Essential Skills for New Teachers

Without access to the pedagogical skills of veteran teachers, many new teachers are unprepared to face the challenges of the classroom.

H. Jerome Freiberg

New teachers are often limited in their repertoire of instructional strategies. Many teachers enter the teaching field directly from university teacher preparation programs, where they mastered minimal pedagogical knowledge or skills. Often, they are not taught how to establish the positive, organized learning environment necessary for them to teach and for students to learn. Some teachers enter the field with almost no formal teacher training, through alternative certificate programs. For example, under the 2001 “Teach for Georgia” plan, college graduates with a 2.5 or higher grade point average may be certified to teach in 30 days (Coburn, 2001).

Through trial and error, new teachers develop a repertoire of teaching strategies. This haphazard process of strategy development may take several years—by which time many struggling, unprepared new teachers have already left the classroom. In addition, most of the national curriculum standards expect teachers to create active learning environments that stimulate higher-level student thinking—yet few teachers have experienced instruction in such settings. Without high-quality prepara-
tion to ready them for the challenges of
the classroom, new teachers will either
teach as they have been taught, or,
given current teacher attrition trends,
they won’t teach at all. If we are to keep
quality teachers, those newest to the
profession must be given the support
system of pedagogical knowledge that
they need to succeed in the classroom.

A Framework of Skills
Professional development for new
teachers should be built on a framework
of research-based instructional strategies
(Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000). These skills
help new teachers bridge theory and
practice and create high-quality learning
environments in their classrooms. The
strategies fall into three categories:
organizing, instructing, and assessing.

Organizing Strategies
Organizing strategies include planning,
lesson design, time use (time manage-
ment, time on task, and pacing, for
example), advancework, and classroom
management. I will focus on a few of
these strategies—planning, advance-
work, and classroom management.

New teachers usually find organizing
strategies the most difficult to master.
From planning to classroom manage-
ment, organizing strategies are hidden
from most classroom observations.
Consequently, the student teacher,
intern, or new teacher who observes a
master teacher’s classroom in the
middle of the year often misses the
advancework and classroom manage-
ment strategies that the master teacher
used during the first few days of school
to set the tone for a positive learning
environment. The novice teacher
observing a veteran teacher’s classroom
sees the outcome of effective plan-
ing—a smoothly functioning lesson—
but is not privy to the veteran teacher’s
lesson planning processes. Organizing
strategies help create the necessary
conditions for learning—and teachers
can acquire these skills systematically
rather than depending on trial and
error.

New teachers usually find
organizing strategies the
most difficult to master.

Planning. New teachers spend much
more time planning instruction than
their veteran counterparts do, often
staying up late at night to plan the next
day’s lesson. Mentors can help new
teachers with instructional planning—
particularly unit planning, which allows
the novice to see the bigger picture and
plan backward from the end of the unit.
During instructional planning, veteran
teachers make decisions on the basis of
learner, content, and context: Who are
my learners? What information, ideas,
and concepts do I want my students to
grasp? Under what conditions will
instruction occur?

Complete lesson planning comprises
four components: initial, active, in-
flight, and follow-up planning. During
initial planning, teachers visualize the
lesson—that is, they think through the
lesson, anticipating their teaching and
the students’ responses. Active planning
involves pulling together materials and
resources for the lesson. Figure 1 illus-
trates the initial and active planning
involved in creating a lesson.

Whereas initial and active planning
occur before teachers present the
lesson, in-flight planning occurs during
the lesson and usually reflects changes
in the day, such as a fire drill or a last-
minute adjustment in the school
schedule. In-flight planning also
involves being able to change the lesson
on the fly for more substantive
reasons—when students aren’t engaged
in the activity, for example. Experi-
enced teachers recognize the need for
in-flight lesson corrections and can
draw from a repertoire of strategies to
make such modifications. During
follow-up planning, teachers reflect on
the lesson and write down what went
well and what changes they need to
make. Follow-up planning is crucial for
new teachers to build an instructional
repertoire for future lessons.

Advancework. It is difficult to teach
those you don’t know or work in an
environment in which you are an outsider. Freiberg and Driscoll (2000) use the term *advancework* to describe what teachers do to get to know their students, the school, and the community in which they teach.

Many teachers live outside the communities in which they teach, particularly in urban schools. As a new teacher, I also lived outside the school’s community—but I shopped there, had my car repaired and purchased gas near the school, had my hair cut at the local barbershop, and patronized the neighborhood bakery. I met many of my students and their parents in the community. Through involvement in the neighborhood, I became a member of the community rather than a tourist in it. Through gathering information about the school’s neighborhood and climate, examining school resources and other materials, and getting to know the learners, *advancework* helps teachers establish a context for teaching and learning (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000).

*Classroom management*. Good classroom management is nearly invisible. When classes are poorly managed, however, disorder and chaos steal time from learning and exhaust the teacher. Poor management can lead to student discipline problems, and sustained student misbehavior often inhibits teachers from using the engaging, interactive instructional approaches that foster student achievement and active learning, including cooperative grouping, learning centers, projects, experiments, and the use of manipulatives (Brophy, 1999; Cohen, 1994; Freiberg, Connell, & Lorentz, 2001).

