



Being a Teacher is More Than Just a Job

by **Susan T. Rice**

YOU WANT TO BE A TEACHER, but have you thought about what that means? It's more than just creating engaging lessons and guiding students toward that aha moment. Being a teacher also means being a professional and a role model for your students. What does that mean for you, the student who plans to be a teacher? Odds are that you're already in classrooms, working with teachers to present lessons, develop learning stations, or assist in other ways. Do you realize that students are looking up to you even now?

You're already a role model, whether you're ready or not. However, being a professional doesn't mean you have to wear glasses, dress like your grandparents, or not smile until December. Here are a few things for you to consider about your professional image as you step into the classroom.

Attitude. Abraham Lincoln once said, "A man is about as happy as he makes up his mind to be." You have made up your mind that you want to teach. So isn't this something that you should be positive about? In fact, you should be enthusiastic, ecstatic, and maybe even jumping for joy because you have

started down the path of being a teacher. I will bet that your teachers once felt that way, too. By the time you are in high school, you have come in contact with the entire spectrum of teachers, from poor to great. Those that you remember as great are the ones that still have a positive attitude about teaching. Having a positive attitude is always your choice, and it is a choice you make every day. Being a professional means that you don't let the negative feelings of others determine how you feel. The reason you are going to teach is because you want to make a difference, not because you get time off in June, July, and August. Be positive about your career and your students.

Civility. This sounds like an old-fashioned word, but its meaning is important for teachers to consider. Civility includes actions such as paying attention, acknowledging others, and speaking kindly. According to *Choosing Civility: The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct* by P.M. Forni, it also encompasses personal responsibility, such as accepting and giving constructive criticism and taking responsibility and blame when appropriate, rather than shifting them to others.

Along with this, remember that each of your students has a story, one that goes beyond the minutes you spend with them each day. Teachers often assume that students lead lives similar to theirs, but many don't. They may be hungry or unwanted or have an ill sibling or unemployed parents. A teacher rarely knows what a child goes through before entering the classroom. Treat each student with civility.

Manners. Everything you do in your class will be mimicked, especially when you do something wrong, so always model good manners. In college, I had one professor who stood outside his door each day to shake our hands and greet us. He made us all feel important and respected. Surprise your students by doing the same. Learn their names and use them inside and outside the classroom. Treat every student with respect, and don't talk down to them.

Listen. Never make fun of them. Say please and thank you. Don't talk about students or other teachers. Don't participate in gossip. Stop whatever you are doing and deal with unkind actions, intolerance, or bullying. Use breath mints!

Preparation. Willy is an FEA member who told me about his first classroom experience. He had spent hours preparing his lesson and felt like nothing could go wrong. He said he was so proud that the students seemed interested and really liked the activity. He knew it was a successful lesson, and then he looked at the clock. His 50-minute prepared lesson had only taken 15 minutes. What happened to Willy that day happens to many teachers. It is amazing how much time it takes to prepare each lesson, and it usually takes at least twice as much time to prepare it as it will to deliver it. Never think you can wing it. No matter how much you know about

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the subject or even if you have taught for 100 years, you must be ready each day. Before each class, read over the outline of your lesson, and check to make sure you have all the materials you need and that you can operate the equipment you will use. Always have a backup of short activities or discussion points in case you have extra time.

Engagement. When preparing your lesson plan, answer two questions: 1) Would I enjoy doing this?, and 2) Is it relevant? If the answer to either question is no, throw it away and start over. If you thought, "It doesn't have to be fun. School is about learning, not entertainment," jump ship now before it is too late. Your job is to make learning interesting, engage students' minds, and help them to want to learn, not just to provide the material. Take the time to learn about your students to make your assignments relevant to them. Develop the material: If the students are really interested in the subject, spend more time on it and dig deeper. If the class grasps an idea quickly, move on. No one wants to be bored at school. Let students become problem solvers and give them assignments that have an end product that proves they understand the concepts, principles, or ideas enough to have developed the product. Make sure that you have an answer to the often-asked question, "Why do I have to learn this?" other than that it's a required course. Offer students examples of how they can use the material in real life. This is not an easy task, but no one ever said teaching was easy.

Appearance. For years, I have had the opportunity of taking students to state and national meetings. I have watched them transform in front of my eyes when they are in their professional clothes. It's a bit like watching a child put on a cowboy hat and boots: His voice gets a little deeper, his stride becomes longer, and he acts a little tougher. I have watched the same type of transformation as each student puts his arm through the sleeve of a blazer, straightens his back, and changes from student to professional. When you are dressed up, you act better, you have better manners, and you speak more confidently. Maybe it is a form of playing dress up, and you are becoming a teacher as you put on your professional clothes. When you walk into the classroom, how will the students know that you are the teacher? Like it or not, your outer appearance is the first impression you make. What does your choice of clothes say about you and your profession? If the answer isn't positive, try these suggestions.

1. Research the dress code of several school systems and the school in which you will be doing your observations.
2. Kick it up a notch. If the schools require a collared shirt, wear a tie. If it states no sleeveless shirts, then wear a jacket.

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3. Observe how teachers dress and decide which you think are dressed the most professionally.
4. Wear something that makes you feel comfortable and confident.

Lifelong learning. Remember that each day is an opportunity to learn. As you prepare each lesson, you will learn more about the subject. You will find interesting tidbits that you will be excited to share with your students. Search for relevant examples to keep them interested, and make certain that your information is current. If you teach only what is in a textbook, the facts may have become outdated the day they were printed. As you deliver your lessons, take the time to listen to your students and observe them. They are great resources. They will know about the latest in technology, and some will probably own the newest devices. They will hear conversations at home about the economy, careers, or fashion that may relate to your lesson, so give them an opportunity to share and learn from them.

You can also learn from the best teachers. Discover what your favorite teacher does to make class interesting. Notice what works and what doesn't in the classroom. Observe the strategies or techniques they use to motivate students. Determine how you could make it even better. Don't become a teacher who teaches the same way and the same thing for 30 years. New ideas and information can pump you up and add value to what you do.

Community. It may come as a complete surprise to you, but teachers don't live in the classroom closet. They go to movies and grocery stores, and some even take Zumba classes. Not only do they live normal lives, but they are part of the community. As a teacher, it is important to understand what is happening in your community, what the job market is like, what new businesses are coming to town, what stores are closing, and most importantly, how these things will affect your students. Becoming involved in your community is part of being an FEA member, and you can get started now. Your FEA

chapter can do a community service project, read to the elderly, or provide tutoring services. Your imagination is the only limit to what you can do for your community. Get involved, and stay involved. You widen your network when you join community organizations, giving you more people to call on as resources if you need guest speakers or community members to serve on advisory boards. It also gives people outside the educational arena a positive view of teachers.

Being a professional is a mindset and the actions that spring from it, rather than just a list of dos and don'ts. It isn't something that comes automatically when you walk through the classroom door. Being a professional is something that affects your outlook and the way in which other people — including your students — perceive you. You can start now to be aware of what professionalism is, cultivate its different aspects, and make it your own. Remember that when you say, "I am a teacher," it is not just what you do, but who you are. ☺☺



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