Revisiting the First Day of School
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First Day of a New Semester
I was very excited about the first day of school, even if it was on a Friday. I got to school at the same time as Mrs. ____, who opened the room. We had already placed name cards on the desks on Wednesday, so all we had to do was unload the copies I had made (syllabus, procedures, interest inventory, etc.). One student trickled in, then another. By the time the bell rang, we only had 10 students in the room—out of a class of 23! A few more came in tardy, but we were missing around 40% of the class. In second period, there were only 13 students (out of 28), and in fourth block, only 7 out of 14 showed up. Between the snow and the national championship on TV the night before, I guess many kids decided not to come to school (later confirmed by a teacher at another high school who said only 50% of their students showed up, too).

Our “revised” agenda:
• Bell ringer (“Get to know you” sheet)
• Introductions
• Syllabus and procedures
• Library (for AR reading test and to check out books)
• DIRT (daily independent reading time)

Some concerns/areas to think about:
—Two very (at least publicly) disinterested and disengaged males in 4th period who refused to check out books and read (one writes poetry and rap, so I am taking in my copy of Tupac’s poetry for him to read during DIRT)
—With so many kids absent, how will we catch some students up and still move ahead?

If you are anything like us, then some part of the above teacher reflection regarding the first day of school will be familiar. Maybe you’ve also had your first day of school canceled due to inclement weather. Perhaps you expected 25 students, but only 15 showed up (or 35 appeared). You might have had too high—or too low—expectations (or unrealistic expectations) of your students. Or maybe, as much as you had prepared yourself for it, you encountered “disinterested” students who managed to arouse consternation. First days are critical, not only for the students, but for teachers—veterans and novices alike—and they’re doubly criti-
teacher with three more sets of hands and eyes. I had returned to secondary school in 2004 on a planned leave of absence from the university, and I had taught full-time as recently as 2002, so right from the first planning meeting, I knew to leave my rose-colored glasses at home. However, all of my past classroom experiences did not prepare me for some of the hurdles I would face, including the intense, tunnel-vision focus on test preparation and the lack of resources necessary to teach equitably (books, technology, unlimited photocopies, etc.).

To be honest, I am still processing much of what I experienced over the semester. Nonetheless, one key pedagogical moment from this first day became a thread throughout the semester-long project: listening to students and using students’ backgrounds and interests to engage them with the curriculum was absolutely necessary to fostering positive attitudes toward reading.

When the two males refused to read on the first day, I immediately realized this would be the tipping point for the rest of the semester. How I handled this situation would set the tone for the remaining 89 days. Rather than force the students to read something from the library, allow them to do nothing, or send them out of the room, I engaged in one-on-one conversations with them. It took some prodding, but I managed to learn that one of the students liked to write rap lyrics. I was almost certain that if I brought in Tupac Shakur’s *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* I would score some points (for listening) and he might read. Turns out I was right on both counts. This student soon became the most prolific reader in the class, reading three to four novels per week! He read a range of titles, too, from R. A. Nelson’s *Teach Me* to Coe Booth’s *Tyrell* (and Kendra’s *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* by Luis J. Rodriguez—which he later told me was his favorite book.

And, once he started reading, other students followed suit.

I began to bring in title after title from my personal young adult novel library and, at least in my opinion, daily silent reading became the students’ favorite part of the class. Students who did little or no work any other time during class were reading book after book during class, ignoring all other instructional activities. (This was one of those situations where we had to decide whether to let them continue reading or make them put their books down—we went for option one. Some may not agree with our decision, but we learned that if they put the books down, their heads would soon follow.)

Two females read their way through Sarah Dessen’s entire collection. Another student read the Make Lemonade Trilogy (in addition to 10 other novels). *The Hunger Games* and its sequel, *Catching Fire*, became favorites, crossing gender, race, cultural, and socioeconomic lines. So, too, did Paul Volponi’s books,*Rikers
Welcome back to school! As teachers, we need to be successful this year so important? We have the power to help students become more confident and proficient readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and presenters. We know from decades of reading research that the volume of reading adolescents do is important. Put simply, the more our students read, the better readers they become. And students need time in school to read. Fostering this

So, why is the first day so important? We have the power to help students become more confident and proficient readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and presenters. We know from decades of reading research that the volume of reading adolescents do is important. Put simply, the more our students read, the better readers they become. And students need time in school to read. Fostering this

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Top 10 List

After we discuss the importance of reading, I distribute sheets of paper and ask students to list the top 10 reasons why they dislike reading or find it disinteresting. They can list anything that directly affects them; however, they must make sure that they get at least 10 reasons down on their sheet. Students take 10–15 minutes composing their lists, and they often share their responses with their classmates before I’ve asked them to do so. After students complete their lists individually, I ask them to gather into small groups (usually 3–4) and discuss commonalities within the lists. Then I have representatives from each group write two common items on the Top 10 list, which is displayed near the front of the classroom for the remainder of the school year. As the year progresses, I point out specific items that we are working to combat before they take their graduation and state exams. By having students point out their own difficulties, they are able to make connections and see how specific objectives will help identify problems. The Top 10 list serves as a form of motivation for me and my students.

