

PART I

Planning and Preparing to Teach



CHAPTER ONE

Making Positive First Impressions

An understanding heart is everything in a teacher, and cannot be esteemed highly enough. One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feeling. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.

—Carl Jung

The first day of school is an exciting and anxious time for everyone and sets the stage for a multitude of first impressions. During this time, both students and parents formulate their initial impressions of teachers and their classes. In the same way, teachers informally begin to assess the personalities, minds, and cultural backgrounds of the many students whom they have been paired with for the academic year. All of these initial judgments can potentially influence a student's sense of self-efficacy and overall achievement in school. Personal interactions between students, as well as those between students and teachers, contribute to the community of learning that is being formed. In addition, the content that a teacher chooses to include in the critical first

days of school and how it is communicated establish the foundations for the social and instructional climate of the classroom. This chapter offers several practical ways that teachers can initiate and foster a positive learning experience for students.

INCLUDE THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN YOUR TEACHING

Although teachers are passionate about subject matter, most teachers do not choose to enter the teaching profession strictly to disseminate knowledge. There is a human element to teaching that motivates teachers to dedicate their lives to this rewarding, yet challenging profession. Those who are passionate about teaching hold on to the hope that their work will make a difference in the life of a child. Thus, it is important for teachers to show the students that they care about them as much, if not more, than the subject matter and schedule. When teachers only preview the subject matter on the first day of class and ignore or forget to connect with the students on a personal level, they are leaving out the human element of teaching. William Butler Yeats stated, “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.” This quote reminds us as teachers to regard the students in our classrooms as highly as we do our craft. This may mean that academic learning time will involve personal introductions, student-centered activities, structured social interaction, and class discussion. Even with the current academic climate emphasizing standardized instruction, in the end, it is the personal connections that teachers make, combined with their teaching expertise, that build the foundation for high-quality teaching and effective classroom management.

This section offers some practical suggestions for how teachers can make personal connections with their students in the first days of school.

Make Connections Before School Starts, If You Can

Connecting with students before school starts by sending them postcards or calling their homes is one way that teachers can include the human element in their teaching in a practical way and establish a personal link before school even starts. This detail

may be more feasible for elementary school teachers than secondary teachers because of the difference in the number of students, but making connections with students before school starts is an extra effort that makes a difference. When my son started kindergarten, his teacher sent all her students a postcard letting them know that she was looking forward to the school year. Not only was my son excited to receive a piece of personal mail, but this also contributed to increasing his enthusiasm for the first day of school. Another elementary school teacher whom I know makes personal phone calls to each of her students before the school year begins. This makes an unforgettably positive first impression of the teacher to both the students and their families. I first learned of making connections before school starts from Ron Clark, Disney's 2001 Teacher of the Year Recipient. He actually makes home visits in Harlem, in New York City, and explains his goals for the year to each family. Although Mr. Clark's efforts to connect with his students are extraordinary, any efforts to make connections with students before school starts are meaningful and appreciated.

Learn Student Names Immediately

Learning the students' names immediately is a practical way that teachers can make efforts to connect personally with the students. One way to learn the students' names on the first day of class is to incorporate some type of interactive activity that will lower students' affective levels, give them opportunities to meet their classmates, and help them to feel more comfortable in class. This is an extremely important activity on the first day of class because it helps students to feel that they belong, contribute to, and are now members of a shared community. When considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968), which begins with *physiological*, *safety*, and *belonging* needs and ascends to *esteem* and *self-actualization*, it is clear that the basic human needs of security and belonging should be met first before an individual moves on to more complex, intellectual actions. An introductory activity does not have to be complicated; it may be as simple as having each student introduce himself or herself and share something unique, like place of birth or special talent. These personal bits of information allow all members in the community to find a common point from which to begin relationships and to build teamwork within a classroom. In providing these moments, the teacher and the

students of the classroom community are socially constructing meaning in their environment and investing in a community of learning. This is a valuable investment of time in the management, discipline, and motivation of the overall classroom. A personal list of easy and fun ways for students to introduce themselves can be compiled by simply asking others from both inside and outside the world of education for suggestions, making notes from parties or workshops one has attended, or by doing a quick search on the Internet for ice-breakers. The following activity is one that has been successfully used in my classrooms for student introductions and helps to initiate personal connections and conversations with and among the students.

