SURVIVAL SKILLS FOR NEW (AND NOT SO NEW) TEACHERS

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

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During the years of developing what one might call one’s teaching style and mentoring numerous teachers, I’ve observed them struggling with basic skills for survival as a teacher in the classroom. These are skills that every new teacher at some point in his or her early teaching career (perhaps as early as day one) may lament “why wasn’t I trained for this.” One might conclude that this lament comes not from the college professors’ lack of knowledge or experience, but because the new teacher will face individual, unique situations, and these techniques and skills can only be developed through trial and error for what fits his or her personal teaching style and situation. This Advisory presents possible solutions to situations or occurrences that will befall all art teachers to some degree. The solutions presented are basically the results of personal discoveries and are not meant to be absolute answers.

LESSON PLANNING

It has been said, “If you don’t make your lesson plans, the students will make them for you.” Most students have an uncanny ability to sense the degree of preparedness in their teacher. The amount of behavior problems arising in a classroom is usually relative to that degree of preparedness. Well prepared lesson plans with motivations that entice students to learn and that have content appropriate yet challenging to the developmental level of the students, are the criteria by which successful art teachers are often judged.

Developing lessons within units (the elements of design, historical eras, multicultural themes, particular technical skills, etc.) give the overall curriculum a sense of cohesion. Units may be as brief as two lessons or as long as a year long theme.

Be sure you know your subject matter. Incorrect information is worse than no information. Time spent researching an unfamiliar subject before presentation in the classroom can provide the control that preparedness assures.

CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION

Many art instructors distribute supplies themselves or choose one or two students to assist. However, giving the students the responsibility of distribution and collection of supplies and equipment as well as the care of them, not only teaches responsibility, but also allows more time for the teacher to tend to other duties. A visible chart of student and/or table responsibilities may be displayed in a permanent location in the classroom. Explanation of the chart should be given at the beginning of the semester with periodic review of its purpose throughout the year.

An important ingredient of a well prepared lesson is the organization of supplies and equipment. A wonderful presentation can be foiled if your enthralled students become bored or even rowdy while they wait for their instructor to hunt for the supplies that were thought to be in the supply closet. Know where the supplies are and check beforehand on their condition. Pay attention to how they will be distributed in the beginning of class, and how they will be collected and stored at the end of class. A rolling cart on which necessary materials have been placed is ideal. It can be prepared before class and pushed out of the way until needed. A table or counter space is good also. As long as a plan is in place for distribution and collection, the momentum of a good motivation can proceed quickly and easily into the production phase.

ESTABLISHING ROUTINES

Let the students know what you expect—their best! Students will give back to you what you expect of them... a little or a lot. Students also need to understand what to expect when they walk into a classroom, and they need to know what is expected of them. A few simple rules discussed in the beginning of the semester and consistently enforced throughout the year is a must for all teachers. Four helpful rules can be posted which might be called rules of respect—Respect for Teacher (or
of any adult). Respect for Peers, Respect for Supplies and Equipment (mine or yours), and Respect for Self. They are few, if any, infractions that do not fit under one of these categories.

Students feel comfortable with a daily routine. They quickly learn that on coming into the room, they are expected to place books and personal items in the designated area away from the work area, which may be retrieved when the bell rings and they are dismissed, not by the bell, but by the sound of the teacher’s “have a good day” or “see you tomorrow”. A designated place for completed work to be graded and a place for them to pick it up after grading is another way to save time and have the students be responsible for themselves. Having a routine for every task does not stifle creativity. Students need to understand what to expect, and what is expected of them.

If the teacher expects the students to look on the board for instructions when entering the classroom, that habit can be quickly and comfortably formed by the students. Instructions such as “Sharpen pencil, be seated and ready for instruction when bell sounds” or “Be seated and ready for a slide presentation” serve to prepare the class for what to expect when the class begins. “What are we going to do today” is heard less often when the students form the habit of looking on the board. The objective and/or assignment for the day should always be written on the board or in a visible location. Steps to be followed in the production process may also be written under the assignment or posted on charts.

Take a silent roll if you know the students, completed quickly at the beginning of class. It takes only seconds to count student heads. If the number of heads counted are the same as the number of student on roll, instruction may begin. If the head count tells you a student is missing, one can quickly check the seating chart of assigned seats to find the missing student and record the absence.

Learn students’ names as quickly as possible. Name games are a fast, fun way to learn them. Lesson closure may be made a few minutes early the first few days of school so that you can play name games. Tell the students that no one may leave the room until you have named correctly every student in class. The children have fun hearing a teacher make mistakes, or having to begin again or ask for a hint or what letter the name begins with. When a student feels secure that the teacher knows his or her name, and will call them by name, they are more interested in what you have to say and are more apt to demonstrate appropriate behavior.

DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUES

The layout and arrangement of the classroom should allow for unobstructed movement by teacher and students. The teacher should be able to move freely about the room for maximum supervision. Be aware of “hidden” areas of the room where students might be less supervised, and if necessary block off or announce that area to be off limits to students. Teachers truly must develop “eyes in the back of their heads”, for they must monitor the whole room continuously. Assign seats and keep a seating chart on hand. Students who present potential problems can usually be found seated furthest away from the teacher. Seating disruptive students in front and separated from each other usually deters negative behavior.

Do not begin the lesson until you have everyone’s attention. A terrific lesson can be lost to the back wall if a few talkative or disruptive students prevent the rest of the class from hearing or focusing attention. Announce to the class that you are waiting for everyone’s attention and don’t begin until you have it. Know your students’ attention span. Middle school students begin fidgeting after about fifteen or twenty minutes, younger students’ attention span is less, and older students’ is more. Having plenty of visuals and examples with your motivation and/or instruction will usually hold their attention longer. Involve the students in the lesson motivation by using such techniques as questioning, and/or interactive dialogue. Look around the room before calling on a student to answer a question and then call on another to rephrase, comment on or correct a student’s answer. Announcing that the next question will be difficult or challenging will also capture their attention.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining conditions in the classroom that foster learning is a goal for which many teachers strive. Classroom management and organization are skills that can be learned through consistent effort. Although the trial and error method must ultimately be used to determine what works best for you in a given situation, familiarity with successful methods of classroom organization and management can be helpful.