

## **“Pearls of Wisdom” for Beginning Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

A teacher educator shares advice for novice teachers on how to address common challenges experienced during their first teaching assignment.

### **Introduction**

Over the years I have taught, supervised, and mentored many pre-service teachers, offering timely advice as they honed their skills during field experiences. Content knowledge, pedagogical strategies, organizational and management issues are continually at the forefront of novice teachers' concerns and challenges. Often, many of these qualms are mastered during Internship or Student Teaching, but commonly residual doubts and gaps in skill level persist during initial, first-year teaching experience. In general, my advice encourages them to plan effectively, implement ongoing critical thinking tactics, and be receptive to the affective element of teaching (including dispositional growth and shifts).

In this paper I share my “Pearls of Wisdom” for beginning teachers through suggestions which potentially address or deflect challenges commonly faced during a teacher's induction year. These suggestions are grouped within the following conceptual constructs: Relational Skills and Insight; Motivational Strategies; Pedagogical and Management Acuity; and Self-Reflection and Awareness Processes. Discussion begins with explication of tactics for ensuring strong relational connections with students. Then, motivational approaches for keeping students engaged are outlined. Next, sound pedagogical and management methods for optimizing student learning are presented. After that, ideas for practicing self-reflection and awareness processes are explained. Lastly, a synopsis of the constructs and their potential impact on new teachers' effectiveness is put forward.

### **Relational Skills and Insight**

Teaching involves intensive social interactions with learners and therefore requires requisite relational aptitude. Possessing and applying relational abilities are necessary for effective teaching to occur. The following discussion provides key aspects for creating strong teacher-student relationships.

### ***Get to Know Your Students***

Knowing students' names as soon as possible helps you connect quickly. Using those names during course interactions personalizes student learning and validates their presence in the classroom as contributing members of the learning community. Students respond to these affirmations, but knowing their names is NOT enough. You need to get to know them as individuals and unique learners...their preferences, dispositions, learning styles, interests, history, developmental levels, strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the best teaching ideas come from students themselves (not curriculum guidelines or other teachers), so you want to be responsive to who they are as individuals and what they share in class. This information will prove crucial for meeting their affective and cognitive needs and supporting their academic progress.

### ***Laugh***

Have you noticed how we cannot laugh without smiling and we rarely laugh alone? Laughter makes us feel good and it serves as an effective "affective" social connector. Use of humor and shared laughter helps us to bond with others (Ziv, 2009). For teachers, shared laughter strengthens relational ties with students (Klein, 2003), as well as colleagues, administrators, and parents. Learners' sense of well-being, connection to the group, and emotional conditions should never be disregarded. Teachers who set a priority on students' affective and socio-emotional needs perpetually generate positive and productive learning environments (Coleman, 1992).

### ***Listen More, Talk Less***

First of all, active listening provides teachers with an arsenal of information about learners' existing knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives shared during class discussion or question responses. Secondly, students who are provided the opportunity to talk during a significant portion of class interactions actually learn more than passively listening to the teacher (i.e., student-talk is an inherent factor of active learning). Learners' sense of authority in subject matter becomes heightened and empowered through dialogue and validated by an audience of peers and the teacher. One more thing, do not assume that student social interactions or discourses that are not teacher-directed are all off task. Offside student discussions may drive teachers crazy, but be aware that they are often related to learning objectives or activities in some way. Rather than discourage or extinguish these student interactions, tap into them as potential learner-initiated teaching and learning opportunities. Allowing real-life examples or ideas to emerge through informal student conversations often spawns instructional inspiration for the *next* lesson.

### **Motivational Strategies**

Motivating learners is always a challenge, but more so in the pervasive culture of testing, where teachers are continually confronted with how to alleviate learners' angst (as well as their own). Some positive ways to encourage student learning are shared here.

### ***Praise Authentically***

Vary your praise. If you say “Very good” 100 times a day, it becomes basically ineffective from overuse (Brophy, 1981). Until you acquire the skill in varying praise, it is prudent to take time to write different praise words on sticks to be pulled randomly OR assign individual praise words where the students self-select their own praise word that they want used when they do something special. Both methods are effective for recognizing students’ progress and contributions to the learning environment. Also, practice objectively describing students’ praiseworthy actions, for example “Billy, your questions in class demonstrate good listening skills and show us how much you are learning!” Lastly, during instruction, take every possible opportunity to incorporate and use students’ ideas shared in class. Their identity as learners is reinforced through this type of acknowledgment.