Two Truths and a Lie

Playing “Two Truths and a Lie” is a way to help learn the students’ names along with a piece of information about each of them. Students write two things that are true and one that is a lie about themselves on a 3x5 card, and then the students stand by their desks while they introduce themselves and share their two truths and their lie. The class then has to decide what the lie is, and everyone quickly engages in informal, personal, and rather comical interactions. Students are often very creative with their truths and lies and reveal facts about themselves that they consider interesting or important. It is best for teachers to model the activity by starting out with their own two truths and one lie and seeing if the students can detect the lie. Here is an example:

1. I can speak three languages fluently.
2. I do not like to touch any red sauces, like ketchup, or I will feel nauseated and sick!
3. I was once the voice of a cartoon character.

It is important to take the time to go back and review the names that have been introduced after each 4–5 introductions, so that the students are learning all the names along with the teacher, and the class is building its body of knowledge together. Repetition and review are critical steps in this activity.

After engaging in this exercise, all students will leave the first class knowing the first and last names of some, if not all, of their classmates. The students and the teacher also conclude the class

with a smile and a positive first impression of the class. The groundwork for building a sense of a safe community where the students can gather to learn together has been laid.

Explore Students' Interests Through Personal Conversations

Understanding students is a standard commonly found on lists of national teaching standards. Getting to know students' cultures, interests, and upbringings helps teachers to understand whom they are teaching and how to relate to the students better. Expressing an interest in the personal side of students' lives tells the students that teachers are interested in them as people and not just as students to whom content instruction is delivered. It is interesting and amazing to uncover all the talents and cultures that lie in our students. Besides just talking about school activities, teachers should ask students about their personal interests outside of school. When students introduce themselves at the beginning of the year, it is a good idea to try and uncover some of their personal interests and then to keep those bits of information in mind throughout the year for motivational purposes. For instance, if a specific sport, talent, or place of interest is discussed, then teachers should consider incorporating it into the class reward system. In addition, if students enjoy listening to a particular type of music or playing a particular instrument, then the teacher could play some music in class that related to their interests. Taking time to uncover student interests by engaging in personal conversations with them builds community within the classroom and helps teachers reveal and cultivate the personal side of teaching.

Stay Hip, or "In the Know"!

Students also appreciate it when teachers are in tune with pop culture or the current events of their worlds. This dimension of teaching is unexplainably powerful. Recognizing popular musical groups, cartoon characters, video games, fashion trends, or reality shows, and then incorporating them into your teachings and conversations is highly appreciated and well noted by students. This also aids teachers' understandings of the culture their students are growing up in and helps teachers to note the

differences found that may affect teaching and learning. The admiration or respect gained from the students because teachers have stayed hip or “in the know” contributes to the positive atmosphere created in the classroom and connects the students and teacher in a way that builds rapport with the students and fosters a sense of community. In such a positive environment, a classroom can be managed and run more smoothly and effectively.

SHARE EXPECTATIONS

At the beginning of the year, it is essential for teachers to communicate clearly with the students what is expected from them in the classroom. This may be done in the form of a written contract, a poster on the wall, or both. The important point here is that the teacher’s expectations be clearly delineated. Then, throughout the year, it is the responsibility of both the teacher and the students to maintain these standards.

This section presents useful ways that expectations can be shared between teachers, students, and parents.

List Your Essentials: Be Clear About Your Expectations

At both the elementary and secondary levels, the initial days of school are the ideal times for teachers to share their expectations with the students and to set the guidelines, rules, and procedures for the classroom. Some teachers take the time to have the students contribute to the class rules and post a collaborative list in the class throughout the year. I have a personal list of essentials, or rules that are important to me in my classroom, and I share these with my students on the first day so that they know what can and cannot be done in my classroom. My list includes items like turning off cell phones while in class, not taking things off of my desk, and not chewing gum in class. I think that every teacher should stop and make a list of their essentials before meeting their first class and then communicate them clearly to the students. This orderly structure and clear communication sets the initial foundation for a successful discipline plan.

