow instructions when they feel respected and when those instructions are reasonable, and that critical mass can have a powerful impact on the rest of the group.

So consider providing your students with a little time to transition into quiet attention. You may find that those few seconds are easily recovered through improved productivity, and that even a small investment of time can lead to a new atmosphere of calm and respect. In my room, the countdown approach has made for smoother starts and much more effective transitions. This has enhanced both our classroom environment and my students' performance. It has also made classroom management more manageable for me.

# Who's holding the pencil? And did anybody learn?

Originally posted January 29, 2006

Years ago, before much of my “official” teacher training, I worked as a Homework Helper at the public library. The city government created my position because it recognized that a large number of students, particularly elementary school children, were instructed by working parents to go straight to the library after school. These parents, many of whom wanted a safe environment for their kids but could not afford to leave work early or purchase private afternoon care, placed their trust in the library’s reputation as a orderly environment. My job was to maintain that order among the children who arrived each day, and to encourage them to use their after-school time wisely by offering to help them with their homework.

Over the course of several months, I came to know the regulars. I also interacted with their parents, who would call and ask to speak to the children (making sure they had arrived safely), and then pick those children up as soon as they were able to leave work.

I took the job because I believed in the city’s mission, and because I needed money to help cover expenses while I was applying to an official graduate school of education. I thought that I would have to wait until arriving at that “higher institution” or into a “real classroom” to gain true insights into child development and instructional method. Little did I know how much interacting with those children and the library staff would teach me, if I were willing to learn.

I remember one lesson in particular. It came in the form of a statement by a grandmotherly figure who worked at the library’s circulation center. She would greet the children as they entered each day and always asked them if they had a lot of homework. And if things were slow in the late afternoons, she would sometimes sit at our unofficial homework tables simply to encourage the children and to observe. She never interrupted, insisting that she was “no teacher,” but she liked to watch as I worked. She saw me draw figures to help the younger kids learn their numbers. She saw me sketch pictures to help others add and subtract. Many times, she saw me revise essays by scratching out sentences or writing down correct spellings. She never said anything, until one day, after work, when I asked what she thought about our after school program. At first, she appeared hesitant, but then she replied.

“I don’t know much about teaching, but I guess I have noticed one thing,” she said, almost in a whisper. “You know how sometimes, when a child asks a question, you take their pencil to help show them what they should be writing...”

“Yes?” I encouraged her to continue.

“Well,” she said, “to me, it seems like if *you’re* holding *their* pencil, they’re less likely to learn.”

## Helping or showing?

The impact of her insight was incredible. All at once, I began to see my entire approach to “helping” in an entirely new light. I had been showing, not questioning or guiding. My first impulse, every time a student asked for help, was to take their pencil and begin drawing, correcting or outlining a process. My actions transformed each struggling student into a passive observer. I then asked those passive observers to watch me and learn.

I am not suggesting that showing a student how to do something is always a bad approach to answering a question. I am simply encouraging you to be conscious of what the students are doing while you respond. How often do you find yourself holding their pencil? Do you leave them as soon as the explanation is rendered and the pencil returned? Are you doing the work for them, under the guise of “teaching”? If so, how do you make sure they have learned?

Since hearing the librarian’s words, I have made a much more conscious effort to provide examples while insisting that my students follow along, then do their own work under my observation. I still show, but I also listen, question, guide, and insist that *they* show what they have gained from the experience.

That interaction with the wise librarian also taught me to solicit feedback from anyone who knows me, my students, or has experience with children or education. In addition to reminding me that I must be conscious of how I am assisting my students, her words remind me of the amazing insights others are willing to share with me, if I am simply willing to ask, listen and learn.



# Valentine's Day: Love it? Or love it not?

Originally posted February 5, 2006

Brace yourself. Valentine's Day is approaching.

No, I'm not talking about bracing yourself emotionally. I'm talking about bracing yourself *professionally*, because it may be one of the most chaotic, heart-wrenching days you experience at school.

My first year, the day was spent listening as some kids were paged to the office to pick up balloons and flowers — and watching as other kids felt left behind. Several of my classes were disrupted by students who had to leave because they were on the “carnation committee,” a group that raised funds for the school by selling flowers. The students who remained in class were interrupted by the carnation deliveries. “Oh, Tamara! Two people sent you flowers! Just wait until they both find out!”

By the end of the day, no one was focused on learning. The kids were focused on whether Tamara's suitors would engage one another. I was focused on preventing on the fight. No one was focused on the kids who left without anything to show for the day spent at Valentine central. They had spent a day in the background, watching others receive balloons, teddy bears, flowers, and candy. So much for my classroom message that everyone was equally valued. That day, the room clearly displayed the social hierarchy a teacher's words could not challenge. As much as I tried to fight it, many kids looked around the room at some desks covered in gifts while theirs remained empty, and they felt divided into a group of loved and loved-nots.

The problem pervaded the school so completely that during January of the following year, our administrators announced that no one would be allowed to exchange Valentine's gifts in the school building. That proclamation lived for exactly one week, then was killed by an announcement over the loudspeaker one early February morning:

Due to economic concerns of the florists and other business owners in our small community, students are allowed, even encouraged, to exchange Valentine's Day gifts at school on the fourteenth of February. Personal exchanges may take place between classes, but all office deliveries will take place during the last fifteen minutes of school.

It was better that year, but still difficult. I have never received so many requests to go to the office to see the nurse or make a phone call or anything else that would allow students to glance at the soon-to-be delivered items and their gift cards. Happy Valentine's Day? Right. I just wanted to go home.

## Getting through the day

I don't know what your school's policy regarding Valentine's Day will be, and I don't know what you'll decide to do in your classroom. I know that some elementary school teachers have students create cards for one another. Some secondary school teachers require that any gifts that students bring into class be stored behind the teacher's desk for the duration of class. In any case, Valentine's day is often not an ordinary school day! Here are a few ideas about how to make your students feel safe and valued on that day in your class.

Ask a colleague what policies your school has regarding Valentine's Day. If your school has a policy against Valentine's distributions, respect it. If not, consider how to best manage the day. If your students are creating Valentines for each other, require that each student make one for everyone else, plus an extra in case a new student arrives or a classmate is forgotten. If your school interrupts class time with deliveries, hold them all for distribution at the end of class. If you can invest some of your own resources, consider giving everyone a small chocolate heart — not something big that they have to explain was “from their teacher,” but something that makes each feel acknowledged. (You can buy bags of them at any grocery store.) Regardless, let your students know how you plan to manage the day in advance.

And throughout it all, remember it is a school day, and the focus should still be on learning. If there will be gift distribution, compartmentalize it so that it becomes a distinct, small, final section of the period, and insist that until then everyone focus on coursework. Also, consider how the emotions of your students and potential chaos of the day should affect your lesson plans. As much as I value collaborative activities, I have found that on Valentine's Day, there is too much gossip to distract students who are supposed to be engaging in group work. It tends to be a day of teacher demonstrations and individual learning in my class.

Investigate what the day generally means in your school and what you want it to mean in your classroom. Be thoughtful about whether you should allow the results of that investigation to affect how you structure that particular day's academics.

