

How to be a Great Student (& Supervising) Teacher

Thomas Rademacher



I had this student teacher once that wasn't doing a great job. In front of class he was cold, mechanical. He taught like he had pre-rehearsed every word he would say (he did), and really struggled to connect with students on any kind of personal level.

So it was that I was working with a student on an essay, and I was quite happy to see this student teacher talking, laughing, smiling with two students in our class.

After class, we were walking down the stairs to lunch, and said, “looks like things were going well over there.”

“Yeah,” he said, “they asked me if I had ever been to any strip clubs and...”

So I had to tell my student teacher, a guy who had traveled all over the world and was also a fully grown adult and stuff, that it was entirely unacceptable to talk to students about the differences in strip clubs all over the world, as well as in different places in the city, because that’s exactly what the hell he was talking to them about.

This was the worst and dumbest thing this student teacher did, but was not the only thing. We spent a few months together, and nearly every one of those days involved an hour of direct coaching and co-planning and goal setting, but it was like rolling a ball up-hill. Every time I let go, he started sliding backwards, as if he had no ability or interest in learning how to stand on his own. He did not know a single other staff member by name, didn’t know most of our students, and not once took it upon himself to do something he was not directly asked to do (with step by step instructions, examples, and reminders).

After a few months of this, he let it slip in passing that he really didn’t have any interest in being a teacher anyway, but was finishing the program because his girlfriend told him to.

I tell this story for a reason. I remember being wildly anxious heading into student teaching that I wouldn't be good enough. The bar is not that high.

This guy was a case study in how to be a bad student teacher, and helps me understand why some teachers (if their last or only experience was like this one, was one in which your student teacher adds a lot of stress and work to weeks and months of your year, who doesn't add to your classroom or to the experiences of your students) don't want to try again.

But then also, I can say that I learned about 90% of what I needed to know for my first few years of teaching from my student teaching experience (and my cooperating teacher, who was really truly great), and I know I'm not alone in saying that. It's a hugely important part of becoming a teacher, and one that I believe current teachers should take on more often.

I've had a bunch of student teachers and practicum students and other pre-service teachers I've worked with since Mr. Strip-Club, another five or so that were in my classroom for a full semester. They've been different levels of great, but all have impacted my students positively, have taught me things about teaching.

Student Teaching about more than teaching, it's about how to be a teacher, how to find and keep joy in this work, how to take breaks, how to know when more work will make things better or just make you worse.

I have a new student teacher, Kara Marlin, starting in the next few weeks. We're in the getting-to-know-you phase, which is often the phase where I try to act way too cool and then struggle later to have those "hey, you did a dumb thing and lets talk about it" conversations. So, this time I'm trying to set things up a little more

clearly. I asked them to make a list of ways I could be a great cooperating teacher to them, which they did (kind of. I asked for 10, and they only wrote 8, which will no doubt be mentioned in whatever recommendation letter I will write in June).

Here's what they wrote:

10 Ways to be a Great Supervising Teacher

1. Share your teaching philosophy with me and help me develop mine

I spent a lot of time before this program worrying about whether or not my cooperating teacher would share my priorities and the concerns I have for kids and the educational system. Discuss your philosophy with me because it will help me get to know you and the big and small things you find important. But also, ask me about mine and challenge me to continue developing it and orienting my practice around it.

2. Let me get inside your head

Teachers make a million decisions per day. When you make decisions, walk me through what led to that choice and invite me to consider how I might choose to act in that situation.

3. Give me space to build relationships with students

I know a lot of people just "love kids", but I don't think you can really love kids (or teach them) until you know them. Give me time and opportunities to connect with kids about the things they are passionate about, familiarize myself with their needs, and

understand the unique challenges they face. Also, do you talk to parents? Tell me about how you communicate with the adults.

4. Teach me how to handle failure

You and I both know I'm gonna screw up a whole lot, so help me work through and learn from my failures and mistakes. Ask me what kind of teacher I want to be, and help me align my actions with that vision by giving me honest and constructive feedback.

5. Explain school politics to me

Seriously, what even?

6. Let me be idealistic while keeping me (somewhat) grounded in reality.

Pre-service teachers are kind of known for their naive idealism, and I bet that can get kind of annoying to be around sometimes. But please, humor me and my wild ideas. This is my chance to take risks and be bold in the classroom with your support. Allow me to tap into that new kid, idealistic energy, and help me direct that energy effectively.