Interest Survey

Before the conclusion of class, I have my students complete interest surveys. These surveys move beyond the basic choosing of fun books and authors. The surveys that I distribute ask students to list their hobbies and interests in specific subjects. Using categorized lists of books that I have already prepared, I help students match their interests to specific young adult books. For example, students who enjoy hunting are able to view a list of several books that relate to hunting. Students who like politics are able to see a list of books and authors that primarily cover political themes in their texts. It is important to note that I have read all novels on the suggestion list, so I am able to answer questions or make suggestions relating to the texts. The interest survey provides students with an opportunity to choose specific texts that pique or relate to their interests.

Conclusion

Literacy should not be presented as something that is cumbersome or an afterthought in secondary English/language arts classrooms. Through book talks, Top 10 lists, and interest surveys, students can begin to value literacy on the first day of school, setting the tone of the classroom for the rest of the term. The ideas presented here have had a continued impact on my students’ interest in reading and positively affected the tone in my classroom throughout the semester.

Homework Assignment for Teachers: Learn Students’ Names

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I remember clearly my first days of college. Since I had wanted to become an English teacher for as long as I could remember, I immediately enrolled in introductory classes in both English and education. Just days after my 18th birthday, I was on my way to beginning my teaching career. I was excited and nervous as I walked into my “Introduction to Education” class. Once there, I realized more students were enrolled in this one course than in my entire high school. “I guess this is what it’s like to be a number,” I thought.

Just minutes into our first class, however, I recognized that I was in the presence of one of the best teachers I would ever encounter. Cliff Schimmels was a biota of a legend on campus, known for his ability to tell a story, his talent for teaching and public speaking, and his unrestrained compassion for students. I don’t recall the content of that day’s lesson, but I do remember how class ended. Professor Schimmels took a Polaroid camera out of his bag and asked us to form a long line by the door. As we were leaving, he took our picture and asked us to write our names in black marker on the bottom of the photo. He said that students’ names were important, and teachers should make every effort to learn them and learn them fast. As we left the lecture hall, the air was filled with the voices of freshmen saying the profound things that freshmen say: “That’s so cool!” “That guy’s awesome!” and “What must that have cost him?” I went to the store a few days later and priced Polaroid film. Our class alone cost over $100.

At our next class meeting, Dr. Schimmels was delivering his lesson when a student raised his hand and asked a question. Dr. Schimmels replied, “That’s a great question, John.” John responded, “How do you know my name?”

“Why do you think I took all those pictures?” Dr. Schimmels grinned. The room was silent, but a lot of the
students began smiling. Just days after our first meeting, he knew every one of us by name. “I’m totaling doing that,” I thought. Between that class and graduation, I took several more classes with Dr. Schimmels, and he followed the same procedure every time.

Years later, I've had too many students to count, but I’ve learned each student’s name the same way. I begin each semester with pretty standard fare. We do a formative creative writing assessment, and then I pass out 4"x6" note cards and ask the students for some personal information along with their favorite band, book, and movie. On the back of the card, I ask them to write their names in large block letters. Then I circulate through the class taking digital “mugshots” of the students holding the name cards at chest level.

Obviously, some are a bit nervous, but this gives me the opportunity to build some rapport with them individually. I acknowledge that it’s weird, and I joke about them posing to represent their persona during the semester: “If you think you might sleep in this class, close your eyes in the picture, so I can recognize you.” “If you know you’re not good at English, try to look confused in the photo.” One said that he would probably skip class a lot, so I should just take a picture of his empty seat. That got a good laugh.

Some students remain hesitant. I try to reassure them that I’m not going to put these photos on the Internet, and I’m the only one who will see them, but I don’t force anyone to pose. Because my purpose is to learn names, it’s okay that one or two are usually too embarrassed to allow a picture; the very act of refusal makes them easy to remember.

When the bell rings, they file into the hallway saying things a little less positive than we said walking out of Dr. Schimmels’ class: “That was weird” or “Dude, that guy’s a trip.”

Now comes the most important part. How do I spend the first days of school? I sit at home with my laptop studying names and faces. I click through picture after picture, first covering up the name card and then revealing it. I rearrange the order so I can’t depend on the context to clue me in. I sort the files by name, then date taken, then file size—anything to mix it up. I spend the whole evening preparing for the next day, for the moment when I see my new students again. Although I have also given a formative writing assessment, I know I can grade that in the days to come. My number one priority is showing my students that their names matter. On day two of class, I want to meet students at the door, call roll, and even handle classroom management with students’ first names. And I can, because I have done my homework.

