10 Things I Wish I Would Have Known Before I Started Teaching

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Disclaimer:

- What follows is a selection of things that I've learned during the past few years of teaching
- My hope is that you can benefit from some of the mistakes that I've made
- Feel free to disagree

1. The syllabus is a contract between you and your students

- Your syllabus is a legal document that outlines the rules and expectations of the course
- If you have a particular expectation, put it in the syllabus!!!
- Never deviate from the expectations that you laid out in the syllabus
- The only thing worse than a "bad rule" on the syllabus, is changing it mid-semester

2. It's better to start off as the bad cop than the good cop

- If you start off being strict, you can always loosen up later
- But if you start off loose, it is very difficult to increase control!
- If given the opportunity, students will try to take advantage of you (though, this is often not intended to be malicious)

3. Teaching is not a popularity contest

- New teachers are often overly concerned with whether their students like them or not (I know I was)
- If you are too concerned with whether students like you or not, you may miss out on an opportunity to provide the students with a worthwhile and challenging learning experience
- If you are passionate about what you are teaching and your students trust you, I bet that they will like you
- If you're having fun, I bet that they will like you

4. Students want to know "Why?"

- There is one question that all young kids ask over and over again: Why?
- College students haven't really lost this thirst for knowledge...it's just hidden behind a little laziness and ambivalence
- Don't just list a series of facts when teaching
- Build answers to the question "Why?" into your lectures and be prepared to answer these types of questions at all times
- Encourage students to explore "why" on their own as often as possible

5. It's OK to make mistakes

- Everyone makes mistakes, but do your best to minimize them
- Always admit your mistakes. Students will see through your attempt to cover it up... and this may erode their trust in you
- Use your mistake as a teachable moment. Explain to them WHY what you said is wrong
- Also, it's OK to admit that you don't know something..., but you should tell them that you will find out and let them know later (make sure you follow through)

6. A few seconds of silence seems like an eternity

- Regardless of what class you are teaching or how you are teaching it, you should pause occasionally to let students think and/or write
- In particular, if you ask a question to the class, wait a while before answering it for them
- If you begin answering your own questions too soon, your students may get in the habit of not even trying to think of an answer
- Learn to feel comfortable in the silence

7. If it's important, then write it down

- Students will not remember most of what you say (even if you say it a 1000 times)
- ALL of the important stuff should be written down (either on the chalkboard, in PowerPoint, etc). At the very least write down where what you said can be found in writing (textbook, internet, etc.)
- However, if students are taking notes, there is a limit to how much they can write down and still follow what's going on in class

8. Be prepared to answer those difficult questions

- Sure, you should be able answer all the hard questions that might come up on the material you are teaching, but that's not what I meant. How about these?
- "Why do we have to learn this stuff?"
- "Do we have to know this for the test?"
- "I don't get it!?"

9. There are a few things that you probably shouldn't do

- Don't say: "This is easy." Of course there are exceptions to this, but I think it's best to minimize this phrase
- Never say: "I'm only teaching this because it's on the syllabus"
- Never act like you are not enjoying what you are doing (if you have to, fake it)
- Don't yawn!
- Don't roll your eyes
- Don't look at your watch. If you look at your watch, then your students will, too
- It's probably best not to swear either... I am so guilty of this!
- It's OK to emphasize the material that the students should know for exams, but don't lead them into thinking that doing well on the exam is the point
- Hmmm, what is the point?

10. Spend some time thinking about what the point is

- What's the point of learning all this stuff?
- What's the point of your lecture?
- What's the purpose of the class you are teaching?
- What's the purpose of learning anything?
- Have you told the students any of the answers to these questions?
- Or, have you asked them to think about these things?
- Do the answers to these questions change how you teach? I think that they should!

Bonus: Erase the board correctly

- Erase the board completely
- Always erase the board up and down
- Never erase the board side to side
- Otherwise, your butt will wiggle!!!

Alright, your turn!

Get into groups of 3 and brainstorm at least 3 more things that would be useful for all of us to know. We'll share these ideas with each other in a few minutes.