Ask Students to Articulate Their Expectations

At the onset of class, it is also important for students to share their expectations with the teacher. It is helpful for teachers to know what the students' expectations of the class are, as well as some personal information about the students. For homework on the first day of class, having the students reflect and respond to a Course Expectations Questionnaire is both interesting and insightful. A questionnaire example is provided in the next section. The questions can be modified for elementary-age students, and depending on grade level, the activity could be completed in class or at home. Upper-grade students may be more likely to work independently and be able to articulate their responses, whereas primary students may need more guidance and scaffolding. Secondary level students can respond to the questions as a homework assignment during the first week of school. Encourage the students not to simply write the responses to the questions on a sheet of college-ruled paper. Instead, tell them to make a good first impression by presenting the answers in some creative form that shows off their personality. For example, a star basketball player could write the answers on a basketball. An artistic student could make a CD cover and then have the tracks list be a brief response to each question. Teachers will be amazed at how creative the students are and the information revealed from this first day's activity will leave an impression on the whole class! When expectations are made clear for both parties, the possibilities for success increase tremendously.

Have Students Complete a Course Expectations Questionnaire

The following is a list of suggested questions to prompt students as they articulate their course expectations and describe themselves at the beginning of school:

1. Describe your expectations for this class. What do you expect to learn in this class? (Take time to consider how you might be left disappointed not learning something.) Be as specific as possible.

2. How much time do you *think* will be needed to be devoted to this class outside of the regular class meetings? How much time are you *willing* to give?
3. What kind of learner are you (visual, audio, or kinesthetic)?
4. If you were a teacher, how would you make learning fun?
5. What makes a course “challenging” for you?
6. What do you consider to be a reasonable amount of homework?
7. What do you like about yourself?
8. What don’t you like about yourself?
9. List any hobbies or activities you are involved in, or any special awards you have received.
10. What is really important to you? (Or who?)
11. Share something “weird” about yourself! (For example: I don’t eat anything white.)
12. Share any of your personal background or goals that you have for yourself this year.

Ask Parents to Share Their Perspectives and Expectations

Another exercise that has proven to be helpful for both elementary and secondary teachers is to request that parents or caregivers write the teacher a letter at the beginning of the year that describes their child in a personal way. The content of the letter should help teachers learn special characteristics of the students as well as their most effective learning modalities. Although this type of letter is more commonly requested from parents of elementary school students, the insights that these letters can offer about secondary students would also prove to be extremely helpful to teachers. Parents should also describe the expectations they have for their child’s school year in these letters, and teachers could use the information when discussing the student’s progress during conferences. These letters paint a picture of the students that offers teachers great insights into the most effective ways to teach and to get to know the students more personally.

Have Parents Write a Descriptive Letter About Their Child

The following is a sample letter that can be written to the parents to request such a letter:

Date

Dear Parents,

I am thankful for this opportunity to be your child's teacher this year. I look forward to a year filled with lots of fun and learning. Our year will pass by quickly, and in order for me to maximize the learning in our classroom during our short year together, it will be very helpful for me to learn about the personal characteristics of your child. I would appreciate it if you could write me a personal letter sharing your child's interests, friends, hobbies, strengths, and special needs. The letter does not have to be long, or typed, and it will be read by only me. Any personal insights that you can offer are very valuable to me as I share this journey of helping your child learn and grow.

Gratefully,

[Signature]

La Fecha

Estimados Padres,

Estoy agradecida para esta oportunidad a ser la maestra de su hijo/a este año. Tengo mucha anticipación para un año muy divertido y lleno de aprendizaje. Nuestro año pasará rápidamente, y para hacer lo máximo que puedo como maestra durante nuestro año corto juntos, me ayudará mucho a aprender sobre las características personales de su hijo/a. Les pido a Uds. que me escriban una carta personal describiéndome los intereses, los amigos, los pasatiempos, las fuerzas, y las necesidades especiales de su hijo/a. La carta no tiene que ser larga, ni escrita a máquina, y sólo yo voy a leerla. Cualquier perspectiva personal que pueden ofrecerme es valiosa a mí mientras yo preparo a ayudarle a su hijo/a a aprender y crecer este año.