And finally, on a personal note, have a Happy Valentine's Day. Consider this a verbal chocolate heart from me to you, inscribed with the words “Thanks for looking out for our students.” They are fortunate to have you, especially when you make a special effort to consider how to convey the sense that they are valuable members of the school community — on Valentine's Day and on every other day that they are in your class.

# Balancing order and learning in classroom discussions

Originally posted February 14, 2006

The rule was that if you wanted to speak, you had to raise your hand and wait to be called on — and *no one* hated the rule more than I did.

It's ironic, since I was the teacher. The rule I hated had been created by me.

But I felt I had to do it to maintain some sense of order during our lessons. I couldn't have students shouting out ideas, interrupting one another and drowning out their quieter classmates. On the few occasions when we tried a more conversational approach, I always ended up monitoring one exchange between a few enthusiastic participants while everyone else either addressed quieter comments to their neighbors or simply tuned out. Before long, there would be ten different conversations going on in the classroom (few of which remained quiet or on topic) and at least two students would use the chaos as cover while they fell asleep.

At least if I enforced the “raise your hand” rule, I could control the conversation. I could make sure everyone had a turn, that they could make their comments uninterrupted, and that those comments addressed the appropriate theme. The down side was that there were no real discussions. There were just a string of remarks, all addressed to the teacher. I wanted students to engage with each other, but how could they when they were all facing forward and waiting to be called on by me?

## Avoiding inconsistency

I wanted the best of both worlds. I wanted the free thinking that came from students engaging in real conversations without the aid of Ms. Moderator. But I also wanted the civil, class-wide, on-topic insights that came when the rules gave control of the behavior to me.

The result of these competing desires was inconsistency in our classroom. At the beginning of a class discussion, I would strictly enforce the “raise your hand” rule.

But as the conversation continued, some invested student would spontaneously react to a classmate, and I would appreciate the engagement just enough to allow it. Of course, the original student would respond, other students would jump in, and pretty soon we'd be drowning in conversational chaos.

Inevitably, I'd step in and reprimand whoever had made the loudest or most inappropriate comment. That student, hearing my reminder about seeking permission before speaking, would then express outrage: "Ms. Smith, everyone has been talking without permission! Why are you picking on me?"

## Seminar format

I was frustrated, and so were my students. Fortunately, frustration can breed creativity in the classroom, and in ours it led to a system that provided structure while still allowing students to engage with one another a little more freely. They would have protocols to follow, but a little more room to breathe.

Our new system hinged on a sign I hung at the front of the classroom. On one side, in large letters, it bore the words "SEMINAR FORMAT." I told the students that seminar format was a good thing. In seminar format, they could simply have a whole class conversation about whatever issue we were addressing, and we would stay in that format as long as they could manage three things:

1. No one was allowed to interrupt a classmate.
2. All comments had to be loud enough for the entire group to hear (no side conversations).
3. Every comment had to be in some way related to the topic we were discussing.

At any point, I could join the conversation to make a comment or to ask a quieter student what he or she thought about the topic. The students were required to learn the rules for seminar format, and reminders about those rules were posted in the classroom. If the seminar system was ever violated, I maintained the right to flip the sign over. On its other side, I had written the words "LECTURE FORMAT. "

## Lecture format

My students didn't like lecture format. They knew that if those words were visible, no one could speak without raising a hand and receiving my permission. The first person to speak out of turn would receive a warning, which was a reminder to that individual as well as the rest of the class. For the remainder of the time in lecture format, anyone else who jumped in without being called on would earn a detention. It was a very formal, controlled way of managing the group.

The contrast between seminar format and lecture format was intentionally stark, and the sign made clear which set of expectations had been established. My students appreciated the system because of its clarity; they always knew exactly what I was asking them to do. I appreciated the system for its powerful influence on student behavior. My students, who only weeks before struggled to have a civil, inclusive, on-topic, class-wide, seminar-style conversation, managed it perfectly when they knew the alternative was an official lecture-formatted system that came with formal detentions. I was amazed when,

after a week of adjusting to the system, they kept one another on task during most class discussions.

“Andre!” a classmate would grumble., “No side conversations! As soon as you started talking, Mrs. Smith started walking toward that sign!”

My management had become a matter of motion. Andre spoke out of turn. I moved toward the sign. His behavior was corrected. We stayed in seminar format the rest of the day.

Lecture format was not all bad; it was not introduced as a punishment. Although students sometimes resisted it because they liked the freedom that came with the alternative, they recognized that there were times our work simply required a more structured approach. We used it on days when students were working independently, taking tests, listening to me address straightforward material very quickly, and on days when discussions centered around more controversial topics. As a history teacher, I facilitated conversations about world issues that were hard for some students to handle maturely. On those days, I insisted on lecture format to maintain a little more control.

## A time for each format

In other words, we found a time and place for both discussion styles in our classroom. More importantly, we discovered a system that clarified expectations and allowed students more say in our classroom. They enjoyed knowing that for the most part, their behavior dictated which system we used and that with some attention to protocol, and they could keep the class in their preferred seminar format. It created positive peer pressure and a more responsible culture. It has also introduced the unwritten rules for engaging in civil discussions. Understanding those rules will help them in college and in the real world.

So if you struggle to facilitate class discussions, consider introducing a similar formats. There is an adjustment period, but there is also hope that students will learn a system that encourages them to learn from each other. Clear expectations allow for real conversations, and those conversations encourage students to engage and allow them to learn.



# Our students: Not just ours, and not just students

Originally posted February 21, 2006

William hated me.

There were small signs of animosity during class — his refusal to follow instructions, constant challenges to any assertion of my authority and open expressions of how I was “boring” and “dumb.”

But the out-of-class indicators were even more frustrating. One-on-one conferences, intended to explore issues and build relationships, were completely fruitless. He would stare at the floor ignoring any attempt at conversation, preferring instead to mumble an occasional “Can I go now?” If he ever made eye contact, it was to stare me down. In those moments, his quiet “Can I go now?” would become an outright defiance. “You can’t keep me here forever, Ms. Smith.”

I was at a loss.

I had tried being positive. I had tried being insistent. I had tried exploring the root of his anger toward me. Finally, when my individual attempts to reach him failed, I enlisted the assistance of others. I contacted his father, who said he would “talk to him” about his behavior. I spoke to a guidance counselor, who revealed only general insights about his history in school. I referred him to an administrator who, after speaking with him, offered simple confirmation of my growing suspicions. “All he would say, Ms. Smith, is that he doesn’t like you.”

The situation went from frustrating to frightening the day he skipped my class, preferring to roam through the hallways. I knew he was at school that morning, and so when he didn’t show up for fourth period, I paged the office to notify the administration that he was missing. When the assistant principal found William and told him that I had reported the truancy, William grabbed a pair of scissors and swung them with enough force to lodge them in a thick wooden door. After surveying the damage, William turned to the administrator and told him, “That’s what I’d like to do to Ms. Smith.”

