

The Truth About Teaching:

What I Wish the Veterans Had Told Me

Coleen Armstrong
A 31-year Veteran Teacher

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The Truth About Teaching:
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For information address:
Inspiring Teachers Publishing Inc.
12655 N. Central Expressway
Suite 810
Dallas, TX 75243

1-877-496-7633

<http://www.inspiringteachers.com>

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Introduction

Despite its somewhat inflammatory title, this book really is a love letter—to new teachers. By new, I mean anyone with fewer than five years' experience. That was once considered the benchmark, the point where we oldsters felt we had a pretty good handle on things.

And by a love letter, I mean an acknowledgment that you probably haven't received anywhere near the credit you deserve for finding the courage to become a teacher. I'll bet plenty of loved ones tried to talk you out of it. Yet you forged ahead. That took pluck, daring, valor...even a kind of heroism.

So I want to provide some reassurance that whatever difficulties you may encounter probably aren't due to what you'd otherwise think were your own personal shortcomings. Take my word for it; rough moments happen to all of us. Yet we survive—and thrive. You can too.

Much has changed since I began my career in 1968. Back then, first-year teachers were literally thrown to the wolves with little or no guidance and then left to thrash about desperately on their own with no intervention—unless

1 The Profession and the Politics...

REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE ON A DIVINE MISSION

In your heart you already know this. You wouldn't be a teacher if you didn't understand on some level that you've been hand-picked by the universe to carry out the most sacred trust on Earth—preparing the next generation to take its rightful place in the world and giving them the skills they'll need to run it successfully. Intimidated by the impact of it all? You should be. If you weren't, you'd be arrogant—and arrogance is one of the worst traits for anyone to carry into a classroom. It hinders growth, change, learning...and most essentially, empathy.

If by chance none of this applies to you, if you've selected the teaching profession for the security, something to fall back on until you discover your true talent, for the “long” breaks—or worse, if you're using it as a stepping stone to something better (read: higher-paying) like supervising the curriculum or becoming director of transportation, then please do everyone, including yourself, a favor, and move on as quickly as possible. We desperately need more fine teachers—but

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there's no room for anyone who's less than totally committed. This is a tough, demanding assignment with enormous challenges and even greater rewards. It is not a place to hide out or relax.

GET READY TO WORK HARDER THAN YOU EVER HAVE IN YOUR ENTIRE LIFE

This is not a job for one person—but you'll have to pretend that it is. That's the only way you'll be able to deal with being your own secretary, researcher, scribe, custodian, and gofer. You'll be keeping records that will rival the IRS, along with files upon files of teaching materials. You'll be planning lessons, grading papers, and composing tests far into the night and probably every weekend. You'll be carrying around inside your head the personality profiles of as many as 170 unique, individual, precious human beings. You'll even be washing your own chalkboards and inventorying/ storing your own textbooks. All while the rest of the world tells you how easy your job is. Which brings me to...

THE THREE-MONTH VACATION IS A MYTH

I'd like five minutes alone in a dark alley with the guy who marketed the bumper sticker which reads, "The three best things about teaching are June, July, and August." Don't believe a word of it.

You'll spend those ten weeks teaching summer school or supervising band practice, taking classes for recertification and to upgrade your skills (often at your own expense), writing your master's thesis, attending seminars, pruning your lesson plans, polishing your tests and worksheets, brushing up on

THIS JOB WILL BOTH HARDEN AND SOFTEN YOU

Get ready to be simultaneously enraged at the vast scope of your job and at the way public policy continually devalues your efforts despite mountains of lip service—and moved to tears by the vulnerability and intense needs of so many kids with whom you work. What you will begin to suspect is true: No one cares about them as much as you do, because you get to know them personally as the talented, yearning, multifaceted individuals they are.

Politicians and taxpayers see children only as abstracts, which is why schools must continually scrape by financially generation after generation. I personally believe that everyone running for public office should first spend six weeks as a 7th grade math teacher. Abstracts would become concretes.

Former talk-show host Phil Donahue used to say, “Nobody whines more than teachers.” He may be right. But imagine a doctor needing to purchase his own surgical tools on a salary of \$26,000 a year and also being accused of incompetence every single time the patient didn’t get better. Wouldn’t he be irritated?