It’s easy to say, “I’m just not good with names” or “I’ll pick them up eventually,” but I think this is usually just laziness. Personally, I’ve never been good with names, and I’m embarrassed to say I have good friends whose spouses’ names I don’t remember. However, despite my weakness, I make learning the names of my students a priority to show them that I am invested in them personally. I once taught at a military school where the majority of the students were white, male, and thin. Add in the military’s proclivity for shaved heads and uniforms, and I had quite a challenge. It didn’t dissuade me.

No school district would hire a teacher who said, “I’m just not good at effective differentiation” or “Eventually, I’ll figure out how to write good assessments.” These tasks and many others in our profession are far more challenging than learning names, but while we all expect teachers to be proficient at these skills, we seem to accept teachers who say they “can’t” get their students’ names.

However, they’re too important not to get. Names encapsulate our identities. They have an influence on our perceptions of ourselves and on others’ perceptions of us, and as a culture, we associate an individual’s identity with his or her name (Alford, 1988). When we introduce ourselves, we say, “I am this name.” When we introduce two friends, we say, “This is [our friend’s name].” Learning names should be a priority in our classes because it demonstrates the importance of getting to know who each student really is. It’s just a step, but it’s a very visible one.

Likewise, Linda Christensen, author of Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Written Word, believes it’s important for students to learn each others’ names quickly, and she suggests a creative writing activity where students write “name poems” to share with the class. They begin the semester writing about a subject they know personally; more important, they begin building a learning community as they share the stories of their names.

With a little practice, teachers can easily learn a semester’s worth of students in a few hours, and unlike Professor Schimmels, those of us with digital cameras don’t have to spend hundreds of dollars on Polaroids to do so.

References


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The first days for first-year English teachers are often as tense as they are exhilarating. While most enter the field of education with a fresh sense of idealism and an eagerness to put their years of preparation into action, Mazur (2007) acknowledges that new teachers are quickly “confronted by the less creative, more mundane realities” (p. 15) of teaching. While the romantic view involves teachers teaching and students learning, there are many other factors at play as educators prepare for the first days of school. First-year English teachers will have many successes during their first few days of teaching, but they will also encounter frustrations resulting from preconceived expectations that don’t match reality (McCann & Johannessen, 2009a).

**Focus of the Current Review**

One-third of all beginning teachers will leave the profession in the first three years, while almost half will depart within the first five years (McCann & Johannessen, 2009a). One cause of novice teacher attrition is the lack of a support system focused specifically on new teachers’ needs. In a 1995 survey of English teachers, Cavanaugh cited six categories as basic necessities for new teachers: curriculum awareness (e.g., literature, grammar, etc.); knowledge about curriculum planning (short- and long-term); classroom management (flexibility, developing classroom procedures, discipline, etc.); details of daily teaching (grading, paperwork, etc.); teaching different levels and ages of learners; and communication with students, faculty, and parents.

With these categories as a point of comparison, I attempt in this article to determine how the experiences of first-year English teachers have evolved since 1995. To make this determination, I have reviewed articles focused solely on the experiences of secondary, first-year English teachers published in *English Journal* between 1995 and 2010. Many of these experiences come from first-year English teachers themselves, while others include reflections of the first year by more experienced teachers. For the sake of this review, the phrase “first-year teacher” refers solely to those in the English/language arts content area. In the end, a total of 39 articles describing the experiences of first-year teachers were included. These articles have been analyzed for recurring themes using constant comparison coding and comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and they have been synthesized in the review of literature that follows.

My hope with this review is to inform teacher educators, school administrators, and teacher mentors—many of whom may have long forgotten what the first days as a first-year teacher are like—to more adequately prepare preservice and novice English teachers.
teachers for the first days of school.

What the Literature Tells Us about New English Teachers’ Needs . . . and Expectations

Five broad categories revealed themselves as I considered the articles, and thus are the basis for this review. These five categories are (1) managing classroom spaces, (2) building collaborative relationships, (3) implementing curriculum and instruction, (4) maintaining a balanced approach, and (5) forming teacher identity.

Managing Classroom Spaces

The first days for some first-year teachers, or what Barnes-Ryan (2010) calls “learning on the job” (p. 84), can sometimes be far from ideal. Fox (1995) described the difficulties faced by two first-year teachers who took on split placements between middle and high schools, with no classrooms to call their own. One of Bickmore’s (2009) former preservice teachers spent her first semester of teaching bouncing from room to room waiting on her classroom trailer to arrive. Similarly, Simmons (2009) went to great lengths to plan a student-centered classroom environment before her first day of teaching, only to realize that all she inherited was a shared book room for an office. As a traveling teacher, she was forced to invade other teachers’ classrooms during their planning periods, which quickly turned her optimism into anxiety and cynicism. Thus, Simmons (2009) felt disrespected and “thrown to the wolves” (p. 111). However, as a result of having to wander the hallways, she found herself better able to identify with her students, who also struggled to get to class on time.

Even those beginning teachers who have their own classrooms struggle to manage the classroom space. Classroom management is one of the most troubling aspects for [all] teachers.