I had no say in what happened to William after the incident. He had threatened a teacher. Following policy, the administration notified the police and then had William expelled. But after he left, my questions still lingered. What had gone wrong? How had I inspired such hatred? What more could I have done to identify and address the issue that had led to such an act of violence from him?

## A surprising answer

The answers came during the first ten seconds of a meeting with William's father. Although we had spoken on the phone a number of times, his trip to campus following the "scissor incident" was the first time we actually met. Upon seeing me, his eyes grew wide with simultaneous shock and understanding.

"Oh, no....I can't believe it....You must be Ms. Smith...."

While recovering from his own surprised reaction, he revealed that I looked exactly like his wife — William's mother — who had died a few short years earlier. Her passing had left William feeling abandoned and angry. Seeing me every day had been way too much for him.

I relay the story both because it was an emotional part of my first year and because I still find it unsettling. I also relay it because it taught me something important about working with students. William may not have learned much from me, but I learned a few things from him.

## It's not all about school

I learned the importance of meeting the parents in person when there is a long-term issue. I learned to trust my gut when it tells me something different is happening with a particular kid.

But the main thing I learned is that sometimes, in spite of your best efforts, you never know what is really going on with a student. We often forget that they have lives outside of our classrooms, and that those lives may be difficult. Not every behavioral issue is rooted in how we've decided to manage our classrooms. Some issues stem from outside events with emotional components that our students bring in.

So what do we do? There are practical steps such as consulting school counselors and administrators about helping students who have emotional issues. Please do that if you have concerns about a specific individual in your class.

But on a more personal level, serve your students by simply remembering that often, the most difficult students are the ones who are struggling with the most difficult issues. Even when they frustrate you, try to respect who they are and what they might be facing. Keep expectations for them high, while acknowledging that they may need assistance from you or others in order to meet their full potential.

And finally, as you continue working to improve elements in your classroom, remember that not every school issue was born in the school building. It isn't healthy to internalize every management failure. Examine the rough patches in an effort to smooth them, but give yourself a small break by internally acknowledging that not every misbehavior is a direct response to something you did.



# Finding an emotional outlet you can get into

Originally posted March 1, 2006

There were a few faculty bathrooms in the building, but only one that was close to my classroom. It was tiny, containing only one toilet, one sink, one garbage can and one full-length mirror. The only distinctive feature was a broken light that strobed every time it was turned on. And it annoyed me day after day after day.

Then another first year colleague confessed that sometimes — after using the restroom and washing his hands — he would pause before unlocking and exiting the bathroom. And in front of that mirror, in the midst of that strobe light, he would dance.

Not a long dance. There was no time for that during the busy school day. Just a quick “John Travolta-Saturday Night Fever-Staying Alive-who put the toilet next to the disco light” type move, and then he was out the door and back into his day.

And after hearing his confession, I began to like that broken light a little better. In addition to enjoying my own little dance (I mean, who could resist after the idea had been planted?) I enjoyed the irony of its message. The worst electrical outlet in the school — the only one that couldn’t adequately support even one little bulb — had become an emotional outlet for a few new teachers.

I share the story simply to encourage you to find your own emotional outlet within the school building. Find something that supports your emotional health as you support the students in your class. It could be as small as allowing yourself five minutes to relax at the beginning of your planning period or as large as working to transform a colleague into a friend.

I have known teachers who played quiet classical music while they worked in empty classrooms during their planning periods. I have known others who ordered take-out every Sunday night from a favorite restaurant just so they could bring that delicious meal in for lunch on Monday, their most difficult day at school.

Our job is demanding, and we must find ways to take care of ourselves as we meet its daily challenge. Please know that it is appropriate, even important, to ask yourself when and where you can find a moment of respite in the midst of a crazy, busy, overwhelming school-day. Take good care of your students. They are important. But so are *you*, so never forget to take good care of yourself.



# March Madness and relationship-building

Originally posted March 7, 2006

This essay is a confession.

During the month of March, there is one day when I devote a full fifteen minutes of class time to a non-academic activity — and there are several additional occasions when our whole class takes three minutes to revisit that non-academic work. All in all, every March, my students lose about thirty minutes of academic attention as a result of this external focus. What are we doing that could be worth sacrificing that precious instructional time?

We're building relationships. We're connecting with each other. And...we're doing it during a conversation about college sports.

It's March! Around the country, college basketball teams are preparing for an incredible tournament. And so every March, I hand out a blank copy of the tournament bracket to each student in my class. I spend fifteen minutes teaching those students how to complete a bracket that accurately represents their athletic predictions. And students who have no knowledge of sports are shown how to use tournament rankings to make an educated guess. Throughout the month, as teams advance through the tournament, I use an overhead projector to post a bracket that reflects the actual outcome of games in the tournament. When that bracket is posted, every few days, my students are given three minutes to compare their picks to the actual winners. At the end of the tournament, the student who has picked the most games correctly wins a small prize.

The students love it. Many mornings, those who would never dream of seeing a teacher outside of class stop by my room to view the updated bracket. They take special pleasure whenever their picks prove more accurate than their teacher's. I receive good-natured ribbing from students in that situation. "Ms. Smith, if you do this with your classes next year and don't want to embarrass yourself, feel free to consult me." And the next year, I can guarantee that they will remember. It is not uncommon for former students to stop by to pick up blank brackets and ask if they can participate on an unofficial basis. "I just want to see how I do, even if I'm not eligible for a prize."

## Instructional time vs. relationship building

Still, it takes a several minutes of class to get the game up and running. Is it worth losing that instructional time?

Some teachers would say no — thirty minutes of time lost is thirty minutes too much. But I would argue that instead of being lost, that time has been *invested*. As a class, we have a renewed sense of community every March — a focused re-engagement with each other as people who can connect on a variety of levels. Relationships are strengthened, and those relationships serve us both as people and as an intellectual group.

When the students feel connected to me — and to each other — they are more likely to engage in the academic activities that connect all of us to course content. Investing those thirty minutes sustains our relationships, and those relationships provide support for our intellectual work.

So this March, take a look at your relationships with students and ask yourself if reinforcing classroom community could serve your goals for the classroom. If the answer is yes, find some way to reconnect with your students. There are many ways you can do that, some of which I described earlier (page 17). In March, my method involves thirty minutes of class time and a few basketball brackets.

## Managing March Madness

In case you'd like to try it, I've included a few tips below. (I have only done this with middle and high school students, so I don't know how it would work in an elementary school class.)

1. Let an administrator know that you'd like to do this activity with your students, emphasizing your belief that it will improve community in your classroom. Ask that administrator if it is o.k. for you to proceed. Assure him or her that the commitment of class time is minimal, that students are *not* paying an entry fee to participate and that no students are betting on the games.
2. Tournament brackets will be posted on several websites, including ESPN<sup>4</sup> and CBS<sup>5</sup>, after the pairings are announced. Download and print out either the men's or women's bracket (whichever your students would enjoy more) and make a copy for each student.
3. Make sure you know how to fill out a bracket and what the numbers in parenthesis on the brackets mean. (The numbers represent how teams were "seeded" in sections of the bracket. A team that has a number "1" next to it is expected to win that section of the bracket.) Use your school's basketball coach as a resource if you need expert advice.
4. Make a copy of the blank bracket on an overhead transparency that you can use to demonstrate the correct method for making selections. Allow students to fill in part of their brackets in class so that you can make sure that they understand the approach. Do this at the end of a class period so that they can finish their brackets at home. (You may also want to offer after school assistance to anyone who needs extra help.) Participation on the part of the students is voluntary, but make sure they know it is

risk-free. No one other than you will see their picks unless they show them to a classmate.