You’re gifted with a painful vision—the ability to see what could take place educationally if we had enough time, space, manpower, and facilities. The frustration of seeing where we are versus where we could be will endure throughout your career.

What’s more, just about the time you consider chucking it all, some kid taps you on the shoulder and asks, “Can I talk to you? I don’t know where else to turn.”

And your heart melts.

2 The Money...

SALARIES AREN'T AS BAD AS THEY USED TO BE, BUT THEY STILL HAVE A WAY TO GO

I signed my first teaching contract in 1968 for \$5600. My fellow college graduates in other fields were beginning their careers at around \$8000 or \$9000. Back then I shrugged at the disparity; it wasn't enough to make me turn away from a field I had already grown to love.

Twenty years later, when my friends in business and industry were earning two to three times what I was making, I was far less philosophical. During the mid-1980s, I knew a man whose college GPA had been way below average, far below mine. Yet he proudly declared after 18 years in management that he'd now be able to "coast" until retirement. His salary? \$62,000. Mine? \$16,000. And I was far from coasting, even on a slow day.

My dedication was still strong, but it wasn't as if my grocer and utility companies were giving me any discounts. How did I finally reconcile this? By realizing that we all make our own choices for our own reasons. Granted, I'd made them

3 The Nuts and Bolts...

YOU NEED A LESSON PLAN—BUT YOU MAY NEVER QUITE GET THE TIMING RIGHT

Create a beginning, a middle, and an end, a pupil performance objective and an evaluation. You need some way of figuring out whether or not your lesson was effective in terms of holding attention, being part active, part passive (with the emphasis on active) and whether the kids actually learned anything new. Great educational moments rarely come about by chance; they take as much planning as D-Day.

Unfortunately, the whole thing can blow apart at the last minute with the point entirely lost because of a fire alarm, an unexpected PA announcement, or somebody falling out of his chair. And don't even ask what happens if a wasp buzzes into your room. Which brings me to...

STOP YOUR CLASS TWO MINUTES EARLY

It took me 25 years to figure this one out, but eventually I learned to build in a time-buffer. Two minutes is usually

enough. Some teachers use the final moments (if not interrupted by the PA) to ask if anyone has any comments. I usually wound up with students milling around my desk, still asking questions or just being friendly.

The naysayers who liked to remind me of how much time I was wasting every year were ignoring two things: First, nobody was listening in those last moments anyway. Second, my mental health was probably better than theirs, because rather than continually losing my final point, I got to wind up my lessons in my own way. Two minutes per period each day may well have saved me two years in anger-management therapy.

THINK OUTSIDE THE (TEXT) BOX

I never met a teacher's manual I didn't hate. The vast majority are boring and banal. If you're following your textbook to the letter each day, I guarantee you're putting your classes to sleep.

I'll tell you a story. As a first-year teacher I was handed a Teacher's Guide. I promptly stuffed it into a file cabinet and then forgot about it. (Hey, what can I say; I was busy.) Then one day in November, I stumbled across it and began to page through. I was stunned to find the literature questions as predictable as sleet in January—and about as much fun. “Why do you think Tom was angry at his mother? Possible answers: She was unwilling to let him grow up. She wanted to control his actions. She was afraid he would leave her.”

I felt like retching. Where were the meaty prompts about anger sometimes being passive-aggressive and how someone might learn to recognize it in another person and in oneself? Where was the discussion about the complex push-pull

BE AWED BY THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL EDUCATION

Think about how many societies (and families) worldwide have denied the right of an education to certain groups of people—most commonly females. Then consider the strength of those which attempt to offer it to everyone. Staggering, isn't it? We no longer question education's value; we're just seeking better ways to sweep more people into the net, even those who disdain it.

DO MOST OF YOUR PREPARATION WELL IN ADVANCE

That means tests, worksheets, outlines of units and lesson plans, and that means writing them during the summer. Otherwise you will often be working well past 11:00 p.m. throughout the entire school year. It's a short road to an early demise.

