Advice for New Faculty: Six Lessons from the Front Lines

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Teaching can be a daunting profession even for a seasoned veteran. For new faculty members, it can feel like a daily battle just to keep your head above water. So what are some ways that new teachers can ensure not only academic success for their students, but also maintain their own emotional and personal well-being? Below are six lessons learned by two new faculty members who have managed to keep their students learning and their sanity intact:

1. Colleagues Are Your Absolute Best Resource – Do not be afraid to ask for help. Your colleagues, even if they have only been at the school for a few years, already have many experiences, stories, strategies, and tips that can be invaluable to your teaching experience if you are open to experiencing their wisdom. There is no shortage of helpful and experienced faculty in any post-secondary institution. However, the cardinal rule is to pass on this support once you get your feet planted firmly on the ground. Creating a culture of sharing and collaboration is paramount to both your personal success and that of the students in your institution.

2. Professional Development is a Powerhouse of Enlightenment – We cannot stress enough how critical it is to become aware of the professional development available to you at your school. Almost all institutions have a center for faculty development and this is an excellent place to start (Gregory & Cusson, 2013). Your center will be able to find professional development opportunities that fit your individual needs and also provide you information on all upcoming workshops, conferences, etc. Professional development not only improves your teaching practices, it helps you create bonds with other faculty members outside of your school, which can help with our first suggestion: connecting with your colleagues.

3. Set Limits for Yourself and Your Time – It is a difficult balance your first few years of teaching. You want to be the best educator that you can be, but you also need to maintain some semblance of a life as well. With the influx of technology, the boundary between your professional life and your personal life seems to be eroding at a concerning pace. Students expect you to be available to answer their questions at all hours, day or night. When you fail to set boundaries and never unplug from your job, you put yourself on the fast track for burnout. It’s important to establish clear guidelines about communication expectations during the first class and remind students often. It is a good general practice is to respond to emails within 48 hours and return any graded assignments within two weeks.

4. Enthusiasm for Teaching – It’s Contagious! – Don’t try to bluff your students. If you don’t know the answer to a question, it’s OK to say “I don’t know.” Ask a student to look it up, or promise the student that you’ll find out, and bring the answer to the next class. It is these moments that will help facilitate your professional growth. In the meantime, as you strive to become a seasoned educator, you can rely on your enthusiasm for teaching, learning, and knowledge (Burmila, 2011) – a novice educator’s most prized possession! That is, by conveying an energetic disposition in class, it not only enhances the student experience, but it also makes teaching fun (Burmila, 2011).

5. Don’t Be Afraid to Show Your True Colors – Would you describe your classroom as being chilly or warm? These descriptors were used by postsecondary students, in a study completed by Serex (1997), to describe the atmosphere of their programs (Vogt, 2008). What makes a thermometer in a classroom rise? For starters, the classroom must be safe, supportive, and inviting. This means being approachable and accessible; ready to assist students in reaching their academic and personal goals. It also means welcoming student-teacher interactions —
being approachable, smiling, laughing, and joking. Just being yourself requires no effort whatsoever and goes a long way in increasing students’ self-efficacy and grade point average (Vogt, 2008).

6. Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who’s the Best Reflector of Them All? – The benefits of reflecting on one’s own teaching did not really dawn on us until we assumed our roles as college faculty. It was amidst the strongly agrees and disagrees of electronic feedback forms; professional evaluations conducted by our deans; and informal conversations with our esteemed colleagues that we realized that we were indeed reflecting on our teaching practices. It may not be in the formal and philosophical ways ascribed by Donald Schon and John Dewey, but we are now more conscious of our teaching and the importance of reflection to our ongoing professional development.

What would you add to this list? Please share your advice for new faculty in the comment box below.

References
Burmila, E. M. (2011). Graduate Students as Independent Instructors: Seven Things to Know about Teaching Your Own Course while in Graduate School. PS: Political Science & Politics, 44(1), 557-560. doi: 10.1017/S1049096510000806


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