5. Fill out your own bracket. The students will enjoy comparing their performance to yours. And be open about which team is your favorite. I always pick Alabama to win the entire tournament, and most of my students love pulling against them just to give me a hard time. I have also been known to require participating students to pick my favorite team to win at least one game, and we have some lively conversations outside of class if my team lets everyone down!
6. Insist that students fill out the entire bracket (not just the first round), write their names on their completed brackets, and turn those brackets in to you *before* the first game is played. (Brackets will contain a play-in game that is scheduled a couple of days before the actual tournament begins.) Make a copy of every bracket and return the original to the student.
7. After the first games are played, check the scores on ESPN<sup>6</sup> and note the winning teams on the overhead bracket (or if you don't follow sports, ask a colleague who watches the games for an update each morning!) Allow students to check their picks every few days and instruct them to circle each game winner they picked correctly. This may take three to five minutes the first day, as students learn the process. After that, it takes even less time.
8. After the tournament is over, have students count the number of circles (correct picks) on their paper. That number represents the number of points they have earned. Each student should write that number at the top of his or her bracket and turn it into you. (Some sports fans have more complicated methods of assigning points, weighting the final games more heavily. I have found that assigning one point per pick is by far the best approach when working with kids.)
9. Check the bracket of the student with the highest number of points against the copy you made of his or her bracket (to make sure they didn't change any picks after the games were completed).
10. Give the student with the highest number a small prize. (I usually give a candy bar to the winner in each class.)

It sounds complicated, but actually isn't that difficult. Still, if managing this activity seems overwhelming, simply find another way to connect with your kids. This weblog is here primarily to remind you that even after you've built relationships with your students, you have to work to maintain them. They know you care about their academic performance. This March, find some way to remind your students that you also care about them.



# I know who they are, but who am I?

I have written a lot about the importance of building relationships with students. What I haven't told you is that some of my earliest attempts to establish those relationships were absolutely unsuccessful. The truth is that a teacher trying to connect might be completely rebuffed.

I haven't told you about the words I heard from Amanda — or what I learned as a result.

Before introducing her, allow me to defend my intentions. I was a new teacher, determined to connect with my students. I wanted to show those students that I respected them and their perspectives. I wanted them to recognize my attempts to relate to their experiences in school.

In an effort to accomplish those goals — and to establish camaraderie with students — I decided to refuse several privileges afforded only to faculty. I used the student restroom instead of the much nicer teacher facilities. I graded in green ink, determined to avoid the authoritarian stigma associated with a teacher's hated red pen.

I thought my students would see these efforts as attempts to connect with them and their experience in our school community. I thought they would appreciate someone who acted less like a teacher and more like an advocate — one who cared about both their education and their personal perspectives on school.

But Amanda didn't see things that way. I overheard her words to a classmate as I was leaving the student restroom one day after third period. "It's bad enough that we have to be with those teachers four periods a day — five days a week — in their classrooms. Can't we at least go to the bathroom in our own personal space?"

Oops. Not my intention.

Amanda and her classmates wanted me to use the faculty restroom. Many wanted me to grade in red like all of the other teachers so they could resume writing with their favorite green pens.<sup>7</sup> In other words, they wanted me to be the adult, in an adult role, with an adult's sense of personal boundaries. I was their teacher. It was insulting of me to imply that I could completely share their perspective. They needed an authority who listened, not one who denied her real position in an effort to be more like the students. They needed a teacher, not a pseudo-friend.

In words that stung, Amanda reminded me that students are most comfortable with teachers who have a clear sense of their own professional identities. To build a relationship with her and her classmates, I needed to acknowledge who I was and the limits of our connection. I was a teacher, with all of the associated roles and responsibilities. I would be contacting parents and guardians about misbehavior. I would be assigning homework. I would be calculating course grades. I would be making some decisions that were

unpopular, but were — from my adult perspective — in the best interest of each of my students. If I presented myself sincerely, acknowledging that actions in each of those realms would be conducted in a fair manner with each student’s perspective in mind, we could begin building relationships. Those relationships would grow when I demonstrated that as a teacher — and in appropriate ways as a person — I would listen and care.

Relationships that start out rocky can be recovered. Amanda and I connected later that semester — after I established myself as a teacher who acknowledged both my role and my limitations and accepted her as a student whose experience needed to be heard and respected rather than shared.

But as teachers, we must tread a fine line between professional status and personal relationships with the individuals in our classes. When deciding how much of your students’ worlds to enter, keep in mind that they benefit from the guidance that comes from your world perspective. Connect in ways that allow you to listen, and on occasion, engage with their experience. But remember that while your relationships benefit from those moments of association, they also benefit from acknowledgement that you are different people, with different outlooks and different roles.

In other words, as teachers, we have to remember two things when building relationships with students in our classes. We must remember to respect them for who they are and who are on their way to becoming. And we must remember to respect our role as their teacher — an established adult who still listens and cares.



# 4

## The home stretch

It's tempting to wind down with the school year. How can you make sure that you and your students both finish strong? Part four offers advice for maintaining your commitment, motivating your classes, and meeting your students' needs at the end of the year.



# If he's in danger of failing, at least three people need to know it

Originally posted March 23, 2006

It was June. I thought the school year was over. But a parent had contacted the administration to officially challenge her child's final grade.

What a nightmare. Meeting after meeting. Tons and tons of paperwork. And a solid position I didn't really want to defend. I had worked extremely hard to help this student learn the material and earn a passing grade on his coursework. I wanted him to be successful! Yet, here I was arguing that the failing mark he had received needed to stand.

As I prepared for the meetings, I did a quick mental overview of his experience in my classroom. I had reviewed his IEP before the school year ever started. I had followed it to the letter, granting him extended test time, copies of my notes and a seat in the front row of class. When it became obvious that he needed more individual attention, I had offered him one-on-one tutoring during after school sessions. Some days we had used that time to work together, but often he had failed to attend. I had given him progress reports every month, in addition to the official report cards generated twice a semester.

Moreover, I had documented all of my efforts. I had used my journal to record everything I did; I required his signature on all the modifications that were recorded in my IEP notebook, and documented every attempt I made to call his home in my multipurpose log. (You can find templates for these documents in "Templates to help you with paperwork (page 9).")

I thought I had done everything I could to reach this student. That wasn't the question my administrators were asking, though. They wanted to know if I had done everything possible to reach his parent or guardian. I had worked with the student, but had I communicated enough with an adult in his home?