STAY AN EXTRA HOUR AFTER SCHOOL SEVERAL DAYS EACH WEEK RATHER THAN TAKING LOADS OF PAPERWORK HOME

You'll get far more done without the phone ringing, the dog barking, or the spaghetti boiling over. Besides, some nights, given family crises and reruns of *The West Wing*, much of what gets lugged home will never make it out of your trunk.

NEVER OFFER THE KIND OF HELP WHICH DISEMPOWERS

The more you do for someone, the less he does for himself. It's called learned helplessness. Where did we first begin to understand that concept? Through our welfare system.

YOU'LL MEET ONLY ABOUT NINE DIFFERENT KIDS IN YOUR ENTIRE CAREER

After about five or so years you'll start to recognize parallel behavior patterns and similar character traits. Every class seems to have a rebel, a brain, a delinquent, a misunderstood genius, a clown, and a teenage parent. Give yourself enough time, and you'll get so good at spotting types that when they talk about their problems, you'll be able to predict what will happen next. Because you're wise, experienced, observant, and a grown-up, you'll often be right—which will thoroughly spook the kids. They'll claim you're psychic. Let them think that.

EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE IS TRUE

I received a jarring lesson pretty early, during my second year of teaching. It came in the person of a seventh grade girl named Eunice. She did everything slowly. She moved slowly, completed her classwork slowly, and her homework not at all. She annoyed me. So one day I kept her after class and presented a stern, teachery lecture on listening to directions and getting her assignments in on time.

Only after I finally wound down did Eunice admit haltingly that her mother was seriously ill, and she was spending all of her time at home preparing meals, spoon-feeding, and reading aloud. This 12-year-old was single-handedly assuming a duty which would throw any adult's life into a maelstrom.

Of course I felt lousy. But now, over three decades later, I have to thank Eunice. In my incredible arrogance I'd made a child's shabby little life even shabbier. I resolved never to do

4 Creative Lesson Plans...

ASK YOURSELF REGULARLY: CAN I DO BETTER?

Of course you can. You don't want to continue using the same old, yellowed notes and one-dimensional plans year after year—because everything you do should be tied into what's going on in the world this month, not last. Society is ever-evolving, and there's always plenty of material out there. Each summer you should go through your lesson files with the intention of pruning. Keep whatever wowed 'em. Discard or update whatever didn't.

BE ALERT TO ANY AND ALL POSSIBILITIES: HOW CAN I USE THIS IN CLASS?

You'll find ideas in newspaper and magazine articles, on PBS specials, in people you meet at parties. Soon the whole world becomes your lesson plan. It's like carrying a camera. You see more, so you photograph more. You photograph more, so you see more.

CULTIVATE A GENUINE PASSION FOR YOUR SUBJECT MATTER

Then convey it. Even if your students can't always share your excitement about quadratic equations or the Civil War, at least they can see why you feel the magic. Don't be afraid to sound a tad foolish. There may be a budding mathematician or Bull Run reenactor sitting in the last row. And the guy who weeps with joy at the sight of a well-oiled motor will be able to relate to your affection for, say, alligators.

REMEMBER YOUR TRIPLE ROLE

First, to intrigue. Second, to ask thought questions, rather than those requiring only yes or no or single-sentenced answers. Third and last, to inform. Remember, great lessons aren't about dispensing dry facts or even showing students the "errors" in their thinking.

What's far more compelling, for example, than Lincoln's signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 is his painful awareness that the path to civil rights would be neither straightforward nor easy. What's far more compelling than his enduring greatness is his constant depression and his feeling of failure. There's a lot to be learned there.

NEVER TEACH A SUBJECT IN ISOLATION

You'd better be all over the map. Tie in the artistry in math, the sociology in history, the psychology in literature. Shakespeare's plays are all wonderful studies of human behavior. Think about how Lady Macbeth manages to convince her husband to murder the king; she attacks his manhood. And later she drowns in guilt and remorse right along with him.

PLAY WITH A BIT OF OLD-FASHIONED COMPETITION

Like spelling bees. You can have math bees, geography bees, government bees.... Choose teams at random; no stacking of the deck allowed. And if one team is lagging far behind another, you might throw out a freebie, a question so easy that even a three-year-old could answer it. Or else, interject one totally off the subject (“Explain the principle behind mixing an effective pesticide”), then recover and mumble, “Ooops. Wrong list.”

