

## Just Dive In

As an undergraduate, I enjoyed student teaching. It was a chance to use my coursework with clear-cut guidelines. I knew what was expected, anticipated my responsibilities, and measured my successes and earmarked failures. Cooperating teachers and advisors set guideposts to reward and improve my efforts.

I left the comfort of student teaching and jumped into certified teaching the following September at a time when my professional confidence was least developed. I thoroughly enjoyed student teaching, but real teaching didn't have the crutch of a university program or the wiggle room for mistakes. Knowing no better, I dove in. *Face first.*

Diving in and letting go of fears the initial weeks of class allowed some of my worry to dwindle. I developed confidence by committing myself to and remaining open to what the job might offer. I worked hard at making learning more dynamic, mysterious, and fun.

In letting go of fears and taking the causality of the job for perhaps more than it was worth, I realized that teaching was something I could make uniquely and entirely my own. So from the flogging wisdom of a third-year teacher, I offer some tips and tricks pulled together for those just beginning their "diving" careers:

1. **Ask for help.** No one expects first-year teachers to recreate the wheel. Despite successful student teaching, they're still learning the ways of teaching in a style that isn't as familiar as high school once was. I still search for lesson activity ideas in fellow faculty filing cabinets. *Valuable insight is yours when you find the time to ask.*

2. **Mentor, colleague, friend.** Time spent planning and working together with a mentor provides countless opportunities to vent frustrations, seek help, and share ideas. If novice teachers aren't assigned a colleague through an official mentorship program, they should seek out an informal mentor. A departmental chairperson might be a likely choice. My chosen mentor taught math. Although our content areas were entirely different, our philosophies and pedagogies were very compatible.

3. **Get to know your students and school.** New teachers should work on establishing rapport with students. The initial five minutes of each class are wonderful for this. Focal points serve as a reminder to students that the teacher is human, too! *Immerse yourself in the community in which you are now actively contributing.*

4. **Make lots of mistakes.** Even beyond student teaching, this is a dynamic, unpredictable profession. I still stutter step and forget necessary things—for example, I often fail to remember to power down the heat plates after lab. I finally learned to check them after plastic beakers once "grew legs" and walked excessively close to those heat plates. Twice during my first year, my car keys became candy-coated.

5. **A full-time job requires a full night's rest.** Every teacher is exhausted after a full day... and most teach *only* five classes. I quickly realized that the degenerative four hours of sleep I was dependent upon in college didn't cut it anymore.

6. **Prior planning prevents poor performance.** For every one hour of class as a student teacher, I sometimes spent two hours planning. Although some content preparation areas can be trimmed, I'm still overly cautious.

7. **Follow your nurturing conviction.** Continually adapting to different student situations is a challenge. Teaching is a nurturing profession. Experience has taught me that the best way to help a needy student is to listen.

8. **Be a reflective practitioner, but have fun!** Teaching is meant to complement your personal life. Think about what you do and why you do it. Ideally, this anchors you to a whole new vocation. Taking time to place your priorities where they belong is important though—so don't think too much, burning out serves nobody.

I often compare my second and third year to my first. Setting out for school this year *seemed* easier. My knees didn't tremble that first day. I could work the copier now (even clear a paper jam) and find the bathroom. I now even remember to turn off the hot plates. These past two years have brought with them all kinds of these virtues—the best of which came from my students.

A newer teacher recently asked if I felt my students treated me differently this year. Perhaps so, I thought, because clearly, I am more confident. That same teacher asked for advice as she began her first job. My reply? *Dive in. Face First.*

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