I had tried. I had left numerous messages on the home voice mail. I had required parent or guardian signatures on every progress report. But it turned out that the student had deleted some of those voice mails before his mother had ever heard them. Some of the parent signatures on the progress reports had been forged.

It is not a happy story. The grade stood. The student failed. And the mother left angry at her child for interrupting our communication and angry at me for not doing more to make sure she had been personally informed. Her last words were both wistful and bitter. "I could have done something. I could have made him do something. If you could have reached me...If I had only known..."

## Preventing failure, not just documenting it

An unhappy story. An unhappy ending. Still, I feel compelled to share it, because it reveals a few important reminders. And I have listed four of those reminders below:

1. Remember that you're approaching the end of the school year. *Now* is the time to take inventory of where everyone stands. During the next few weeks, spend time figuring out which students are in danger of failing and deliver the message about those grades while there is still time for students to improve them. Make sure they know that if they want to pass, they have to decide now that they want to turn things around.
2. Let those students know that you will be contacting their parents or guardians, then figure out some way to speak to an adult in their house. If your messages go unreturned, try e-mail or get a work number or address from the office. If there is an older sibling in the school, let them know that you are trying to get in touch with a parent or guardian. If none of that proves effective, let an administrator know that there is a student in danger of failing and you have been unable to reach his or her parents. Or you can talk to school counselors, other teachers, extracurricular coaches or anyone else working with that student who might have valuable advice for tracking his or her family down.
3. Remember that the point of the conversation is not simply to notify the parent or guardian that the student is failing. You want to make the risk clear, but also need to express confidence in the student's ability to catch up *if he or she begins improving right now*. Make the contacts early enough that success is still a real possibility. Let the parents or guardians know what their child must do to pass the class and how they, as supportive adults, can help.
4. Document all of your efforts. In addition to helping you keep track of what you have (or have not) accomplished, you may need those records if the grade is challenged after report cards go out.

Some teachers will tell you that it is too much work and that tracking down parents is not your responsibility. They may be right on both counts. However, given all of the time we put into our students, isn't it worth taking the time to make sure we are enlisting their families' assistance? That mother insisted that she could have done something to help if she had understood the situation. Even after administrators assured her that I had lived up my responsibilities, I felt like I had let her down.

So today, I encourage you to take a look at your students. Who is struggling? To be successful in June, who needs additional help now? As teachers, we can provide extra aid, but we should remember that we are not alone in the effort. Parents and guardians care, and they are an incredible resource. Let them know if their children are faltering, and enlist their assistance. When notified, most are willing — and eager — to help.

# “I am very sorry. It is going to happen again”

Originally posted March 30, 2006

On a small table in the back of my classroom, there is a folder labeled “No Name, No Grade.” My students know that whenever an assignment is turned in without a heading that identifies its owner, I place the ungraded work in that folder. The system has transformed accusations (“I didn’t get mine back, and you know I did that paper, Ms. Smith!”) into quiet trips back to the folder. “This is mine. I must have forgotten to put my name on in. Can I turn it in now? How many points do I lose because it’s late?”

The system saves me the headache of figuring out whose handwriting a paper looks like, and it places responsibility for ownership back on the students. It works well, despite the occasional moment when two students try to take credit for the same unlabelled assignment. We address those issues after class, when I look at the work to see if I can tell whose it is. Often I’ll remember helping a student with the paper or I’ll recognize a student’s style or script. If I do, the student who tried to falsely claim the work receives the normal penalty for cheating. If I can’t settle the debate, no one gets credit for the work. Overall, I believe it is a tough but fair way to teach an important lesson: Check your papers before you turn them in to make sure there are no errors. A part of that check should be making sure you wrote your name at the top of the page.

I share the system not only to introduce a management idea, but to provide context for a comment one student made after finding his paper in the folder marked “No Name, No Grade.” His name was Luis, and his English was limited. He was hesitant to speak in class, but felt comfortable communicating with me through e-mail. And after he recovered his unlabelled paper, he wrote me a note that I still have saved on my computer.

To: my favorit teacher Mrs. Smith

i am very sorry that i forgot to put my name in my project, it is going to happen again.

Of course, he meant to communicate that it would never happen again, but forgot to edit his e-mail — just as he forgot to edit his assignment before turning it in. Still, the message made me smile. It was a reminder that many of our students’ intentions are good and that their efforts are honest. It was a reminder that I should keep my faith and my patience, because kids make mistakes even when you have systems in place to teach them and to hold them accountable. Moreover, they sometimes make the same mistake again and again.

So as we enter the last few months of the school year, remember to maintain the systems you have established. Make sure that your commitments to classroom organization and management stay very strong. But also direct some of that strength to maintaining your belief in students who frustrate you as they repeatedly make the same academic or behavioral error. As Luis inadvertently reminded me, “it is going to happen again” even as we approach the end of the second semester.

Continue to embrace your students, even as they stumble while approaching the finish line. You have helped them get this far. Focus on their progress instead of expressing disbelief that on occasion, they seem to forget everything you’ve worked on this semester — even something as basic as checking to make sure their name is at the top of a page. At this point, more than ever, they need to know that you your faith will persist no matter how many times you need to revisit the lessons. Like mistakes, encouraging words can be repeated — and they should be — again and again and again.

# And you thought it had been a long time since someone thanked *you*

Originally posted April 7, 2006

National Secretary's Day falls in the last week of April, and many teachers will acknowledge the school secretary that day verbally or in a card. Just an FYI in case you would like to be among the group that remembers!

It was 7:28 in the morning. Class had started only three minutes ago, and Jessica had just thrown up on the floor. After sending her (with a peer escort) to the nurse's station, I paged the office to request a custodian. He arrived a few minutes later, and by 7:40, classroom order had been restored.

He was the same custodian who had cleaned up after the food fight in the cafeteria. I had also seen him at athletic events — picking up garbage in the bleachers and sweeping the floors. When the state evaluated our school, we were identified as needing improvement in almost every category — *except* for school maintenance.

I didn't fully appreciate the efforts of this custodian, or his team, until I worked in a different school where efforts weren't extended as often. In those schools, there was more trash in the hallway and less paint to cover graffiti in the bathroom. The students there received the indirect message that they didn't deserve better than a dirty, disorganized learning environment. And in that context, it was hard to convince them that their school believed they could do — and be — more.

I don't know how well members of the non-instructional staff do their jobs in your school setting. I don't know if the custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, secretaries, nurses and so many others leave you impressed or wanting much more. But I do know that if we as teachers aren't often thanked for our efforts, the non-instructional staff receives even less appreciation. The services provided by those individuals are vital, but the people who provide them are too often ignored.

Do you know the name of the man or woman who serves your food in the cafeteria? Do you speak to the secretary when you come through the office door? Do you ask your students to clean around their desks before leaving the classroom, both because they are responsible for the mess and out of respect for the custodian? Those are simple things, but each has a powerful impact. Recognizing the efforts of someone who has been supporting you behind the scenes improves their life, and it could improve yours.

