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Making that Transition

By Leslie D. Fehl

Where is that teachers' manual when you need it? I have asked myself that question numerous times during my two years of teaching dental assisting. How does one know the no-no's when instructing a class of young to mature adults in a vocational setting? From what I have learned thus far, by trial and error.

Not knowing what is to be expected, prior to accepting a teaching position baffled me. I am a superb dental assistant of fifteen years. I have trained numerous assistants, but the role of a vocational educator is not what I expected. In fact, I did not know to ask the right questions about being a vocational teacher. I was given the course outlines and syllabus and basically I was on my own. Don't get me wrong, I had much support by my supervisor and fellow educators, but on how to conduct my class in a manner that is successful, I was sink or swim and I did a lot of bobbing.

My first semester teaching, I had 23 students ranging from seventeen years of age to forty-five. This particular class I had many strong personalities to contend with, not to mention the preparation of lectures and class activities for this many students. To me that was a lot of students!

First day of class. Shaking uncontrollably for the first hour. My voice trembled. I kept thinking to myself.... please don't let anyone ask a question I can't answer. Oh no!...two hands are up in the air.... What do they want? God please let me know the answer to their questions! That wasn't so bad. I answered the question gracefully and with confidence. Oh no! What if they ask another question and this one I can't answer? What if they ask about the tensile strength or weakness of glass ionomer cement? I have not mastered the elements of ALL cements. Fortunately, nothing like that was asked...This time.

Same first day, now I am teaching dental radiography. Boy, what a bummer this subject is. This particular subject is not my strongest discipline. However, I have taken thousands of radiographs in my fifteen years of being a dental assistant. This does give me the upper hand, right? Cathode, anode, electrons, short and long waves lengths, ionization...I haven't read about this stuff for six years. I studied and studied the material for three weeks in hopes to be prepared. Knowing this was going to be a difficult class to teach, I wanted to know as much as I could and be prepared for the unexpected infamous question. I have learned that many students are far more intellectual than I, but I have an advantage-- experience and ambition!

Teaching is nothing like it appears on television, Nobody told me I had to maintain a professional portfolio, attend meetings, workshops, seminars, be an active participant in the colleges recruitment, become a member in various associations, committees, attend classes towards a bachelors degree, AND teach! Someone may have mentioned these activities to me along the way, but initially ALL I could think of was preparing, learning, preparing, learning to be a successful educator. To me a successful educator is one that

creates and molds a successful student who then becomes successful in their chosen specialty. This is my goal. I so badly want all my students to be the best dental assistants they can possibly be, retain the knowledge and experiences from my classes, enjoy and respect the chosen profession, and be an asset to the community. I know that I am an inexperienced instructor, but through trial and error, time, advice from fellow instructors, mentors, and the students, I am in the making of becoming a successful educator.

Let me take just few comments about my social life. What social life? There is none, does not exist... poof...its out of here! The time I spend at the college, on my computer, attending meetings and classes, preparing lectures and activities with my nose deep in a book and fingers aching from typing. I am just very busy keeping up with all the responsibilities of a teacher. Am I there yet?

I can't tell you how much I have learned from being a teacher. My brain used to be like a dry sponge that is now thirsty and wants more. I am acquiring a vast amount of information, so much that I have started taking ginkgo biloba in hopes to retain it all! A day does not go by that I do not learn; whether it be a teaching concept, a resource that may aid to a pertaining discipline, or managing my class and time.

Teaching is an underestimated career choice. I have never dreamed of the commitment and dedication required. However, I am in the mode to do just that. My values in life have changed considerably. I not only care for my family, but I have students who

depend and rely on me to aid in their dental assisting careers and becoming successful as well.

The path I am on is a long winding, bumpy road. I accept this, I want this! Needless to say being a "newbie" is a hard, gut wrenching experience. With much support from my family and friends, I too will succeed.

About that Teachers Manual

The missing link. The "how" to book. I am currently taking a college class, "The Professional Role of a Vocational Education Teacher." This is my first on-line course.

Let me tell you something. This class and teacher are phenomenal! The information, resources, and support obtained from this class is countless. I wasn't completely aware of the unlimited resources until I visited the campus for a showcase of Internet classes. I met one of the faculty and we spoke a little. In the short time we spoke, I learned of various resourceful educators on-line web sites and how to utilize the on-line library. To top that, the best resource provided was a book. "I Make A Difference; Making the Transition from Clinician to Educator", edited by Larry Hudson, Nancy Raynor, and Phyllis Olmstead. Dr. Hudson even wrote an inspiring message on the inside cover, " Leslie, you are making a great transition. My very best wishes, Larry Hudson." This message gave me much hope. He may write this in all the books he signs, but I feel it was written personally for me.

When my husband and I went on our vacation during spring break and the first day out on the water, I broke out this book. As I turned the pages and began to read, I began to get really excited about all the information in this book. I got my highlighter out and began to highlight! As I began taking notes, relating to experiences being described, I was in awe. This is the new teachers manual! I gained many terrific realistic ideas as to my role as an educator. Motivation tactics, teaching concepts, self and student assessments, and not be forgotten, recruitment tactics. These are just a few items this book discusses. I have gotten more ideas from this book in such a short period of time than from any other source. I am sure I will refer to this book countless times before I lay it to rest.

Have I Made that Transition?

My voice doesn't tremble anymore....my knees don't wobble. Have I learned all I need to in order to be a successful teacher? Not by any means. BUT. I am on the right path and I will stay on this path till I feel confident in my role as a teacher. I know I will make boo-boos along the way, but I also know I learn and grow from these mistakes. A teacher has got to start somewhere... and here I am.