

Life's Little Instruction Book for Overseas Teachers

Every teacher has them, like a cook who acquires a repertoire of foolproof recipes. You know, those *can't miss* activities...

- the ones guaranteed to captivate and motivate and turn the unruly into the purposeful
- the ones whose results end up on the walls on open house night
- the ones that are pulled out for that special observation or demonstration lesson
- the ones where sometimes—if truth be told—the objective and its assessment are fitted to the task at hand (and not vice versa).

One of my “foolproof” lessons was taken from H. Jackson Brown, Jr.’s *Life's Little Instruction Book*. Inviting a group of students to use their collective and individual experience to complete the phrase, “I’ve learned that...” is guaranteed to generate a list that is at times poignant, pithy, and profound—and all of it proof that “kids do say the darnedest things.”

I am an outstanding educator because I don’t regard myself as an outstanding educator. I am not complacent, I want to improve, and I make every effort to help all my students achieve at the highest levels. I rightfully regard teaching as a practicum, to be refined in the crucible of the classroom. Like Mr. Brown and those he quotes, both young and old, I have learned much since I began teaching almost a decade and a half ago. Here are some of those lessons, the ones that make me—and anyone who heeds their wisdom—an effective, efficient, and empathetic educator.

I’ve learned that all students need clear, consistent, and high expectations.

Simply stated, I believe that all students can learn and that I can teach them. At XIS, we used to teach middle school “IT” as a series of disconnected, discrete skills. The IB quite rightly pointed out that this did not match their vision of technology in an MYP school. When I was hired, I was given a mandate to overhaul the tech program. Our new approach initially produced resistance, backlash, and failure. We persevered. The result? During the IB’s return visit, the tech program was cited as exemplary, and student achievement today in tech outstrips other departments.

I’ve learned that classroom management is 80% prevention and 20% reaction.

That’s right, the 80/20 rule. My classroom is designed so that every student knows what he or she should be doing at all times. Room arrangement ensures that I can easily move from one spot to the next. Procedures for most tasks are structured, consistent and reinforced. Students take responsibility for their own (and their peers’) behavior and learning.

I’ve learned that much learning takes place outside the classroom.

Isolated and unconnected learning is meaningless and ineffective. My students, whenever possible, get out of the classroom and apply their knowledge to real-world situations and tasks. I’ve accompanied students to Dalat where we learned about the diversity of Vietnam’s ecosystems, to Cairo to explore the construction of the Pyramids, and to Kanha National Park in India and Chitwan National Park in southern Nepal. This year, our grade 9 and 10 MYP students are designing a sustainable community garden that they’ll plant this spring. Collectively, the upper school teachers at each school helped design and implement curriculum that connected the travel with specific grade level objectives.

I've learned that you can embrace change or resist change, but you can't ignore change.

I've taught elementary, middle and high school students—as well as pre-service teachers in San Francisco State's teacher training program—how to use everyday and specialized software to learn and be more productive. Too often, though, technology is viewed merely as a means to automate routine everyday tasks. Most schools today aren't much differently than schools 50 or even 100 years. Where we went to the library in years past, now we go online and “google” a topic. We project YouTube videos from our computer instead of 8 mm film reels. We have fewer messages in our teacher's box and far more in our email inbox. The library is bigger, the tools are more convenient or faster...but the activities remain the same. Gary Stager wrote that “any teacher who thinks they can be replaced by a computer probably should be.” The trick is to find ways to innovate and ultimately transform the way that we teach, using the unique abilities of both teachers and technology.

I've learned that if you don't keep students busy, they'll keep you busy.

Students have no free time in my classes, and neither do I. Lessons are planned with clear objectives, and students are told what they are going to learn and why. Busy does not mean “busy work,” though. Last year we have examined various aspects of school design and operation as we sought to answer the question, “What does it mean to be Green?” At all times I urge students to ask and answer the question posed on a large poster over the front door of our classroom: “Why are we doing this?”

I've learned that you have to get to parents before they get to you.

Teacher-parent communication should never be “us versus them,” but, rather, “we're all in this together.” My first phone call home is always positive, to each student's parents at the beginning of the year. At XIS we use FirstClass, where I post assignments and resources on an online class calendar that is mirrored to my school website, so parents have the same access that students do. At XIS and at earlier schools, I maintained a website on which all assignments are posted, along with other information that can help students and parents be better informed about our classes. And, by creating a username and password for each parent, I was able to share each student's achievement in real time.

I've learned that a student's attention span (and a teacher's, too!) is about as many minutes long as their age in years.

Students need to move, and instruction must be varied! I have taught within a full or modified block lesson format for several years now, and the conventional wisdom is that longer periods of instruction provide greater opportunity for in-depth exploration of topics. Counter-intuitively, I believe that the opposite is more often true: that longer blocks require more time for review and demand a greater number of shorter “chunks” of instruction. Every lesson, regardless of its objective, must contain opportunities for movement. My students have the simple dictum that they must “help others (and themselves) to learn”; accordingly, they are free to eat, drink, and work anywhere, provided that they are actively engaged in learning.

I've learned that my subject area is just a small part of what I teach.

Spike Lee said it best: "Do the Right Thing." Service learning—curriculum that at once enhances learning and makes our world a better place—is the essence of meaningful education and a necessary part of any curriculum. This year our upper school students are leveraging the knowledge and expertise that they have gained in their MYP and DP to help make their CAS and C&S activities more meaningful. Those actions, along with the reflection that accompanies them, have reshaped their idea of what they can and should do to make their world a better place.

I've learned that school is not always uppermost in an adolescent's mind...and that's as it should be!

Evolutionary biology tells us that the need to feel safe and connected precedes any cognitive activity like learning. My ability to connect with students is one of my greatest strengths as a teacher. I learn their names in the first 20 minutes of the first day of school—not to show off my prodigious memory, but because addressing someone by their name is one of the most powerful ways to make them feel accepted and comfortable. Even years later, I greet every student that I see by name. In the classroom, I smile. I talk to students as I would to a friend. I don't yell, and I don't tolerate putdowns. Most importantly, I listen to them. Students learn from what you do, not from what you say. I care about my students and model the behavior that communicates that caring to them.