So say a quick thank you the next time the custodian empties your garbage or the school secretary takes another phone message. In addition to demonstrating respect for a person who has earned it, you are building a relationship with someone who can offer you invaluable support. I have turned to custodians for quick clean-ups, secretaries for help finding last-minutes subs, and cafeteria workers for the plastic cups I forgot we needed to do a class demonstration. Those requests are easier to make, and more likely to elicit

desirable reactions, when you know the people you're asking. And a great way to get to know them is to point out that you've noticed and appreciate their work.



# Where are they now? And where are they going?

Originally posted April 16, 2006

He turned in his project and made his request on the same day.

His project was part artwork, part essay. I had asked him, along with all the other students in my world history class, to create an artifact that represented something about the society we had been studying. He also had to write an essay explaining what the artifact revealed.

His request was that I write him a letter of recommendation for college. I'm embarrassed to admit that until he made the request, I had forgotten he was a senior. Most of the students in my class were freshmen. He had transferred into our school from another state after his freshman term, and since our state had slightly different graduation requirements, he had to make up a few freshman classes during his senior year. Now, in the midst of that year, he was making sure he had completed everything he needed to earn both a high school degree and college admission. I was happy to write him a recommendation. He was a good student, a hard worker and really nice kid.

Yet there was a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I couldn't ignore as he walked out of my classroom. There, on my desk, sat his project and the form on which I was to write the recommendation. One represented where he was. The other represented where he wanted to be next year.

The contrast was stark. I had allowed students to make the artifacts out of construction paper and to hand-write their essays. As I looked from the amateur work I had required to the professional form required by the college, I cringed.

What if he submitted a construction paper project to a university professor? What if he hand wrote the first college essay he turned in? I realized, in that moment, that I had thought of him as my student — not as a person preparing for life after my classroom. I should have done more to challenge him and everyone else in my classes. My standards were too low. That would hurt all of them.

I raised the standards for my students' next project. They needed more encouragement and support to meet the higher expectations, but I discovered that when I asked for better work, their performance improved.

Take a look at what you require of your students, and think about what will be required of them in future years. Consider their current age or grade level and ask yourself what they will need to do in their next environment. Are you preparing them now for what they will be expected to know then?

If not, consider having an open discussion with your students about where they are headed and how you intend to use these last few months to make sure they are ready to be there. And if preparing those students well means raising your standards, then do it, all while offering even more support and encouragement to them.

# Picture this

Originally posted April 23, 2006

I have one picture of my students that I absolutely love.

In the background of the photo, you can see the west wall of our classroom. That wall was covered in positive messages I had posted throughout the year, all intended to help students stay focused and believe in their own abilities.

In the photo's foreground, you can see seven of my students. One of them was just starting to give me the finger as the picture was taken. I realized what he was doing right after I pushed the camera button that preserved the moment forever — the moment when he was just beginning to counter my ultra-positive messages with a message of his own.

The photo reminds that education is about what happens in the mind (or through the hands) of a student, not about what happens within (or on) the walls of a classroom. But that's not the reason I love the picture so much.

I love it because it reminds me of that group of ninth graders. I taught them, and the dozens of their classmates not pictured, years ago, but it only takes one glimpse of that photo to remember exactly who they were. From left to right: Andre, Justine, Louis, Shandra, Jamal, Randall and John.

I remember the struggles, the successes, the hopes, the frustration, the good days and the days when my words got the physical or metaphorical finger from all of those students.

I remember. And I'm glad I remember. My only regret is that I don't have more pictures to trigger more memories of more kids.

Teaching — and all of the relationship building and studying and reflecting teaching entails — is your priority. Everything else at school seems to get pushed aside, especially during your first year. But before this year ends, I want to encourage you to take a few moments to snap some physical and mental photos of your students. You're going to want to remember them — even the days you are occasionally tempted to forget.

At some point during the next few weeks, take a camera to school and ask a colleague if he or she will use five minutes of his or her planning period to take a picture of you with your students. Or splurge and spend forty dollars to buy a yearbook that contains pictures of all of the kids. Or spend an hour at a coffee shop one Saturday morning jotting down a list of memorable moments from your year in the classroom. I make that list every year. That collection became the basis of this weblog. Looking back, I wish I had illustrated my personal collection with more images — more actual photos of my kids.



# Appendix A. Mentor's guide

My first words to any veterans, mentors and administrators reading this section should be “thank you.” The support and counsel you offer new teachers is invaluable. It is my hope that *The First Year* will assist you as you assist those new to the teaching profession.

The purpose of this section is to detail ways in which you might use *The First Year* to enhance the work you are already doing. Some of you may be working with large groups of novice educators. Others may be working one-on-one with the new teacher down the hall. Regardless, the individual articles may serve as a way to introduce a topic for discussion or as an initial response to a topic about which a new teacher has expressed concern.

## In a large group

Imagine for a moment how the articles might be used in a large group forum. In that setting, you are responsible for assisting dozens of new teachers, each confronting a different set of classroom challenges. Your goal is to provide foresight into issues these teachers may not anticipate, counsel about concerns already consuming them, and support for them as individuals in a stressful new setting. You may begin by addressing issues that affect all of the teachers (and might use a relevant article to introduce that discussion), but you also recognize that beyond the general guidelines that benefit everyone, you need to know and respond to their individual needs.

One way to do that is to choose three or four articles and ask the new teachers to read them. Once they have done so, ask them to identify the article that addresses a topic they would like to discuss. Allow them to move to different sections of the room, congregating with small groups of others interested in talking about the same issue (and ideally, a mentor who can facilitate discussion within each group).

1. Encourage them to begin by sharing why they chose the article. Does it remind them of an issue they are currently facing?)
2. Move into a discussion of the issues. Would the article’s suggestions work for them? What other approaches have proven effective or ineffective in their experience?
3. Conclude with a brief period of reflection. Was there anything in the article or discussion that might help them in their classroom? if nothing else, have they identified other new teachers with whom they can collaborate about common concerns?

If there is time, have individual groups report back to the larger community. Overall, the hope is that the articles will inspire the groups to engage in reflection and discussion, while reminding the new teachers that they are not facing the struggle alone.

## Timely topics

Whether you are working with a large group or with an individual teacher, the chronological organization of the articles in this collection should help you identify topics that are timely and relevant to what your new teachers are facing at different points during the school year. You can use that organization to identify topics those teachers might need to discuss.

Don't forget, though, that the best way to identify timely topics is to simply ask new teachers to identify their current challenges! At one point, new teachers may reveal that classroom management is the most pressing issue. At another, they may express concern over administrative observations occurring throughout the school. Use their responses to guide future professional development sessions and individual conversations. (If you would like to introduce those sessions with a relevant article, the index will help you find what you need.)