SHOWER YOUR KIDS WITH APPLAUSE AND AFFECTION

No, I don’t mean the physical kind. When someone gives a supremely complete and correct answer, go berserk with joy. It won’t sound corny, not to your grade level. It could be the best memory someone has of the entire year—especially if the class learns to join in.

STRETCH THEIR MINDS

At least once a month schedule a “story” half-hour. Take a chapter from history or an aspect of science/technology that they’re unlikely to hear about until years later, and relate it in an easy-to-follow, soap-opera fashion. You want everyone sitting on the edges of their seats.

A few historical suggestions: The Salem Witch Trials. The Lindbergh Baby’s Kidnapping. JFK’s Assassination.

Scientific/technological options: Early methods of medical intervention, such as bloodletting and the use of leeches and maggots (those last two are seeing a resurgence). The mysteries involved in constructing the Pyramids of Egypt and

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the circular formation at Stonehenge (some authorities suggest that extraterrestrials assisted with both).

IMPRESS UPON YOUR STUDENTS AGAIN AND AGAIN THAT FROM YOU THEY CAN ALWAYS EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

How to do this? By being lovably eccentric, but stopping just short of weird. A sharp intellect, an inquiring mind, and a quick wit are helpful too.

5 Discipline...

CLASSROOM CONTROL IS STILL EDUCATIONAL ROCKET SCIENCE

Meaning that it's the most complex issue any teacher ever faces.

No matter how dedicated and dynamic you are, it does no good whatsoever if your classes won't settle down long enough to listen to you. Yet instruction on how to handle a roomful of young people is still sketchy at best. Education classes still spend far too little time and energy on the thorny topic of classroom management. The reason? There are so few absolutes. It's a science with huge amounts of art thrown in—and therefore to a large extent, *unteachable*.

It has always been thus. Even one-room schoolhouses had plenty of young rowdies. Today's problems may be far more complicated, but misbehaving schoolchildren will always be with us.

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On the other hand, 99% of your problems will be caused by only about 2% of your students. The vast majority will never give you an ounce of trouble. It's that other (smaller) group which will drive you batty.

Ideally, you'd like to pursue a successful teaching career without a single disciplinary incident. Sorry. That won't happen. You may be fortunate enough to have low numbers—but nobody gets away with none. Nobody.

What's more, it's unpredictable. One class will give you its full, respectful attention from Day One. Another is so antsy that it seems borrowed from Bedlam. (That's a British insane asylum from the 1600s whose name has become synonymous with chaos.)

You may never understand why it happens. Becoming a class target has absolutely nothing to do with your age, your size, your gender, or your degree of attractiveness. Kids are equal-opportunity abusers. Old teachers, young teachers, males and females, 230-pound former linebackers, and 90-pound former cheerleaders. We all get more than our share.

Here's the dilemma: Whether or not you seem in charge and hence *unshakable* depends on only one thing: your physical presence. More about that in a few minutes.

As a first-year teacher, I was fortunate enough to discover early on that I didn't have the drill sergeant archetype anywhere inside me. Try as I might to locate him (some of my early memories of barking orders are truly comical; former students still tease me at class reunions), he just wasn't in there.

Discipline

So I switched gears. It was a difficult process, with plenty of setbacks. After all, I'd been trained by the "Don't Smile Until Christmas" generation of mentors. But the kinder, gentler approach eventually won out. Now I can look back and declare proudly that my number of discipline problems over 31 years was relatively small.

And what's more, I'm about to spill all of my secrets. You may not agree with everything I have to say. That's fine. Adopt what's useful. Toss the rest.

Let's start with a few foundational insights.

"CONTROL" ISN'T REALLY THE ISSUE

Ultimately we control only ourselves. So if you find ways to make your classes *want* to behave, to make acting out an exercise in futility, then you're pretty much home free. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It's not. Finding the delicate balance between strong discipline and friendly goodwill involves a huge web of interconnected strategies that take years to develop and eventually become so instinctive that you can't even list the ingredients.

For now, know this: Externally imposed discipline is a mere stopgap. The only kind that lasts is the kind that comes from inside. We must model for our kids how to find that—and how good it feels when we do.