Building Collaborative Relationships

It is important for novice teachers to understand that in every school there are “enthusiastic teachers and tired teachers, exceptional ones and less than exceptional ones” (Fontana, 1998, p. 103). Like other first-year teachers (see Paschke, 1996), Simmons (2009) initially worried about being accepted, but later learned not to be intimidated by colleagues. Although her experiences as a traveling teacher who shared a book room for an office were not ideal, she found the companionship of another novice teacher going through the same struggles to be therapeutic.

Thus, interactions with colleagues can be critically important because many teachers will experience at least some sense of isolation and loneliness during their first year of teaching (Barnes-Ryan, 2010; Bickmore, 2009; Bush, 2005; Mazur, 2007; McCann & Johannessen, 2005; Reese, 1995; Simmons, 2009). Part of this isolation may be the result of a struggle to fit in (Kist, 2007), a lack of preparation for working collaboratively (Sims, 2008), a lack of time for collaborative planning (Reese, 1995), or a failure to recognize that even experienced teachers have problems with the likes of classroom management and curriculum implementation (McCann & Johannessen, 2009a).

One of the major struggles for first-year teachers is the search for resources; for this reason alone, cooperative relationships with colleagues are essential. While the lack of physical resources is a tremendous concern for novice teachers, so is the lack of mental resources that come with teaching experience (O’Connor & Van Sluys, 2007). Bradbury (see Hunt, Hunt, & Bradbury, 2003) encourages new teachers to circumvent this obstacle by borrowing as much as possible from experienced teachers, but to do so with specific ideas and goals in mind in order “to strike a balance between creating and borrowing” (p. 77).

However, there are occasions when first-year and more experienced teachers will seem incompatible. One common example included first-year teachers who offered new perspectives inconsistent with experienced teachers’ previous successes (Graham & Krippner, 1995; Kist, 2007). Beginning teachers may also feel pressured to work within the system, although some will find it “professionally irresponsible” (Shafer, 2002, p. 18) not to voice their displeasures. Pressure can come from a dictatorial principal (Crowe, 1995) or from overbearing coworkers (Graham & Krippner, 1995), both of whom could cause “political entanglements” (Graham & Krippner, 1995, p. 30) that impede the novice teacher’s ability to focus on teaching and learning.
Implementing Curriculum and Instruction

Teaching literature and encouraging reading has become the hallmark of effective English teaching, yet developing literacy skills in students offers many challenges. One such challenge is that first-year teachers may have a better understanding of what teaching English “should not be” and “only a vague notion of what English [teaching] should be” (Fox, 1995, p. 18). Fresh off her student teaching experience, Stovall (2008) was excited to bring her love of literature to the classroom, but found herself struggling with assigning interesting and meaningful homework (see also Burnley, 1997), overcoming unmotivated students, increasing students’ confidence in their reading skills, and teaching students to avoid plagiarism.

Like Stovall, Perry (2003) also entered the classroom with a love of literature. Unfortunately, many of her students did not read at grade level, nor did they share her passion for reading. As a result, students quickly became apathetic and disengaged during classroom discussions. Eventually, Stovall and Perry both found success by creating exciting literacy projects that increased the internal motivations of their students.

Lessons that involve a combination of reading and writing are often seen as crucial and inseparable in the field of English education (Cheney & Gaillet, 2000; Fox, 1995). Although Cheney (see Cheney & Gaillet, 2000) became an English teacher based on his passion for writing, he quickly discovered that many students are somewhat indifferent toward putting pencil to paper. Halfway through a disappointing first semester, he successfully implemented an approach that offered students more freedom of choice, which, in turn, led them in many fascinating directions. In fact, the literature suggests that a teacher’s willingness to alter plans to meet the needs of students is one of the most predominant lessons learned during the first year of teaching (see Baart, 2002; Burnley, 1997; Cheney & Gaillet, 2000; Dean, 2001; Fairbrother, 1998; Fox, 1995; Nunan, 2005; Perry, 2003; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; St. Clair Otten, 2003; Vogelsinger, 2005).

While planning is a major part of the learning curve for first-year teachers, it should be noted that every lesson a first-year teacher designs is a gamble (Vogelsinger, 2005). Sieben (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009) was faced with the decision of whether or not to discuss issues of sexuality with her English classes. She chose to do so, thereby teaching her students to “confront all artificial constructs that dehumanize” (p. 49). While this experiment worked for Sieben, Joshua (from McCann & Johannessen, 2009a) struggled to teach a curriculum in which he had very little personal interest. What Sieben had that Joshua lacked was a clear and articulated rationale for teaching specific content, which, according to Hunt and Hunt (2005), must be practiced for reasons other than because everyone else is doing it. They go on to assert that novice teachers should not feel pressured to be experts on every topic they teach; rather, they should simply strive to be competent and prepared for class every single day.