### ***Keep Learners Engaged***

You have to both keenly observe learners and be able to adopt their perspectives to understand and implement instructional strategies that will appeal to their interests. This skill involves the mature ability to “think like a kid.” Basically, think through an instructional activity and if you find it fun, enjoyable, interactive or challenging, students generally do as well (Daniels, 2010; Middleton, 2004). Remember, if conducting an activity where students take turns, figure out a way where ALL learners must be engaged in some fashion throughout the entire event.

### ***Play***

Play is what children know how to do best and is intrinsically motivating to them, so why not build from that strength? This does not mean just offering learners the opportunity to play or have fun with instructional activities. Rather, teachers need to participate in play activities as well. Play mediates learning and socialization skills for all participants; therefore, taking part as a co-learner or member in a playful activity is not only emancipatory for the teacher (and students), it also adds depth, dimension, and dynamism to existing relational bonds in the classroom (Gordon & Esbjorn-Hargens, 2007). Play is appreciated by all ages of learners and not reserved for implementation at only the elementary level.

### **Pedagogical and Management Acuity**

Beginning teachers have completed required course work toward their degree, passed certification tests, and acquired basic skills during Student Teaching or Internship. Unfortunately, at this point, many have only nominal experiential knowledge accumulated on actual instructional practices before they step foot in their own classroom. Simple instructional and management suggestions to advance effective pedagogy and thwart possible adverse events in the classroom are provided in the following discussion.

### ***Plan, Plan, Plan...***

Teachers can never plan (enough) for every interaction or experience they may face in the classroom, but can always be better prepared for unexpected events if the expected events are covered (Evertson & Emmer, 2013). Consistent, solid planning builds teaching confidence in preparedness, which supports the development of “withitness” (Kounin, 1977) and a flexible perspective needed in productive classrooms. Thorough planning also frees teachers to act upon serendipitous teaching moments and learning experiences that may occur. Also, good management emerges out of effective planning.

### ***Give Sound Directions***

When you plan lessons, it is solid practice to write out the directions you intend to give to the students. This can deflect major problems later since it helps you think through ahead of time what you want the students to do and helps you envision particular issues that may arise. Additionally, these directions provide clarity to what the students are expected to do and ease your instructional effort. It is also prudent to present or project those written-out directions on a board or screen. This will diminish questions from students who forget what they need to do; especially, if there are multiple steps of the assignment or activity. If students get confused, all they need to do is look up at the screen; thereby, a potential management issue is tackled before it can occur.

### ***Ask Effective Questions***

Learning occurs through questions but not yes/no or short answer questions that elicit low-level responses. Learning occurs through higher-level questions that rarely have one right answer and potentially stimulate extended student responses or involved classroom discussion. Opinion-type or “explain why” questions always evoke more critical thinking and in verbalizing ideas, students’ higher-level thinking occurs. Responses to these types of questions involve student investment in the discussion, which adds to their engagement and optimizes learning. Good questioning strategies are also important when trying to understand a student’s action or response. Prodding them to explain more fully can deflect any false or erroneous assumptions you may have of what you “thought” they meant with an action or response.

### ***Self-Reflection and Awareness Processes***

Reflection processes help keep our instructional impact at an optimal level. Reflections need to be ongoing and intrinsic to our teaching actions and not just occur after-the-fact (Schön, 1983; 1987). Teachers use reflections to guide instruction, respond to interactions with learners, and shape our awareness of teaching effectiveness (Poom-Valickis & Mathews, 2013). Discussion that follows offers stratagems for practicing reflection and awareness processes.

### ***Questioning Your Questions***

Reflections of teaching practice on how to improve instruction and student learning are important, but not enough. A teacher must start questioning questions to create *better*

questions with a practical focus that can actually guide discovery of answers to classroom dilemmas. Beyond reflecting on a common management issue such as “How can I keep my students on-task at the end of the day?” ask baby-step “what” or “why” questions that can lead to productive doable actions. For example, “What exactly are my students doing at the end of the day that is off-task behavior?” Gather data, reflect, and then ponder, “What do these student actions mean?” and “Why are they occurring at this time?” Answers to these questions provide specific data at the heart of an issue and better equip teachers in addressing “how” to fix a problem.