FOR KIDS, SO MUCH SUFFERING COMES FROM FEELING STUPID AND INEPT

THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER CHANCE TO TURN THINGS AROUND—ALWAYS

It's the last day of school. You're sitting at your desk, feverishly grading exams, swilling down tepid coffee, when you hear a tap at your door. The knob turns—and there stands your nemesis, the kid who just spent an entire year sabotaging your carefully crafted lessons.

He tiptoes forward. "I just want to say," he ventures, "that I'm sorry I caused so much trouble. You're really a very good teacher."

You try to be gracious, but a part of you remains stiff-lipped. Why couldn't he have found this kind of maturity and empathy nine months earlier?

Because he wasn't ready yet. And now he is.

And you were instrumental in fostering that change.

I've heard from many kids over the years who've admitted they owed one or more of their teachers sincere gratitude, apologies, or tributes regarding their enormous influences. Do they call? Write? Only rarely. But they think about this person with boundless affection on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis.

Just because you don't hear from your students doesn't mean your efforts were in vain. Just the opposite. Believe me about this. You've done your best.

You *will* be remembered—and cherished.

Afterword

Everyone wants to hear about what makes an inspiring teacher.

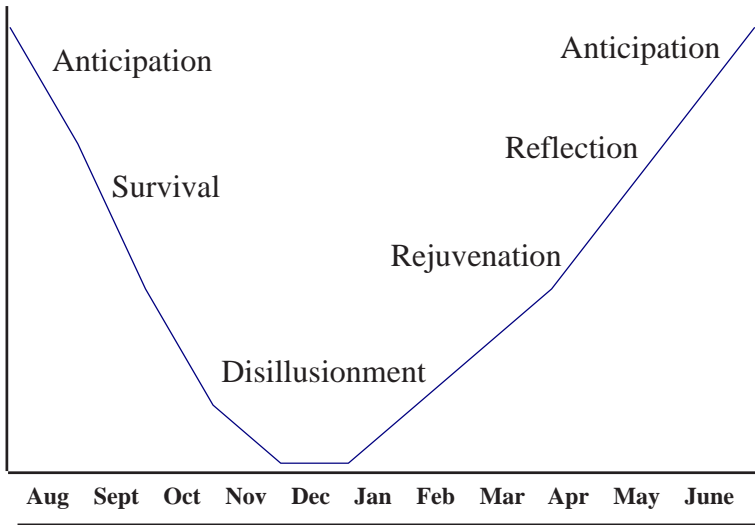
Someone who is competent, caring, and concerned. Hopeful, enthusiastic, and optimistic. Knowledgeable and approachable. Smart and funny—with an instinct for reaching young people and a talent for making them want to know more, learn faster, and become better.

And then he often possesses one or two odd idiosyncrasies which fly directly in the face of all logic. Perhaps a friendly gruffness, an affection for colorful snakes, or an over-the-top repertoire of corny jokes. (Or maybe he prefers large classes.)

It isn't supposed to work. But somehow, for that person, it does. What does this teach our kids? That their own particular brands of lunacy can be equally captivating—and successful.

Can every child be reached, then? I believe that she can. But maybe not by you. Maybe by someone else whose unusual approach just happens to get her attention and suddenly makes her drop all of her defenses.

Attitudes Toward Teaching During First Year¹



Scary picture, isn't it? Well, it doesn't need to be. Each stage is perhaps predictable—but not inevitable.

Although this graph was designed to apply to first-year teachers, you may find yourself riding this same roller coaster several times throughout your career. The trick is not to get stuck for long in the valley of disillusionment. Awareness helps. The knowledge that you aren't alone helps. Developing a strategy which enables you to leapfrog past despair helps. This book offers, I hope, a number of reassuring options. One which I believe to be remarkably effective is a long talk with a veteran teacher who's still smiling.

Meanwhile, try a couple of alternatives. First, do *not* resign while you are in the midst of that disillusionment phase, because it may merely be a form of what I call temporary insanity. So wait. Give yourself a couple of months, perhaps

¹ Graph developed by Dr. Mark Littleton and Dr. Pam Littleton, Tarleton State University