

Ten Non-Standard Ideas About Going Back to School

By Nancy Flanagan on August 6, 2016 9:54 AM

Education Week Teacher Blog: Teacher in a Strange Land

I had a colleague, a third-grade teacher, who spent most of August sorting books into leveled baskets, going steady with the laminating machine, and running up colorful curtains for the door to her classroom. Her husband, a secondary social studies teacher, would mark the beginning of the school year by wandering around the house, trying to find his thermos. This was immensely irritating to her, of course. But it's hard to say who was the better teacher.

I had 30 first days of school as a teacher. Here's my—very non-standard—advice for teachers, on gearing up for the new year.

1. Don't work too hard at unimportant things, like fancy bulletin boards. The most important thing you can do before school starts is think about the curriculum and the kids you're teaching. You're not likely to achieve a high-functioning, intellectually cooking Day One, anyway. You're aiming for Day Four or maybe Day Eleven, once you have a sense of who's sitting in the desks (or on the floor), and how to get them to work together.

This is *not* a half-baked "make it up as you go along" theory of instruction, by the way. I know that curriculum has never been less open to creativity --and Important Metrics are looming. You've got a big job to do. But--as the salesman says, in *The Music Man*--you gotta know the territory.

2. Walk around the building and say hello to all of your colleagues. Even if the interaction lasts 30 seconds, and you're not particularly fond of the teacher / aide / principal / secretary / custodian in question. There is nothing more effective than a school building where adults get along, respect each other and have the same goals. I am always amazed when teachers bitterly complain about the kids bickering in their classrooms, then proceed to ignore or castigate their fellow staff

members. Build a few relationships. Welcome newbies. Thank the custodians for the shiny floors.

3. When it comes to advance planning, keep your options open. Don't write detailed lesson plans for a semester. Plan for a week, maybe, just to ensure you have enough rabbits to pull out of your stovepipe and keep the kiddies busy. Set overarching goals, for sure. But it's folly to think you have the flow of instruction and learning for the next six weeks under your control. The watchword: learn as you go.

4. Corollary: For now, plan grandly, not precisely. Think about the things students need to know for the next decade, not the next standardized test or unit quiz. Not even the end-of-course or college admissions exams. Focus on things they need to master and understand before adulthood. Very soon, you will be dealing with the ordinary grind: daily lesson plans--plus assemblies, field trips, plays, the school newspaper, the spelling bee, the science fair, yada yada. But those are the trees. Think about the forest. What do you want your students to take away, forever, from your teaching? Which big ideas? What critical skills? It's easy to forget the grand picture, once the year gets rolling. Take the time to do it now. Dream.

5. Make your classroom a pleasant place for you, too. In addition to being a place where students learn, it's the place where *you* work, both with and without kids. (And, yes, I spent a year on a cart, so I know this recommendation may seem specious.) Most of us teach in a place that, stripped to its essentials, feels institutional, to some degree--if not downright unsightly. Find a way to have comfortable seating, task lighting, pictures or tchotchkes that make you smile. It doesn't have to be pretty and color-coordinated--many wonderful classrooms have that "kids' playroom/teenage basement" aura. Still, forget those admonitions about too much personalizing--a classroom *should* feel like home. One of my former students just posted this marvelous, home-made, vocabulary wall that her students can absorb all year long. (Thumbs up, Lin!)



6. Don't make Day One "rules" day. Your classroom procedures are very important, a hinge for functioning productively, establishing the relationships and trust necessary for individual engagement and group discussions. Introduce these strategies and systems on days when it's likely your students will remember them and get a chance to practice them. This is especially important for secondary teachers, whose students will likely experience a mind-numbing, forgettable parade of Teacher Rules on Day One.

7. Instead, give students a taste of disciplinary knowledge on the first day of school. Teach something, using your most engaging instructional techniques--perhaps a game, a round-robin, a quick-response exercise with no wrong answers. Bonus points for something involving physical movement. Beware of empty ice-breakers or team-building exercises--your goal is to have students going out the door saying "I think this class is going to be fun, and I already learned something."

8. Keep your expectations about the first few days modest. You will probably be nervous (and have bad dreams), even if you've been teaching for 30 years--I always did. The students will be keyed up, too--it takes a couple days for them to settle in and behave as they usually do. Wait for your teacher buzz to kick in--that happy moment when you see engagement, maybe even laughter, and you know you're on the right track. It takes a while, but when it happens, it's like the first flower in the spring garden.

9. It's the first day of school for parents and families, too. They're at home, wanting to know that their kids are OK, that this year will be a good one for little Tyler. One idea for immediate parent engagement that I used for many years (thanks to Middleweb): asking parents to tell you about their child, in a million words or less. Very simple, and very powerful.

10. Tie your classroom to the world. There's been a lot of on-line chatter about the presidential election, and its impact on kids. Even if you teach kindergarten--or chemistry--you can't avoid the same kinds of chatter in your classroom. Use the daily news as backdrop for modeling civil interactions and substantive debate on the content you teach. Read picture books on immigration. Take your AP Stats class to FiveThirtyEight.com and assign your physical education students to watch Simone Biles. What are YOU currently watching, reading or discussing? Share. Help your students analyze issues or find role models.

Because that's your job.