Muchas gracias,

[Signature]

From reading these letters, teachers can better understand the student and parent perspectives and can then share with them how the class is or is not geared to fulfilling their expectations.

TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Taking pride in one's classroom is a detail that contributes to the positive first impressions that are formed of teachers and their classes. If a teacher's work area looks unorganized or if efforts to display student work or showcase bulletin boards appear lacking, this can send the wrong message to those who enter the room. However, if a teacher pays attention to the details of creating a motivating learning environment for students, this can help build community and pride throughout the classroom. Showing pride in one's workspace by including student work, students' pictures, and motivational quotes throughout the room should not be underrated. Adding these details to a teacher's classroom promotes admiration and respect for the teacher and builds positive relationships between students and teachers. Seeing their pictures and work neatly displayed on the walls also gives students a sense of belonging to the community of learning that is being established in the classroom. We are all beings who are affected by visual stimuli, and taking pride in one's classroom sets the stage for maximized and positive learning.

TEACH LIFE LESSONS

Often, I pause in my preservice classes to teach my students "life lessons." These are lessons that have a connection to our classroom but can also be applied to life in some way. I use the activity "Sharing Expectations" in the first week of class as a prime opportunity to introduce one of my first life lessons by pointing out to the students that sharing expectations is important not only in our classroom but also in life. I explain to students how I see the value of sharing expectations in managing relationships in my life. For the older students at the secondary levels, any time you can give them advice on relationships or dating, you have their full attention! In my personal example, I shared that when I go on a trip

with my husband, I ask him at the onset of our trip what he would like to do during the trip, and then I share my vision for the trip. This way, in the end, neither of us is left disappointed that we did not get the chance to do what we wanted to do. We have both had the opportunity to communicate honestly about our expectations for our time together, and we can then work together more effectively to manage our time in such a way that both our expectations can be met. Students appreciate when teachers move beyond textbook knowledge to teach life lessons; these are often the lessons that leave the most lasting impression.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO JUDGE A STUDENT'S POTENTIAL FOR LEARNING ON THE BASIS OF YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As human beings, we are visual creatures who naturally seem to judge people by their physical appearance. Although I accept that this behavior is an automatic response, I also believe that it is a human flaw of which we must be careful. Teachers' attitudes can be detrimental to students' learning if teachers judge them on the basis of first impressions of physical appearance. Because students do not fit into a prefabricated mold of an ideal student image, teachers could potentially limit their opportunities for learning. For instance, students who are English-language learners and have difficulties with language, or students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who appear unkempt, could be predestined and wrongly labeled as students of low ability due to their cultural influences. However, these very students could be the ones who flourish and become academic champions if given the opportunity, the support, and the confidence.

To model this life lesson to my preservice students, on the first day of my educational psychology class at the university, I role-play my mother. She is a South Korean immigrant who speaks with a heavy accent and broken English. I pull my hair back and wear an interesting ensemble: a long black wool skirt, a pilgrim-collared oversized suit with shoulder pads, a bright magenta and gold-colored paisley printed scarf, tube socks over dark nylons, and sandals. I know my students are all looking at me aghast because I am a walking fashion violation. The majority of the students

appear frustrated as they struggle to understand my exaggerated accent. Some students give up trying to understand my speech and respond rudely with quick, short answers and disgusted facial expressions. Others are sweetly empathetic, and these are the students who smile and nod their heads to encourage me and then speak slowly and loudly in response to my questions. I teach my students on that first day of class that people have the potential to learn and to be very intelligent even if they wear clothes that may not fit, that may not be in fashion, or even do not speak English fluently and have a thick foreign accent. What shocks my students is when I begin to peel my mother's wardrobe off in the middle of class while my own clothes are on underneath her ensemble. I then begin to speak without her broken accent, and then the lesson really hits home to them as they individually begin to realize how their perspectives of me have changed instantaneously because I have changed my wardrobe and my language. Why do I do this? Because I believe that it is important to teach others, especially future teachers, that though we are all human and are quick to judge people on the basis of our first impressions of them, we are sadly limiting our perception of their abilities before even giving them a chance. For a teacher, this preconceived expectation of a student's abilities based solely on an initial visual representation of an individual can end up actually limiting what is learned. We should remember that all human beings have the potential to learn, even though they might not meet all the expectations of the essential qualities of a person that we have already conjured up in our minds.