## Key themes

Offering the articles piecemeal (as opposed to viewing them as a chronological collection) serves many needs, but may obscure a few key messages that are delivered and explored throughout *The First Year*. You may find it useful to articulate those messages while facilitating discussions about individual articles. Doing so lets participants know that the individual practices recommended in some of the articles work best in classrooms where practitioners are also working to manifest the following beliefs:

- Teachers must build relationships with their students, and there are practical ways to establish and maintain those interpersonal connections.
- Investing time in those relationships with students will reduce management issues and inform instruction. Management issues are reduced when students feel valued and safe, and when teachers understand who students are, why they make certain choices, and what they ultimately need. Instruction is improved when teachers know their students and can identify each student's potential points for personal connection with course material.
- Instruction should be engaging, relevant and purposeful. A successful day is a day in which students have learned.
- It is important for teachers to take care of themselves while caring for each of their students.
- Parents, colleagues and administrators want new teachers to be successful. New teachers should not be afraid to ask people in those groups for help.

## Thank you!

I'll end with another thank you, and with a sincere hope that whether you are using the articles to help an individual teacher, or many individual teachers in a large group, you find the collection a useful resource. In the words of one new teacher, "We're in this together." Together, we can help our new teachers — and their students — achieve incredible goals.





# Appendix B. Paperwork templates

These templates are referred to in “Twelve rules for arranging your classroom (page 5)” and “Templates to help you with paperwork. (page 9)”

# Textbook signout sheet

Teacher:				
Student Signature	Book Number	Date signed out	Date signed in	Teacher Signature
Indicates responsibility for any books signed out. The book is the student's responsibility until the teacher has initialed the column indicating the book's return.				Indicates the book has been returned.







# Sub plan

Substitute Plans for: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s): \_\_\_\_\_

## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for covering my class today. I have included everything you should need below. Please complete the “substitute feedback form” at the end of the day to provide feedback about the students’ performance and to assist me as I work to improve my sub folder!

## DAILY SCHEDULE

Time Period/Block	Description of Activity (Title of Course, Duties, Lunch, Planning Period, etc.)	Location (Room Number or area of the building)

## ATTACHED ITEMS

1. Lesson Plan and Handouts (Subs will have an easier time if you insist that all work be collected at the end of class. Students then know they cannot play during class and complete the work later at home.)
2. Seating Charts
3. Class lists:
  1. Please take attendance in each class.
  2. If attendance must be submitted to the office, you will find notes about that process written here:

## OTHER NOTES

(May include information about emergency procedures, special events, recommended “student helpers” in each class, etc. I always write a note asking subs to tell my students

“Your teacher told me how great you are and that she hopes you live up to that reputation today!”)

## **LESSON PLAN**

**Objectives**

**Materials and their location**

**Things to do before class begins**

**Lesson**

## **SEATING CHART**

*Include a copy or simply let the sub know where a copy is filed in the room.*

## **CLASS LISTS**

*Xerox a copy of your roll book after the names are in it, but before any other notations are made. Some teachers put a star next to one or two students the sub can ask for help in case something needs to be delivered to the office, etc.*

## **SUBSTITUTE FEEDBACK FORM**

Please complete this form and return it to the teacher along with other paperwork. Thank you!

### **Comments about individual classes**

*Amount of work completed, behavior, etc.*

### **Comments about the sub plans**

*Were the lesson plans clear? Is there anything else that should be included in the folder?*



# ISS Plan

ISS Plans for: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher's e-mail address or room number: \_\_\_\_\_

## INTRODUCTION

In situations where my students are sent to ISS without enough notice for me to prepare lesson packets for them, they should complete the assignments outlined below. They should turn completed work in to me and pick up any additional work they missed.

Please record the name of the student, the date and the handout you assigned them to complete and deliver that information via e-mail or through my box in the office.

## EMERGENCY PLANS

Incident Number	Objectives	Assignment
First incident		Complete Handout 1 (in attached folder)
Second incident		Complete Handout 2 (in attached folder)
Third incident		Complete Handout 3 (in attached folder)
Fourth incident		Complete Handout 4 (in attached folder)

## NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Note for teachers submitting the ISS plans (delete this section before submitting the plans):

Since these lessons are for emergency purposes only, I make sure they are very simple to create, maintain and grade. For example, when I am teaching history classes, my emergency ISS plans are the same for all my courses (World History, American History, etc.) I simply xerox dozens of individuals' biographies and each time a student is sent to ISS they work on summarizing the next biography until I can arrange a packet from the day's actual lesson.

Please note that it is important to have these plans even if you never send students to ISS. In many schools, other teachers can send them for the day and the students will miss your class. You may not find out about their ISS location until later. This work is to ensure that they learn something during that time instead of wasting the day.









Questions, comments or concerns (including information you would like me to note such as a medical concern about your child, updated contact information for you, etc.):

## Syllabus

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Binder Section: Daily Work

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **WORLD HISTORY WITH MRS. SMITH**

Achieving our classroom goal (outlined below) will require the cooperation of parents/guardians, students and teachers.

### **CLASSROOM GOAL**

I believe all students have the ability to shape their own lives and society in positive ways. My goal this year is to have all students recognize their power and use that power to improve themselves and their communities. We will use world history to inform students' vision and to increase their ability to make that vision a reality. In order to achieve this goal, we will need supplies, organization and procedures. These are outlined below.

### **NECESSARY SUPPLIES**

If there is any difficulty obtaining these supplies, students may see me outside of class time to obtain used supplies in good condition. They are free of charge while supplies last.

- One three ring binder (2 inch)
- Eight dividers (Students may make the dividers out of tape and paper.)
- loose leaf paper
- pencil or pen (blue or black ink only)

### **CLASS ORGANIZATION**

Notebook: (2 inch binder or larger) Most of your materials will be kept in your binder. You must bring this binder to class every day. Label its dividers according to the model below.

1. Current Events/Vocab
2. Leaders
3. Maps
4. Timelines
5. Class Questions
6. Religion/Philosophy

7. Papers/Projects
8. Daily work

## **RULES**

All *[insert name of school here]* rules will apply in our classroom. Students are also asked to

- Show respect (to other people, the environment and yourself)
- Do your best (which requires believing in yourself, being prepared and always trying as hard as you can)

## **PROCEDURES**

At the beginning of class:

1. Pick up your “Do Now” activity as you enter the room.
2. Be seated and quiet.
3. Place completed homework on your desk.
4. Begin your “Do-Now” activity.

During class:

1. Sharpen your pencil when necessary. You do not need permission.
2. Save trash until after class.
3. Bathroom/water/nurse/locker policy:
  1. Please do not ask to leave class unless there is an emergency. Anyone who consistently asks to leave will need to schedule an individual conference with the teacher.
  2. No one will be excused during the first or last 10 minutes of class or during certain activities.
4. You will not be allowed to go to your locker once class has begun.

At the end of class:

1. Pack up your belongings only after you have been asked to do so.
2. Clean the area around your desk before you leave.

## **POLICIES**

### **Homework**

- I will check all homework right after roll. All work must be on your desk by that time.
- I will come by your desk once. If your homework is not on your desk at that time, it will be marked late.

### **Late Work**

- Once I have reviewed the answers, late work will not be accepted.

- I will accept late large assignments (100 point projects, research papers, etc.) for one week after the due date. Students lose a minimum of 5 points for each day the assignment is late.
- Students will not be allowed to turn in bulk work at the end of the term.