### ***Embrace Ambiguity***

Three things a novice teacher should acknowledge before entering the classroom: (1) you do not know it all; (2) others’ perspectives will differ from your own; and (3) flexibility is crucial to survival. You see, even after years of experience, there is rarely a sense of completeness in everyday teaching as plans change unexpectedly, routines are arbitrarily altered, decisions are challenged, uncertainty reigns, chaos rules! A teacher’s own little semblance and order of their classroom “world” works to maintain some experiences of the day, but usually falls short of the entire daily phenomenon. For perfectionists, the ambiguous reality of teaching is especially stressful as it often violates expectations of order, linearity, and “correctness” perceived to be inherently embedded in an effective classroom environment. In actuality, successful teaching is riddled with imperfections, but always genuine in intention. Similar to the saying “knowing one’s enemy” helps prepare for battle; embracing uncertainty of the teaching journey, best primes you for bumps in the road.

### ***Challenge Your Assumptions***

Novice teachers often rely on lay theories of teaching rooted in their own schooling experiences as learners (Holt-Reynolds, 1992). These experiences are foundational for building experiential teaching knowledge, extending conceptual understanding, and exploring research-based theoretical aspects of pedagogy. Acquired knowledge is important for beginning teachers to gain their footing as teaching skills are developed but should not comfort one into static complacency. Educators who practice life-long learning view knowledge as amenable and continually challenge their own assumptions of what they think they know as “best practice.” Professional development must be ongoing throughout an educational career as it supports educators in thinking about, reflecting on, and questioning existing beliefs and practices. Mastery is never attained, only potential mastery can be exercised.

### ***Celebrate Mistakes and Failure***

History reveals that perseverance through failed attempts leads to success; therefore, one should celebrate mistakes as a temporary and valuable experience. An impactful teacher models and helps children believe that failure is a building block to accomplishments, not the stumbling block. Unfortunately, most teachers must counter the current educational emphasis on standards, grades, deficits, judgments, and comparisons to others which inhibit students in taking learning risks that would yield the

greatest academic gains. Sadly, within this climate of testing and standardization, some learners' sense of persistence, tenacity to the task, and mastery orientation becomes stifled or stagnant as they are conditioned to be satisfied with the status quo. With respect to students' learning progress, it is prudent for novice teachers to heed the commonsense adage "there is no growth in a protective shell of perceived perfection" (McDonald, 2009, p. 183).

### ***Recognize what you Have Control Over (and what you Do Not)***

New teachers enter the profession with hope, passion, and promise. Their optimism, as progressive educators for contributing to society, is often countered by schooling factors of which they have little to no control (e.g., students' home lives, their guardianship, etc.). Teachers will always have concern for their learners, but spending time trying to change things outside one's control yields frustration, adds to feelings of burn out, and ultimately diminishes commitment. An invested focus on what one CAN DO (e.g., capitalizing on time spent with students, providing effective instruction and learning opportunities, connecting relationally, etc.) provides the greatest impact on supporting students' progress in accomplishing academic goals.

### ***Take Care of Your Feet***

Due to the rigor of the profession and needs of the learners, teachers are often physically exhausted at the end of the day. Since teachers are constantly moving, often their feet experience the brunt of this activity. Novice teachers rarely reflect on their physical needs. So, if you are extravagant about nothing else, be sure to spend money on good, comfortable shoes and occasional foot massages (a valuable and highly appreciated option). If your feet feel good, your energy level will not wane as quickly and you will more likely retain a pleasant demeanor and mood throughout the day.

### **Conclusion**

Neophyte teachers learn best through experience, but can benefit from veteran advice as they begin their teaching career journey. As new teachers gain experiential knowledge, tips and guidelines may prove helpful in acquiring solid practice through a trial and error process. The suggestions in this paper provide ideas for new teachers to explore for impacting effectiveness within their own budding practice. Some ideas may support their developing pedagogies, where others may be turn out to be less helpful and require modifications to better suite individual teaching preferences or possibly discarded as ineffective. Teaching is a lifelong learning experience. None of us knows it all, but most of us hope to share what we do know to ease new teachers' acquisition of skills and expertise.

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