In an era of standards and accountability, many first-year teachers also face the dilemma of teaching to garner the excitement of their students versus teaching directly to a test (see Baart, 2002; Perry, 2003; Vogelsinger, 2005). Vogelsinger (2005) struggled with this decision and concluded that it would be more rewarding to hook his students on an Agatha Christie mystery using classroom performances to show students “how effectively drama can be used to help them own their learning” (p. 115).

Whereas drama is interactive by nature, grammar is often viewed as a more isolated and troublesome piece of the curriculum for first-year teachers (see Dean, 2001; Fox, 1995; Nunan, 2005). Nunan (2005) described her experience with teaching grammar as using “drills, minilessons, and sentence strips” (p. 70), but to no avail. In fact, she not only had to revise how she taught grammar, she also had to alter the way in which she thought about grammar itself. On the opposite end of the spectrum, when Dean’s (2001) district no longer required grammar as a mandatory objective, she dropped it only to find that she and her students suddenly lacked a necessary means of perfecting language usage.

While grammar may offer first-year teachers the most worry, other aspects of the language arts curriculum come with their own challenges. Baart (2002) called poetry an “arduous, thankless task” (p. 98) as she struggled to make it relevant to her students. St. Clair Otten (2003) found that implementing vocabulary effectively in her classroom was a complicated endeavor that demanded a variety of resources and approaches. Meanwhile, Chandler (2000) entered her first year of teaching without an understanding of the importance of spelling at the secondary level. Although she resented having to take time to teach spelling at the outset, she grew to appreciate its value in making students better readers and writers.

Maintaining a Balanced Approach

Just as first-year teachers must learn to balance the many facets of the curriculum, balancing roles is one of the
most crucial components in becoming an effective teacher. In describing a former student and a current first-year teacher, Kist (2007) offered a list of standard responsibilities that can divert attention from actual classroom instruction; that list included tasks such as lesson planning, preparing for observations, standardized test preparation, and extracurricular activities. One oft-mentioned and time-consuming task that concerns many first-year teachers is managing paperwork (Barnes-Ryan, 2010; Bickmore, 2009; Duncan & Chaney, 2000; Graham & Krippner, 1995; Hunt & Hunt, 2003; Kist, 2007; Mazur, 2007; Reese, 1995). This paperwork typically includes papers to grade, parent contacts, library passes, registration information, and meeting agendas.

Non-paperwork concerns that require time and preparation include mastering the copier (Kist, 2007) and planning procedures for providing students with supplies and passes (e.g., bathroom, library, hallway, etc.) (Sims, 2008). Since first-year teachers are pulled in so many different directions, organization is an essential skill (Barnes-Ryan, 2010; Simmons, 2009); without it, it is easy to fall “weeks behind . . . [without] teaching anything effectively” (Cheney & Gailliet, 2000, p. 30). When novice teachers lose their balance and put more focus on roles such as researching, planning, or grading, it usually means a decreased amount of focus on other priorities, such as creating student-centered lessons (see Cheney & Gailliet, 2000; Hunt & Hunt, 2005). Barnes-Ryan (2010) suggests that new teachers learn to say no to avoiding becoming “overcommitted and stressed out” (p. 85).

Another result of first-year teachers losing balance can be teacher burnout. As O’Connor and Van Sluys (2007) concede, the strenuous efforts of first-year teachers can cause a great amount of physical and mental fatigue (see also Mazur, 2007). Although the exhaustion from teaching is often seen as a consequence of the physical and mental activities of a normal school week, it may also result from the overwhelming emotional toll that schools can place on a first-year teacher. An example comes from McCann and Johannes- sen (2005) who found a first-year teacher “crying and being consoled by another novice teacher” (p. 52) after being verbally attacked by a student. While confrontations can result from any number of circumstances—some having little or nothing to do with the actual teacher—it is often difficult for first-year teachers not to take such attacks personally.

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**Forming Teacher Identity**

Overcoming the physical, mental, and emotional strains of teaching can be aided through a strong mentoring program. The role of a mentor is to listen and to respond with “care and professionalism, giving advice, supportive comments, and reassurance” (Bush, 2005, p. 106). Mentors should engage their mentees in personal and professional conversations, offer feedback on teaching performances, give advice on teaching-related activities, offer suggestions for motivating students, and share materials and resources (Barnes-Ryan, 2010; Bickmore, 2009; Crowe, 1995; Fox, 1995; McCann & Johannessen, 2009a; Paschke, 1996; Ramsey, 2000; Reese, 1995; Simmons, 2009).

The search for identity is common in all teachers, but it can cause a greater amount of stress and anxiety for novice teachers (see Fox, 1995; McCann & Johannessen, 2009a). In this search for identity, teachers must first have an understanding of their own “personal theories” about teaching (Fox, 1995, p. 22). As O’Connor and Van Sluys (2007), both novice teachers, acknowledged, “We need to decide for ourselves who we are and who we want to be” (p. 96). While...
some first-year teachers struggle to form their identity as they transition from being a college student to a teaching professional (see Fox, 1995; Vogelsinger, 2005), others struggle if placed near experienced teachers with strong personalities who push them to adopt teaching styles similar to their own (Sims, 2008).