7. Help me connect my teaching practice to activism

Teaching is an inherently political act and I'll fight anyone who says otherwise.

Access to education is highly dependent on so many other factors, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, disability status, and geographic location. If teachers can see the inequity

that exists, we ought to be doing something about it. Show me how you do activism within the school and outside of it. Do you march in protests? Do you show up to city council meetings? Do you organize within your union? Do you write? Guide me in finding my own voice as an educator and encourage me to use it often.

8. Something something “work-life balance”?

Is this a thing?

I mean... to be clear... I'm going to like Kara a bunch. I mean, look at this list! Exclamation point! At the point they are at, I would have been able to ask, like, two questions. One would have been about [classroom management](#) and the other would have been about where the microwave was.

I especially love #6; love that they expect me to support them in wild ideas and big misses and all the stuff that is great, love they want to stay grounded but not ground down. People coming into my room with that energy are always, always welcome.

I wrote a list too, of course, which probably isn't the exact same as the one every cooperating teacher would write, but I bet it's pretty close.

10 Ways to be a Great Student Teacher

1. Try hard

Teaching may be one of the first big things in your life that working harder doesn't necessarily help fix any of your problems. That said, try hard on the important stuff, and don't let me or

anyone else in the building use you as free labor for stuffing envelopes, cutting and sorting paper, or anything that isn't going to help you learn to teach.

2. Connect with kids.

It's really the most important thing we do, or the start of the most important stuff, or whatever. The answer to every tough question you've asked about how to actually teach has been "build relationships" with kids but, almost always, no one has told you what that is, or what that looks like, or how that's done. So, let's focus on that stuff.

3. Ask a bunch of questions

4. Bring ideas

5. Bring concerns

6. Take initiative

Teachers are very used to ruling their own little universe. We do it naturally. I sometimes bury myself in paperwork or emails or whatever in the back of the room in order to make myself shut up and give you the room. Go for it.

7. Ask for help, and for breaks

I remember days in my student teaching where I just couldn't. It was fifth hour and one through four had been so much, and I just didn't have the stamina for all of it yet. If you're there, let me

know. I'll take over, you can take a walk or head home and process or whatever you need.

8. Give me space

Ok, so I'm an introvert, so this is especially big for me, but one of the hardest things for me about having another adult in my room is that all those moments that were quiet pauses before are now full of talking. Lots of that is ok, but every so often, finding some work to go do or another classroom to be in can be awesome. Also, it's weird to answer emails while someone just sorta stares at you.

9. Let me Vent, Let me Fail

We're going to spend a long time together in high-stress situations. You will hear me say not nice things about people I work or have worked with, or people other people have worked with, or just all humans in general. I'm going to vent, and you are encouraged to do so too, but, like, don't go spreading that around.

Also, I usually share my bad days before anyone else gets a chance to, but for other people, just know that inviting someone into your classroom can be a super vulnerable thing, and you're going to see them fail and you're going to see them lose their patience. It happens. You shouldn't be out there spreading worst-day stories about your cooperating teacher.

Oh, unless you have a cooperating teacher that is doing something that is damaging or dangerous to students, then RAT THAT TEACHER OUT.

10. Something about work/life balance, indeed.

Whoever figures this out first has to share.

So, for Supervising Teachers,

Really, probably the most important thing we can do, something I've never done before and will do this time, is make a regular time every week for a meeting with my student teacher where we will talk about how things are going. I've avoided it because when I have a student teacher in my room, I'm already talking to them constantly, and it feels weird to schedule a meeting, but the communication is important, and it's important to build a structure in case of struggles before the struggles start to happen.

For Student Teachers,

It's going to be ok. And, like, for real, the bar isn't *that* high. The thing about being a pre-service teacher is that you're supposed to suck, supposed to struggle. That's how you learn this stuff. Your cooperating teacher is there to make sure no one gets hurt and you have room to try stuff and grow. So, you know, try hard, care about the students, be engaged and interested in your students, your classroom, and your building, and don't, seriously don't, talk with kids about your favorite strip clubs. We'll work the rest out together.

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