### **Tardies**

Please be seated and ready to begin at the appropriate time. If you are late, the school tardy policy will apply:

1. 1st tardy—warning
2. 2nd tardy—call home
3. 3rd tardy—ISS
4. 4th tardy or more—OSS

### **Absences**

- With an excused absence, you may make up missed work for full credit. Missed exams must be made up within one week.
- Make-up work will be addressed outside of class (preferably right before or right after school).
- After they have been used in class, copies of all handouts are placed in folders in the top drawer of the small green filing cabinet. If you are absent, check this drawer for missed work.

## **CLASSROOM CULTURE**

We will work hard to have a positive classroom culture, and to celebrate that culture in many ways (positive phone calls, increased privileges, etc.). In instances where that culture is disrupted, consequences will include teacher detentions, parent/guardian contacts and administrative referrals.

### **GRADES**

- 5-10 point assignments: Daily work
- 100 Point Assignments: Tests, Papers, Projects
- Notebooks will be checked regularly and will count as part of students' test grades.
- Progress reports will be sent out according to the school calendar.

### **PROMISES TO STUDENTS**

1. If you ever feel I am doing a poor job of living up to these promises, please schedule an individual conference with me. I work very hard to make sure that I am true to my word.
2. I will always believe in your ability to succeed. This means my expectations are extremely high. I will demand your best at all times.
3. I will listen to you. I ask that you bring questions, concerns or comments to me in a calm, respectful manner at the appropriate time. Individual concerns should be



addressed in individual conferences that can be arranged by seeing me before or after class.

4. I will respect you, and I will insist that others respect you in our class. Please let me know, in an individual conference, if you ever feel disrespected.
5. I will never assign work unless I can explain why it is important. I do not believe in busy work.
6. I will work hard and happily. I took this job because I love teaching, I love history and I love my students.
7. I will learn from you. You are smart people, and each of you brings experiences and perspectives to the class that will benefit the group. Please share your viewpoint every day!



# Appendix D. “Getting to know you” questionnaire

Title: Getting to Know You

Binder Section: Daily Work

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

## Introduction

You are all amazing people, and I am eager to learn more about each of you. Please help me do so by completing the following handout.

## Section I

Please answer questions 1-6.

1. Do you have brothers or sisters? If so, how many?

2. What is your favorite activity?

3. What is your least favorite activity?

4. What is your favorite school subject?

5. Have you been involved (or are you hoping to become involved) in any school activities (clubs, sports, etc.)? If so, which ones?

6. What is your favorite type of music?

## Section II

Please complete the sentences below.

7. On the weekends I like to...

8. Someone I admire is because...

9. If I could go anywhere for a day, I would go...

10. I learn the most when the teacher...

11. I learn the most when I...

12. I don't like it when teachers...

13. I don't like it when I'm asked to...

14. After high school, I will probably...

15. My ideal job would be...



# Appendix E. Sample rubric for student binders

Title: Binder Rubric — Exam 1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Binder Section: Exams

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

All blanks are worth 4 points, so you can earn up to 20 points on your exam by turning in a well-organized notebook!

Requirements	Self-scoring	Teacher-scoring
Your name and the name of this class (North Carolina History) are clearly visible on the outside of the binder.		
Five dividers are present		
The dividers are labeled correctly: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm Ups</li> <li>2. Notes</li> <li>3. Homework</li> <li>4. Exams</li> <li>5. Projects</li> </ol>		
Papers are placed in the correct sections		
There is some blank paper in each section		
Point total		





# Appendix F. Student feedback form

*This template represents a revised version of a template I received while in graduate school. The original version was distributed to my classmates and to me by a group of advisors at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

**Note to all students: You do not have to put your name on this form!**

Please fill out this form as thoroughly and honestly as possible. I constantly think about and reflect upon my own successes and failures as a teacher, and now you have the opportunity to help me with my ongoing goal of becoming a better teacher. Your responses are extremely valuable to me, and they will certainly influence my teaching in the future. I thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

## THIS CLASS

	Strong Agreement	Some Agreement	Little Agreement	No Agreement	Don't Know/Not Applicable
This class is interesting.	4	3	2	1	n/a
This class is challenging.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The work load is fair.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The assignments are clear.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The tests/quizzes are relevant to the topics covered in class.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The material is interesting/exciting.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The class forces me to think about complicated issues.	4	3	2	1	n/a

## THE TEACHER

	Strong Agreement	Some Agreement	Little Agreement	No Agreement	Don't Know/Not Applicable
The teacher presents the material clearly.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher facilitates my understanding of the material.	4	3	2	1	n/a
Teacher is approachable outside of class.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher is fair.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher's style is effective.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher cares about the students and their concerns.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher is aware of the students' level of understanding.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher welcomes and encourages interpretations other than her own.	4	3	2	1	n/a
The teacher is knowledgeable about the material being taught.	4	3	2	1	n/a

## THE STUDENT

	Strong Agreement	Some Agreement	Little Agreement	No Agreement	Don't Know/Not Applicable
I am satisfied with my effort in this class.	4	3	2	1	n/a
I am satisfied with my work in this class.	4	3	2	1	n/a
I feel that I am learning a lot in this class.	4	3	2	1	n/a

	<b>Strong Agreement</b>	<b>Some Agreement</b>	<b>Little Agreement</b>	<b>No Agreement</b>	<b>Don't Know/Not Applicable</b>
<b>I am enjoying this class.</b>	4	3	2	1	n/a

1. What do you like most about this class? Why? Be as specific as possible, and list as many aspects as you feel are appropriate.

2. What do you like least about this class? Why? Again, be as specific as possible, and list as many aspects as you feel are appropriate.

3. What do you feel are the best aspects/qualities of my teaching? Why? List as many as you feel are appropriate.

4. What do you feel I need to work on to become a better teacher? Please be as specific as possible.

5. What are you taking away from this course that you didn't have/know/think about/realize in August?

6. In ten years, what are you most likely to remember from or about this class?

7. If you have any other thoughts/comments/ feedback on this course, please include them below or on a separate sheet.

# Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/contact>. (Referenced on page 6.)
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/articles/Environ6>. (Referenced on page 7.)
3. See <http://www.grantwiggins.org/>. (Referenced on page 25.)
4. See <http://www.espn.go.com>. (Referenced on page 74.)
5. See <http://www.cbs.com>. (Referenced on page 74.)
6. See <http://www.espn.go.com>. (Referenced on page 75.)
7. I now require students to submit all formal assignments in pencil, in blue or black ink, or as typed papers because I want to prepare them to submit collegiate and professional documents. See “Where are they now? And where are they going?” for a discussion of other ways to encourage students to take a more professional approach to their assignments. (Referenced on page 77.)



# Contributors

## Kristi Johnson Smith

Kristi Johnson Smith was a 2005–06 LEARN Fellow working in the area of new teacher support. Kristi taught high school world history and grade eight North Carolina history from 1998 to 2005 in Texas, Massachusetts, and North Carolina, most recently at Southern High School in Durham. Currently a Ph.D. student in Curriculum and Instruction in the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Education, she holds a B.A. in history from Princeton and a Ed.M. in Teaching and Curriculum from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.





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