Forming a teaching identity is certainly a challenge for first-year teachers, especially when considering the concurrent personal transitions being faced after graduating from college or coming from other careers. Mazur (2007) reminds us of these personal distractions in describing her first year of teaching, which came on the heels of a broken engagement and a cross-country move, both of which left her physically and emotionally drained before the school year had even begun. Although first-year teachers may not experience the full extent of Mazur’s struggles in their first few days, they will certainly know struggles. The successful transition from preservice teacher to first-year teacher depends on many factors, but one thing is certain: first-year teachers need a support system to assist in identifying their own teaching styles and to remind them that all teachers are merely “more experienced learners” (Hunt & Hunt, 2003, p. 95).

Implications

In terms of first-year English teachers’ experiences, this review of articles from English Journal has highlighted several similarities with Cavanaugh’s (1995) six categories of basic necessities for improving teacher preparation. Not surprisingly, priorities haven’t changed much; teachers still recognize as essential:

- understanding the English curriculum,
- teaching that curriculum effectively,
- planning diverse lessons and activities,
- managing the classroom environment,
- building collaborative relationships, and
- paying attention to the details of daily teaching.

Comparative analysis shows that curriculum concerns of first-year teachers remain fairly consistent, with reading, writing, and grammar leading the way. One aspect of the English curriculum that has clearly gained momentum since 1995, however, has been using a multicultural approach to teaching English. For Cavanaugh (1995), teaching different types of students had more to do with ability levels and age differences than diverse cultures and backgrounds. Ironically, the recent educational push toward multicultural classrooms has been countered by the increasing dependence on influence of standardized testing, which has many first-year teachers wondering what to teach and how to teach it.

As it links to curriculum, planning and time management are also as important today as ever. For Cavanaugh (1995), planning primarily consisted of unit and lesson planning. Since 1995, however, English teachers have heard the call to take on multiple responsibilities in their schools, which has involved learning to maneuver through many educational contexts and to balance an increasing number of activities and experiences aside from regular classroom teaching and curriculum planning (e.g., testing, meetings, extracurricular activities, coaching, and all manner of other miscellaneous duties). These multiple commitments may have much to do with higher levels of teacher burnout and sudden spikes of teacher attrition systemwide.

Another constant theme related to first-year teachers is classroom management. For Cavanaugh (1995), classroom management began with implementing the curriculum first and managing student behavior second. Since 1995, the trend is toward the reverse: teachers attempt to manage their classrooms first and cover the curriculum second. Findings within this review point to several potential reasons for this trend. First, numerous first-year teachers may not have a classroom to call their own, which makes classroom management problematic, especially when considering the ever-increasing issue of overcrowded classes. Second, first-year teachers seem to be having greater difficulties motivating, engaging, and, in some cases, even relating to their students, which could have much to do with the widening array of student (but not teacher) cultural backgrounds. Finally, first-year teachers are struggling to maintain control in environments where students’ individual needs are far greater than can be addressed in the time teachers can allot, especially if teachers feel unsupported by their administration or other faculty members.

Cavanaugh’s (1995) final category involved communication with students, faculty, and parents, although this communication had more to do with speaking “fluently and correctly” (p. 45) than it did in actual collaboration with other educational stakeholders. Interestingly enough, search results from English Journal included a major focus on communication with students and other faculty members, but very little on corresponding with parents. Despite its overwhelming importance, this trend seems to be the result of an overall lack of opportunity to interact between teachers and parents, which may have something to do with time restraints, parent or teacher apathy, or first-year teachers’ fears of engaging parents.
Conclusion
First-year English teachers need ongoing collaboration and mentorship now more than ever. Guidance can be critical when dealing with the situations and challenges presented in this review of literature and can help alleviate feelings of isolation that often accompany the first year of teaching. The literature clearly shows that novice teachers need both formal and informal mentors to share in their experiences, to contribute ideas and resources, to help carry their burdens, and to push them toward an understanding of their own unique teacher identities. More than anything, first-year teachers need a shoulder to lean on and an ear to listen before, during, and after their first few days of school. I believe that providing an ongoing support system that specifically addresses the experiences and issues mentioned in this article will improve the quality of instruction during the first few days of school, increase first-year teachers’ overall development, and enhance the likelihood of retaining novice teachers past their first few years.

References


On the First Days of School . . .

We asked English teachers we know to weigh in and give some advice on how to make the first days of the school year successful and productive. Here’s what they said:

- Don’t judge students based on the advice of teachers who have had them in the past. Some of my best students (those who learned and improved the most) turned out to be students I had heard were the “bad kids.” They responded to my teaching style differently than they did to other teachers’, and we had a productive year.

