

44 Things I've Learned as a Teacher

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Introduction

Dedicating myself to self-reflective practice and advancing learning has been integral throughout my teaching career. Recently, I turned 44 with a renewed sense of purpose and instead of focusing on the chronological aspect I chose to explore this as a way to provide insights in the form of a list that has defined most of my choices in the academic world and has led to my current state of learning.

The List

1. Be aware of your actions, thoughts, and emotions and how they manifest unconsciously as facial expressions, mood, and body language.
2. Take the Zen approach: Greet everyone. Never lose your temper. Muji (無印) as background music. Smile & laugh. Take a deep breath. Let everything flow. Be patient.
3. You don't talk to students; you talk with them and teach through storytelling. Have a startup routine and wind down the class with small talk or casual conversation.

4. Students desire an engaging and purposeful education that breeds a genuine interest in acquiring knowledge, rather than simply checking the boxes of compulsory classes.
5. Silence and noise in a Japanese classroom can have many meanings apart from what we are used to. They're not taking notes or listening because you don't have anything of worth to impart.
6. Elicitation over explanation and suggestive over corrective feedback. But be explicit and suggest gently, usually prefacing with "and you want to say?" and "how about trying to say it this way?" respectively.
7. There are a multitude of student learner types and preferences. This could mean giving them different choices when doing an activity and adjusting goals, difficulty, duration, and pace when necessary.
8. Project based activities and collaboration is commendable, but autonomy and self-reliance will give them the confidence in their abilities, opinions, and ideas which will allow them to thrive in life.
9. Establish clear grading criteria and give students a clear control and agency in it. Strike a balance between summative and formative assessment.
10. English teachers can teach various disciplines. Go beyond imparting language, guide them how to learn, how to practice empathy, and how to navigate life to become well-rounded citizens.

11. Avoid presuming that students completely grasp your instructions or intentions; instead, consistently employ scaffolding techniques such as graphic organizers, instructional rubrics, and modeling.
12. Maintain a policy of firmness and fairness, avoiding any display of favoritism. Give everyone enough attention, praise, and criticism. No student should get to a point of realizing there is inequity in class.
13. Classes should strive to be as participatory as possible. Create an ideal environment of comfort, security, and happiness. Let students question assumptions and state opinions without judgment.
14. Allow for creative chaos. Get students to move around and be active. Occasionally switch seating arrangements along with partners or groups.
15. Consistently improve and update your class curriculum and methods. Do a scrub of all content every semester break and organize them all both online and offline.
16. Unplanned spontaneous lessons can sometimes bring out the best performance in a teacher. The opportune time to innovate and try something new is now.
17. In an age of AI, the only thing that separates you is your uniqueness. Do this by making your content innovative, sensational, inspiring, personal, challenging, interesting, empowering, and encouraging.

18. Timing is an art not an exact science. Come 15 minutes before class, don't rush your lessons, spend more time if necessary, and finish early when the students deserve or need it.
19. Attend and present at major conferences but do not forget smaller university conferences where you can generate more meaningful connections and talk more closely to the attendees.
20. Fully grasp the scope of a students' university life and their overall workload and your expectations of what they can produce linguistically but also realistically.
21. Students possess fragile confidence, be weary of directly or excessively interfering during group or pair work activities. Leave sticky notes instead.
22. Be proud of who you are and where you come from. Never sacrifice your culture, heritage, beliefs, or identity in exchange for short sighted benefits or higher stature.
23. Technology is a double-edged proposition and it can either enhance or disrupt the learning process.
24. The most insightful epiphanies about pedagogy and language lie within conversations during lunch with students.
25. Prepare for a worst-case scenario, where all your resources are taken and you're left with just a chalkboard and you can still execute a lesson to its completion.
26. Teachers have immense influence and power over students that extends well past the time they graduate. Consider not only how you made them think but also how you made them feel.

27. Treat students like adults but tap into the potential of their child-like innocence and youthful exuberance.
28. Be a team player and work together with your peers. Share in both your successes and failures. Be generous with praise and restrained in your critique.
29. Choose friends over mentors. Form authentic friendships that are about common interests, experiences, and beliefs and not just for the sake of career advancement.
30. Sustainable motivation can never be provided or forced, only brought out and generated from within the students themselves.
31. Lean on substance not on fluff. Be an educator that challenges beliefs and improves the learning experience. Entertaining classes should come second to great teaching.
32. Introduce text and media that covers a variety of genres and forms. A wide spectrum of quality materials can determine a student's emotional and intellectual investment.
33. 'Do now apologize later' only works if you don't plan on having a faculty recommendation for the next job. Also, you are always okay with working on occasion at the university's other branch.
34. Give students responsibility and moments to exert leadership and higher order skills such as critical thinking, evaluation, solving, applying, and synthesizing.
35. Form memorable bonds with your students. Create student profiles and remember their names, stories, and faces. If you are fortunate enough you will meet hundreds and even thousands in your lifetime.

36. Stay humble and accept constructive criticism with enthusiasm, self-reflection, and grace.
37. Academic and pedagogical skills are prerequisites which however, do not guarantee competent teaching. Experience and wisdom that comes with this will.
38. Take full advantage of breaks in between semesters and the weekend during the semesters for your mind and body's well-being. You will thank yourself later for this kindness.
39. Machine translation and artificial intelligence utilization by both the teacher and student is acceptable when the situation calls for it and when proper guidelines have been communicated.
40. Avoid bandwagon research fields; take the time to find out your line of research. Journal your ideas and once you've figured it out, focus, write and get your articles published.
41. Don't be afraid of pushback from the academic community and embrace the peer review process. If you're not infuriating or intriguing people with new ideas, you're not doing it right.
42. The way you dress and the state of organization of your desk is an indication of your professionalism, work habits, and attention to detail.
43. The search for knowledge is a two-way street. Learn something interesting, thought-provoking, and new from your students.
44. Capability usually shines and success will follow if you work hard enough and don't make it unnecessarily hard or overly complicated.

If I'm still around to teach at 65 years old, I'd like to revisit this endeavor and do an additional 20 things I've learned. In the meantime, I hope this current list can suffice and show the transformative power of embracing change, adapting to challenges, and continuously learning.