

Lay the Seven Foundations of Successful Teaching

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Recently, a reporter asked a remarkably successful business entrepreneur the secret to her success. She revealed that she had built her business using seven fundamental rules. Her recommendation? No matter what your personal business style, no matter how you operate your business or no matter what your business is, you should never stray from these fundamentals.

Since education is my business, the students are my clients, and knowledge and skills are the goods I offer, I modified this entrepreneur's list to fit the teaching profession and posted this list in my office. If these fundamentals worked for an extremely successful businesswoman, I reasoned, shouldn't they work for me as well? The answer is a resounding yes.

Always follow through

Say what you're going to do. Stick to the syllabus and your promised grading scale. Return papers when you say you will. Keep your office hours, and come to class on time. If you don't keep your promises and meet your own deadlines, how can you expect students to keep and meet theirs? Set an example. After all, the students are there to learn from you.

Be positive and keep company with positive co-workers

Negativity can lower classroom moral and lessen your stamina. You set the emotional tone for your class; therefore, your students won't have a good attitude about your class if you don't.

Positive colleagues can boost your moral as well as offer positive solutions to classroom problems. Also, because you might spend much of your time in the classroom, you'll tend to be isolated from colleagues. Keep up your professional and social networks with your coworkers. You'll benefit from their emotional support as well as fresh teaching ideas.

Never say anything negative about a student or coworker in front of a student

Be careful of who's listening to what you're saying. Venting in private about a student or coworker to a trusted colleague is one matter, but complaining about a student or coworker around or to students is another. In the Student's eyes, this behavior undermines your professionalism as well as the credibility of yourself and other faculty. Students will be less likely to listen to and learn from those they don't respect. Also, students suspect their instructor might say unfavorable things about them to others as well.

Nurture the now

When the current term becomes wearying, it's inviting to abandon the now and start to live in the future by diverting energy to the planning of future lessons and the meeting of a new group of students. Shifting your focus away from what seems to be a transitory relationship is always tempting. Remember that even though students come and go, your efforts are not wasted by focusing on the students in your care now. If students sense your inattention to them, who can blame them for losing interest in your class. Even though they're with you for a short time, what they learn from you stays with them for a lifetime.

Check your personal value hierarchy

What is your highest value? Being a parent, sibling, friend, etc.? How do these more permanent relationships compare in value to a job that could be gone tomorrow? My personal life recharges my batteries for work, not vice-versa. How about you? How can you keep your enthusiasm high?

Be personal

Of course, you want to act like a professional around your students, but good teaching is about building good relationships. Students are motivated to do well when you take an interest in them. Remember their names and get to know them. Recall the little details they share about their personal lives. When they return from an illness, ask how they're feeling. Share a bit about yourself: hobbies, a good joke, or professional interests and practical-job experiences. Also, establishing a relationship can give you a leadership advantage with a potentially problem student.

Be creative about rejection and negative feedback

Learn from your mistakes. If students seem bored in class, don't despair; get feedback and make changes. Learn from unfavorable evaluations rather than beating yourself over the head with them. Negative comments and evaluations aren't predictors for the future, they're springboards for change. Keep a sense of humor and look forward to improving semester after semester.