- Use inclusive words on the first day—this is “our” classroom, and “we” are going to do this and this (not “my” classroom and “I am going to do this). While I am sure to always let the students know that I am the adult in charge of them for this class, I also want them to begin to understand that they, too, have responsibilities and ownership of what we do.

- Because students are typically inundated with “rules” and “expectations” from the syllabi in all of their other classes on the first day of school, I start with an activity that demonstrates my interest in them as individuals and provides me with important information about their reading and writing proficiency at the same time.

We begin by reading and discussing Sandra Cisneros’s “Eleven” (a vivid story about a girl’s frustrating eleventh birthday), and I ask my students to pay close attention to figurative language and sensory details that “show” rather than “tell.” After my students are aware of the impact of this descriptive language, I challenge them to think about a similar moment in their lives that represented a turning point, an important realization, or a time when they felt on top of the world. My students then write a brief personal narrative about this moment that includes sensory details to allow the reader into their experience, just as Cisneros does in “Eleven.” This activity allows me to learn something significant about each student (e.g., students often write about parents getting divorced, an important sporting event, or the death of a loved one), and I am also able to get a snapshot of their reading comprehension and writing skills, which helps me begin to shape the curriculum to meet their needs.

- Something that has always worked well for me is to begin the first day by reading the children’s book Cinder Edna by Ellen Jackson. This double story introduces Cinder Edna, Cinderella’s next door neighbor. Unlike Cinderella, who sits around waiting for her evil stepmother to decide her fate, Cinder Edna gets a job, makes enough money to buy her own dress for the ball, and takes a bus to get there. After “story time,” I lead the class in a discussion about being proactive vs. reactive. I then have the students write a paragraph, in class if there is time or for homework if there isn’t, on how they

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First Day Checklist

Have you:

- Decided how to introduce yourself?
- Arranged your classroom to reflect your expectations?
- Made copies of needed materials for each class?
- Thought about how you want students to enter/exit your classroom?
- Thought about how you will handle requests to go to the bathroom, office, etc.?
- Thought about how you will pass out/collect papers?
- Thought about how you will handle students who come to school without needed supplies? (e.g., pencils, paper)
- Thought about how you will take attendance?
- Thought about where students will sit? (Will you have name tags on their desks, or will you let them sit where they want?)
- Defined for yourself what standards you plan to reflect?
- Chosen a way to make your standards and limits clear, public knowledge?
- Created a syllabus outlining course expectations and assignments?
- Created a packet of information (or letter) about you and the specific course to send home to parents?
- Thought about how you will enforce school rules (and your rules) on the first day, if challenged?
- Found a method for finding out about your students’ interests and goals?
- Thought about how you will begin learning students’ names?
- Thought about how you will distribute textbooks?
- Set up a place and system for keeping records and forms?
- Thought about how you will handle students who come to school without needed supplies? (e.g., pencils, paper)
- Thought about how you will pass out/collect papers?
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- Thought about where students will sit? (Will you have name tags on their desks, or will you let them sit where they want?)
- Defined for yourself what standards you plan to reflect?
- Chosen a way to make your standards and limits clear, public knowledge?
are going to be a Cinder Edna this school year instead of a Cinderella.

- It is important to have a “Plan B,” even on the first day of school. I had a long, well-developed plan for my very first day last year, but then found out at the last minute that we had a shortened period. I had to think fast about what I could cut and what I couldn’t, and it threw me off for the rest of the day. Also, be positive. The students will be passionate about your subject if you are.

- Be organized (or appear to be, even if you don’t feel that way!!). The students will sense if you have not thought about how to organize things, like handing out papers, dealing with bathroom passes, or collecting information from students during the first days. Have a routine for everything. The students are watching you from the first moment they enter your classroom!

- Also, don’t be afraid to discipline, especially during the first days! If you let things slide in those first days, it gets harder to enforce the rules and hold students accountable for following your rules. If you have a rule, enforce it the first time (and every time) it’s broken so students know you mean business. This makes the rest of the year much easier!

- I firmly believe that before you can truly teach students, you have to know them. I like to focus a good portion of class time at the beginning of the year on getting to know each student. Here is my favorite first-day activity:

  On the first day of each semester, I have each student choose a colorful envelope; colors are important because they allow me to talk with students about something safe to break the ice (I can ask questions like “Why do you like green?” Or discuss trivia about how each person sees colors differently). Once all students have an envelope, I ask them to fill out their address—it’s amazing how many of them have a difficult time with this, so it turns into a very teachable moment. I tell the students to make sure to fill out their address correctly because, at some point in the semester, they will get a note from me. This process gives me and the students something to look forward to for the entire semester—they are so anxious to get their notes! I send a note home at particular times in the semester—usually when a student needs extra encouragement or praise (i.e., “I really appreciate your improved attitude during class these past two weeks—keep up the great work!”). I also like to include a coupon for a homework pass or extra credit.

