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# I Need to Know, but I'm too Embarrassed to Ask

Nancy Orr Elliott

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How do I set up my grade book? Does every grade have to carry the same weight? Why didn't someone tell me how to deal with students' crushes on the teacher? What are teachers REALLY paid? What do I include in my portfolio, and what do I remove? How do I determine and establish expectations for high quality work in my classroom?

As preservice and new teachers enter the classroom, their questions are often some of the same ones we veterans wrestled with many years ago, but through the years we may have forgotten the struggles we had with these issues. In October the MCTE Fall Conference hosted a session dealing with questions new teachers need answered but are too embarrassed to ask. The nearly one hundred participants in this session wrote their questions on index cards so that they would feel comfortable asking them.

## The Questions

The questions fell into three major categories: classroom management and administration, content and methods, and job search strategies. The list of questions follows and may provide interesting discussion in methods classes or may provide some substance for dialogue between established teachers and new staff members.

### Classroom Management

In the area of classroom management and administration, the participants posed the following questions:

- How do I deal with a student's crush on me?
- What do I do when discipline problems take up more attention or time than the content area material?
- How do I motivate students to take some pride in their work rather than just "turn stuff in"?
- What is the best method for dealing with and communicating with parent who are unable to read

or write (non-English speakers or parents without the skills)?

- What is the best way to sell the idea of Whole Language to parents whose first question is "How many points is this worth?"
- How can I de-emphasize an intrinsic value when I release my students into a society where money/salary are among the first and easiest ways to "judge" something/someone?
- What do I do when a parent or administrator objects to a book I want to teach?
- What do I do if a student is reading an "inappropriate" book in my class during free-reading time?
- What is the best approach to dealing with threats of violence by students? Immediate, on-the-spot threats?
- What is a good approach to take with an unpleasant teacher/student or teacher/parent conference?
- How do I handle a parent who does not want to hear that her/his child is struggling in some area of school?
- How can the State of Michigan insist that teachers take the very subjective MCCT English exam?

### Content and Methods

Nuts and bolts, content-related and methods questions also were posed during the session:

- How do I set up a grade book?
- How do I plan for a week/semester/year?
- What role does "quality" play in assessment? How is quality defined?
- What do I do when the students have more literary experience (they've read more) than I have?
- Where do teachers get their materials (grade books, posters, attendance logs, and so forth)?
- How much does the average teacher spend in a year in his/her own classroom on extra materials?
- How do I deal with children who are at various learning levels in terms of making the lessons ben-

official to all students?

- How can I find ways to be sure to address different types of learning styles (kinesthetic, visual, and so forth) equally?

- Is it fair to evaluate creative writing when we are trying to encourage students to write from within themselves? For example, if we grade them down because we don't like their style, isn't that forcing one form of writing on them when the assignment is supposed to be creative and individualistic?

- How do I organize the curriculum for the year?
- Is the reader-response approach good for beginning teachers to use?

- Should I teach books that I have little experience with but like personally?

- How do I deal with a class setting where a few students don't understand the material but the rest of the students are ready to go on to the next level?

- What should a new teacher do about planning his/her first lesson plan?

- What types of things should be included in a lesson plan?

- How should I adjust when I am expected to teach twelfth-grade students who write at a ninth-grade level?

- How do I handle this situation: When a paraprofessional acts like the teacher or treats the children with bad tones in her/his voice or disciplines in a way that doesn't agree with my philosophy, making a child feel negative. What steps can I take to change this negative attitude in my classroom without hurting anyone's feelings?

- What Shakespearean plays do I teach seventh through ninth graders?

- What kinds of concerns can I anticipate with trying to introduce new literature (items not on "the list")?

- How do I avoid feeling "stupid" if I don't know the answer to a student's "obvious" question?

## **Job Search Strategies**

Other questions dealt with their job search:

- How do I begin a job search? What kinds of things do I need to know to do this?

- As I begin a job search, what types of things should I be alert to as far as benefits, etc.?

- What are the disadvantages of switching districts? Do I lose benefits?

- How do districts differ?

- What are some possible interview questions?

- Can I have too much information in my resume or portfolio? If everything is related to kids, volunteering, teaching, and so forth, should I keep it all on the resume, even if it runs two or three pages?

- Is every teacher required to join the union?

- What is tenure, how do I get it, and what does it do for me?

- How often are teacher contracts negotiated?

- Are teachers paid twelve months of the year?

- What is REALLY the beginning salary of new teachers?

## **Teachers Need To Share Information**

Content and theoretical pedagogy are vitally important parts of any teacher education or mentoring program, but so often we forget to share with new or prospective teachers those things that make the classroom run smoothly so that they can most effectively use the content and theory.

Some teachers who have taught several years have still never really looked at the grade book as a means of focusing on what is most important for students to learn. Recently an embarrassed teacher who had successfully taught for four years approached me and asked how a teacher can make assignments worth different values, and since then, a second successful teacher raised the same question. We often lead beginning teachers to believe that these types of problems can be solved with common sense, but for newcomers in the field, there is no frame of reference from which to draw "common sense."

If a teacher struggles with classroom management, nuts and bolts organization and methods, and at the outset, how to find a job, he or she has less time and energy to focus on teaching students. Also, if teachers leave a teacher education program believing that some of these questions have "obvious" answers, they may not feel comfortable exploring other ways to approach a task or a classroom situation.

Teachers learn all aspects of teaching through experience and dialogue, and new teachers need to know that each of us constantly questions and seeks new ways to deal with even the most mundane problems. This is the best knowledge we can share with our newest colleagues.

## **About the author**

Nancy Elliott, a frequent conference presenter and former adjunct teacher ed. instructor at Saginaw Valley State University, teaches English at Ubley High School.