Classroom management is more than discipline. It involves, among other things, the development of classroom rules and rational consequences for breaking them. Classroom management also can be measured by the seamless flow of papers between the students and the teacher, by the extent to which social justice triumphs over the “teacher’s pet” concept, and by a teacher’s ability to share control and promote student self-discipline.

**Instructing Strategies**

Cuban (1990) noted that the education reform of the past century has swung like a pendulum between an emphasis on teacher-centered and student-centered learning. In fact, instructional strategies exist on a continuum from most teacher-centered to most student-centered: lecture, demonstration, questioning, discussion, guided practice, independent practice, grouping, role play, simulation, and reflective inquiry (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000). During a lecture, the teacher is the source of knowledge. By contrast, such student-focused activities as role play or reflective inquiry depend more on students as the sources of knowledge.

New teachers are most familiar with teacher-centered instructional strategies and often revert to them when under pressure. The good news is that, with time and experience, teachers can learn to use more student-centered instructional approaches. For example, teachers can begin to incorporate more student-directed approaches by following lectures with 2–3 minute student-to-student discussions about the information or issues presented during the lecture. Eventually teachers can incorporate cooperative learning structures, student research projects, and inquiry lessons that require students to seek knowledge from sources other than the textbook or the teacher.

**Assessing Strategies**

Effective teachers assess both student learning and their own professional learning. New teachers struggle with both types of assessment.

*Student assessment*. Most new teachers have a limited repertoire of assessing strategies and few prior experiences...
Teacher professional development should be built on a framework of research-based instructional strategies.

- Use more specific praise
- Stop saying OK and all right
- Do this self-assessment more often to examine and assess progress. (Planje, personal communication, Fall 1996)

Planje continued to audiotape her classroom and analyze the results. She gained insights into her teaching through self-assessment and credited a successful first year—and a nomination by her superintendent for a national award as the district's best first-year teacher—to her new understanding.

What can schools do to ensure new teachers' success? In addition to providing novices with mentors, schools can

- Gear "just in time" staff development to the immediate pedagogical needs of new teachers—for example, offer training that provides teaching strategies to help them get started at the beginning of the school year. Regular follow-up workshops should be scheduled as needs arise.
- Implement new teacher summer academies that provide intensive weeklong instruction in teaching and learning. Embedded in such instruction should be opportunities for self-assessment—audiotaped lesson simulations, for example—as well as mentoring support and feedback.
- Collaborate with leaders of teacher preparation and alternative certification programs to codevelop methods courses for new teachers.
- Design an online library of veteran teachers' lesson plans that new teachers can access for ideas and instructional development.
- Establish a confidential "help line" to answer new teachers' questions.

with alternative assessment. Even maintaining student grades (in a gradebook or with grading software) is an unknown quantity to first-year teachers and is rarely taught in college methods courses or new teacher inservice training. Novice teachers must explore formal and informal measures of learning and practice constructing various assessments.

Most new teachers only have experience with the assessment measures that their teachers used when they were students: multiple choice, true/false, and short-answer essay tests. Assessing strategies, like instructing strategies, require a range of options to reflect students' diverse learning abilities—from rubrics that provide standards against which students can measure their work to portfolios that include pre- and post-activity student writing.

Self-assessment. Teachers rarely receive ongoing feedback about their teaching. Accurate feedback is a crucial component of instructional change, but teachers are dependent on others to supply the necessary data to answer the question, How am I doing? The typical teacher observation model, in which an administrator observes a teacher in his or her classroom a few times a year, leaves much to be desired.

Assessing oneself as a teacher is a highly inexact science. Teachers can glean information from a variety of sources, including student feedback and technology—audiotaping a class and then analyzing the lesson, for example. During a weeklong summer academy that I developed for teachers, Christina Planje, a first-year high school biology teacher, taught a simulated class and taped the lesson. After analyzing the lesson using a low-inference self-assessment measure (Freiberg, 1987; Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000), Planje determined that she needed to

- Allow more wait time for students to respond to higher-level questions
- Ask a question, leave time, and then call on a student
- Allow more student questions and feedback
- Narrow the topic
- Fully review previous concepts and tie this new lesson in with previous lessons

ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT 59
When professors, principals, and mentor teachers expose novice educators to the framework of essential teacher skills—organizing, instructing, and assessing—new teachers can build pedagogical repertoires as rich as those of the best veteran teachers—in less time. Such training may be the crucial factor that helps more new teachers succeed and remain in the profession.


References


Author's note: This article is based on Freiberg and Driscoll, Universal Teaching Strategies, 3rd ed. (Allyn and Bacon, 2000).

Copyright © 2002 H. Jerome Freiberg.

H. Jerome Freiberg is the John & Rebecca Moores University Professor and founder of Consistency Management & Cooperative Discipline (www.coe.uh.edu/cmcdd) at the University of Houston; freiberg@mail.uh.edu.