A Positive Classroom Climate: Create It . . . Sustain It

Katherine Evans, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

It starts with the shopping trip for school supplies, followed by lesson planning, decorating the classroom, contacting parents, and more planning. I love the beginning of a new school year. The desks are free of trash and bubble gum, the whiteboards are clean, and students and teachers both have a “clean slate” to work from. These first few days provide an important opportunity to set the tone for the next nine months.

It is during these first few days that teachers establish expectations, set into place the rules and procedures that will order the next 180 days, and begin to create a classroom climate that fosters engaged learning opportunities with and for students. Much is at stake: the type of classroom tone established during the first few days of school has the potential to foster successful and fulfilling learning experiences for students throughout the year. Therefore, as they plan, effective teachers consider ways to balance structure and freedom in the classroom, and to develop relevant and authentic instructional activities and assessments. Ignoring the advice to “never let them see you smile before Christmas,” teachers joyfully welcome their students with excitement about writing and reading and learning. They dream of students acting out sections of Shakespeare or writing their first poems; they imagine intense debates about hypocrisy and religion in The Scarlet Letter or consider ways to engage them in online discussions about race and poverty in Monster.

Then reality sets in. For some, it happens on the first day of school; for others, it may take a couple of days or even a couple of weeks. But eventually, it happens. Regardless of the careful planning, no matter how engaging the instructional activities, eventually, a student pushes back against a rule, or an assignment, or a request. Dealing with classroom discipline is inevitable; how teachers respond is a choice, and those choices will determine the sustainability of the classroom climate they have worked so hard to foster.

For many teachers, the choices they make about discipline are limited to which rewards or consequences they will administer to ensure appropriate behavior in their classroom. For them, discipline takes a traditional “sticks and carrots” approach, where “good behavior” is rewarded and “bad behavior” is punished. While this approach is popular, there is strong evidence that, for many students, it is not only ineffective, but
may actually exacerbate misbehavior. Focusing primarily on the individual student and his or her external behavior, these teachers are likely to overlook important contextual and developmental considerations that might influence a student’s behavior. Teachers may also fail to take into account instructional practices that might be frustrating or discouraging students. Further, when sole “responsibility for order falls on the teacher and his or her abilities to control the activities of the classroom” (Danforth & Smith, 2005, p. 57), teachers miss out on valuable opportunities to promote social and emotional development and foster self-regulation in their students.

In contrast, some teachers take up more democratic ways of addressing student behavior that focus on shared control of the classroom. For example, allowing students to help set the expectations for the year, giving them options regarding necessary procedures, and involving them in problem solving about their own behavior not only minimizes misbehavior, but also benefits the long-term development of student responsibility.

So what might these democratic classrooms look like? While there are countless ways to apply democratic principles to classrooms, there are several models that have proven effective at sustaining classroom climates that are conducive to learning, including the Peaceable Schools Movement (Bodine, Crawford, & Schrumpf, 1995), the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (DeJong, 1993; Lantieri & Patti, 1996, 2002), and Restitution (Gossen, 2001).

Another model that is gaining attention is Restorative Justice (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hopkins, 2002, 2004). Restorative approaches to discipline focus on strengthening students’ social, emotional, and cognitive skills, encouraging them to make right any wrongs that have resulted from their behavior, and insisting that all students are redeemable and worthy of being restored to their learning community. Consistent with many theories of motivation, Zehr (2002), a seminal writer in the field of restorative justice, claimed that there are three pillars on which individuals build their lives: autonomy, order, and relatedness; individuals’ behaviors are viewed as a reflection of unmet needs in these areas. Teachers’ responses to misbehavior can serve to either exacerbate the unmet need or can help to meet it. For example, rather than simply suspending the students who got in a fight on the playground, the teacher might engage them in a discussion about the conflict, finding ways to restore the relationship and helping them learn about conflict resolution. By viewing behavior as an opportunity for learning, these teachers not only address challenging behavior, but make great strides toward preventing future misbehavior. Further, restorative justice educators encourage students to make amends when they have wronged another person, strengthening the child’s problem-solving ability, improving his social responsibility, and creating an environment of genuine community. In her research on restorative practices in the United Kingdom, Morrison (2007) noted that the goal of restorative justice is to “build the social and emotional intelligence and skills within the school community such that a normative capacity for safe and just schools can be realized” (p. 326).

In preparation for the beginning of a new school year, with all of its potential and promise, it is important to not only establish classroom climates that promote engaged learning opportunities, but to consider ways to sustain those climates when challenging behaviors occur. Our task as teachers is greater than simply managing student behavior so that we can effectively teach our lessons; as Butchart (1998) stated, “all manner of barbarity works, if the end is orderliness alone. The question is, what works to assure the sorts of civility and dignity that is essential in the short term for effective learning, and vital in the long run for democratic life?” (p. 3). Establishing classroom climates that are effective at fostering this type of learning experiences for students begins in those first few days of school; but in order to be sustainable, teachers must continue to make decisions about discipline that are consistent with long-term educational goals of engaging all students in learning.

References
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