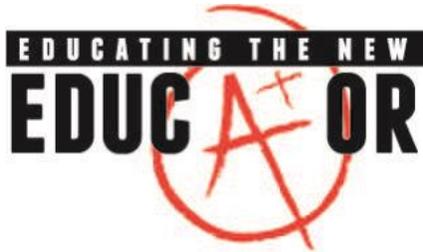


# Tips for Student Teachers from Former Student Teachers

by [Nick Jaworski](#) · July 16, 2012

*“Student teaching is probably the hardest time in a lot of young educators’ lives. It marks the beginning of the single biggest change they’re going to experience.”*



Recently, I asked a handful of recent student teachers and young music educators to reflect on their own student teaching experiences in the hopes that they would provide some insight into how to get the most out of it. While definitely not all-encompassing, their reflections and advice are invaluable and I hope that future student teachers take them to heart.

## **Before you student teach:**

### **Seek out teaching opportunities before student teaching.**

While there is no avoiding the awkward transition from full-time college student to professional teacher that is the student teaching experience, you will be best served if you seek out opportunities to teach early and often during your undergraduate career. Yes, these early teaching experiences will help you practice and refine your teaching strategies, but they will also provide you with opportunities to practice being in front of young people. Private lessons are a great start, but try to find situations that allow you to be in front of groups of children. This will give you the chance to understand the most effective ways to interact with young musicians. Music teachers in your area are always in need of quality help. Simply send them an email and ask if you can come help out on a consistent basis. There is simply no substitute for experience.

### **Get in touch with your cooperating teacher as early as possible.**

As soon as possible, try to meet your cooperating teacher and begin the process of developing a positive professional relationship with him or her. Of course, many music departments have more than one music teacher on staff, so it is important that you try and develop good relationships with all of the teachers around you. Early in this “getting to know each other” process, try to ascertain what responsibilities you can expect to have while student teaching. It is not uncommon for a pre-service teacher to essentially take over the teaching responsibilities for an ensemble or class (music theory or music technology, for example). As soon as you find out what your responsibilities are, attempt to get your hand on as many materials as possible so that

you'll be ready to teach on day one. Not only will this impress your cooperating teacher, but it will mean that your students will be getting the quality educational experience that they deserve.

### **Start acquiring teacher clothes early.**

This might seem a bit specific, but trying to purchase a teacher wardrobe in the month before you start student teaching can be expensive and stressful. If you plan a year or two ahead and ask for teacher clothes for birthdays and holidays, you'll have more than enough to wear in no time.

### **Clear your calendar & save your money.**

Even if your cooperating teacher says that you have no after-school commitments (which is highly unlikely), make sure you have as few evening conflicts as possible. Student teaching is going to make you mentally and physically exhausted. You need as much time to both recover from your current day and plan for the next one as possible. Participating in collegiate ensembles may be fun, but keep in mind that student teaching is an entirely new experience that will wear you out. As far as part-time jobs go, obviously some people aren't in a position to leave their job, but perhaps by planning ahead and saving money, you can minimize the amount of hours you will need to work.

### **Have a "pedagogy boot camp".**

When you get a chance (perhaps after finals and before student teaching), take a couple of weeks where you spend 2-3 hours per day simply reviewing and reflecting on all of the important pedagogical concepts that you imagine you'll need during student teaching. But taking the time to remind yourself of the things you may have forgotten, you'll be more effective in the classroom from day one – which allows you to focus on other important concepts that you still need to learn.

## **During Student Teaching: The Easy(ish) List**

### **Get plenty of sleep.**

When I started my teaching career, someone once told me, "It's not getting up early that is difficult – you get used to that. It's going to bed early – that's the hard part." He couldn't have been more right. I had spent years starting homework after The Daily Show and, while that's fine when you don't have class until 10 AM and can take a nap in the middle of the day, it simply won't work when you have to wake up before 6 AM and then be at your best in front of large groups of people. Start practicing going to bed early and then keep a consistent bedtime.

### **Work ahead as much as possible.**

If you know you're going to be teaching a lesson on rhythm or conducting a specific piece, get working on it right away. This will limit the amount of stress you encounter throughout student teaching. Develop this habit during student teaching and you'll find your professional career much less stressful.

### **Try everything your cooperating teacher suggests at least once.**

There are going to be moments when your cooperating teacher gives you a suggestion that you may not agree with. It would be in your best interest to give it a shot anyway. This is true for a couple of reasons. First, it might actually work! The cooperating teacher is going to know their students better than you do and they've had more time to develop teaching strategies that work. Secondly, by trying every suggestion, you show the cooperating teacher that you trust them. This will be received positively and will only serve to create a stronger mentor/mentee relationship.

### **If you don't understand something, ask.**

These questions can range from the simple, "Where does this piece of paper go?" to the more complex, "Why am I teaching this concept?" Whatever the question is, do not be afraid to ask clarifying questions anytime that you are confused. By asking questions early, you'll be able to put yourself in the best position possible to succeed and then built on that success.

## **The not-so-easy list**

### **Accept failure.**

Not everything is going to go the way you planned it. In fact, when you start student teaching, most things won't! It is your job to recognize that through failure you grow as a teacher.

### **Be open with your cooperating teacher.**

If there are things in your life that are proving to be difficult and you feel that they are getting in the way of your teaching, you might consider sharing the problem with your cooperating teacher. Now, this does not apply to minor issues like you didn't get enough sleep the night before or you forgot to DVR American Idol. This step applies to issues related to your health or home life that are impacting your ability to fully commit and focus on student teaching. As one young educator said to me, "If s\*\*\* is happening to you, you have to tell your co-op." The idea is that life happens and sometimes there's nothing we can do about it. If you find yourself in a situation where your teaching is being impacted by your personal life, you should find a way to communicate that to your cooperating teacher.

### **As much as you may love your students, they are "not yours".**

Overall, the way your students behave while you're in front of them is a reflection of your cooperating teacher – not you. For many undergrads who student teach with a successful large ensemble, this is especially true. More often than not, you will learn simply how to maintain the classroom environment of your cooperating teacher. There is no doubt that this knowledge is very valuable. However, what you probably won't see is the process the teacher went through to establish those classroom expectations. That takes time and experience. With this in mind, be aware that some of the techniques the cooperating teacher will work with your teacher personality and beliefs – others won't. Take lots of notes, try everything out, and then realize that you'll be starting from scratch at your first job.

For the record, this is also true for programs where student focus is limited. Your inability to gain control of a classroom that has little control to begin with should not be how you gauge your success as a teacher. You simply won't be able to transform a classroom culture in 16 weeks, especially as the student teacher. Learn what you can and...

### **Enjoy the small victories.**

As mentioned earlier, failure is a part of the learning process – this is as true for you as it is for your students. With that in mind, you need to remember the little moments that went according to plan and enjoy them. This is easier said than done, for sure, but it's very important. In a day of mixed results, it can be easy to forget that you probably had a ton of small victories along the way. Do whatever you can to remember those moments and reflect on what made them successful.

### **Your student teaching peers are going through the same things you are.**

Sometimes you talk to your student teaching friends and all you hear is how great everything is going. While things are probably going pretty well, often times student teachers feel that sharing the "failures" is a sign of weakness. This is simply not true! By recognizing the areas in which you need to improve, you can start the process of actually improving. Be open and honest with your peers. In the long run, it will benefit all of you.

All in all, student teaching is a time of great change and challenge. Keep in mind that the time is fleeting – grab as much knowledge and experiences as you can! There will be successes and failures, it's simply the nature of the beast and it's what makes student teaching so rewarding. Good luck out there!