In my own teaching, I believe I have fallen prey to this inappropriate habit of quick judgment, and it is from learning from my mistakes that I am able to include this life lesson in this book. Although I serve as the role model as the teacher in my classroom, my students are also my teachers, and each year I learn many valuable lessons from them. I have watched students and teachers gawk, laugh, limit, and criticize students who resemble the stereotypical Hispanic gang member, or the student with attention deficit disorder who comes to school each week with different colored hair, or the student from a foreign country whose clothes are not stylish, or the neglected student who smells and whose clothes do not fit anymore but whose parents have not noticed. From this group, I have seen come forth academic champions and responsible,

professional, contributing members of society. These are my silent heroes because they excelled and soared to the top in spite of those, like me, who were so quick to judge their potential by their outward appearance.

In the book *Between Teacher and Child*, Ginott (1965) summarizes the powerful role that teachers play daily in the lives of students:

I am the decisive element in the classroom.

It is my personal approach that creates the climate.

It is my daily mood that makes the weather.

As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.

I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.

I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.

In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.

Indeed, the way that a teacher responds to, teaches, and judges a student from the first day of school to the last will affect the student's learning as well as his or her life.

BE YOURSELF

One of the most important and practical lessons that teachers should learn before they begin their first day of teaching is *be yourself*. Although experienced teachers, administrators, and friends can all offer different pieces of advice about what they believe to be appropriate or valuable in the first days of teaching, in the end, it is the teacher's responsibility to select and form the first few lessons and activities that will best express his or her own style, standards, and self. Teachers must do what they believe is right. One student teacher intern shared with me after her first day of teaching that she tried to combine the advice of several different well-respected people when creating her first day's lesson, but afterwards, she realized that she actually did not represent her

own style and personality. New teachers, especially, may feel that they need to simply trust the wisdom of experienced teachers, but they should also be encouraged to do what feels natural and is important to them. Just because they are new teachers does not mean that their instincts and ideas are not valid. Even though it is good to solicit and accept the advice of other teachers, it is equally important not to lose yourself and your own identity as a teacher in this process. Trusting one's instinct and taking time to reflect upon what is important to you personally as a teacher is very valuable. So don't forget, above all, to be yourself.

CONCLUSION

Once I attended the 10-year reunion of one of my favorite graduating high school classes, and I reconnected with one of my former students who reinforced for me the power of first impressions. As we were becoming reacquainted, he stopped to say, "Did you know that you are my first memory of high school? You were the first person I spoke to, you were my first class, my first high school teacher. . . ." I remembered that student. I remembered his first and last name. I remembered that he had a younger brother. I remembered his perfect penmanship. I remembered that he was very intelligent and an excellent student. I do not remember that first day of class. I do not remember what I wore or what exact lesson I taught. But that student, 10 years after high school, remembered that I was his first memory of high school. He remembers the personal connection I made with him and his classmates—a connection that awarded me an invitation to his class reunion 10 years later. I know that such a special and priceless invitation did not come simply because of the lessons that I taught or the classes that I disciplined, but rather from the personal relationships that were formed through this incredible profession that we call teaching.

Practical Tips

- Include the human element in your teaching.
- Make connections before school starts, if you can.
- Learn student names immediately.
- Explore students' interests through personal conversations.
- Stay hip or "in the know."
- Share expectations.
- List your essentials; be clear about your expectations.
- Ask students to articulate their expectations.
- Have students complete a Course Expectations Questionnaire.
- Ask parents to share their perspectives and expectations.
- Ask parents to write a descriptive letter about their child.
- Take pride in your classroom.
- Teach life lessons.
- Be careful not to judge a student's potential for learning on the basis of your first impressions.
- Be yourself.