



Think you are ready? Think again!

THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCES OF A FIRST YEAR TEACHER.

I was so excited! I had done it! I had studied hard, survived the application process, and landed my very first teaching job.

For me, preparing for the first day was like planning a well-orchestrated and impeccably choreographed Broadway production, complete with stage management and scripts. I spent the month of August frantically timetabling, studying curricula, and practicing a speech to set the tone for my classroom on the first day. I met colleagues and administrators, was bombarded by mountains of paperwork (that I swore I would get to), and bought a new black suit for the opening performance. Over and over, I pictured my first day – getting the year started on the right foot. Amidst all the preparation, I thought to myself contentedly: “I am so ready!”

Right.

As my first “real” students started streaming into the classroom, I stood huddled by my big desk, feeling very small, reviewing a speech I had rehearsed countless times in preparation for this day. Why was I here? What did I think I was doing?

As the students sat down, I walked to the center of the room...and tripped on the edge of the carpet. As I flailed about like a fish out of water, a jar of multicoloured chalk came crashing down off the lip of the blackboard and all over my black suit. Predictably, the class burst out laughing. One little girl ran up to the front and started to help me clean up while the rest of the students tried (unsuccessfully) to stifle their giggles. My little helper quietly said to

me, “Don’t worry, everyone is nervous on the first day.” Thanks.

I was struck by the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. I had not factored my own clumsiness into the picture of my first day. But I remembered the old stage adage: no matter the calamity, the show must go on!

We finished cleaning up quickly. Flustered and embarrassed, I opened my mouth and... nothing. What had happened? I had been so prepared! All impressive monologues forgotten, covered in chalk and beet red, I finally managed to croak out my name and a few things about myself – my hobbies, interests, and background. Not the script I’d rehearsed, just whatever came to mind.

And in those interminable first moments, I learned a key lesson – not just about first-year teaching, but about all teaching: no teacher can predict and plan for every minute of a teaching day. My big first day production had turned out to be a flop, and I, the star of the fiasco.

There were countless moments in that first month when I felt myself drowning in self-doubt. Did I plan this lesson correctly? Are my students learning? Am I any good at this? I became so engrossed in my little mistakes that I forgot what I definitely knew: that it was okay to make them. Sure, the best-laid plans were sometimes a flop. But that didn’t mean I was a failure.

How did I manage to avoid mistakes and save face? The truth is, I didn’t. Instead, I came to realize that I really shouldn’t even try! I realized that my students and I had something very basic in common: we were all people trying to fudge our way through new situations and challenges. Rather than act like a robot, I tried showing my students me – the real me. By sharing my interests, my humor and – yes – my mistakes, I was allowing my students to share theirs and to take risks. As time passed, my classroom became a place where students were eager to ask questions, and not afraid to risk mistakes. In other words, a place for learning.

As the first month of teaching wore on, I realized that my students didn’t care if I was a superstar photocopier, a great planner or a curriculum expert. They wanted to know what my favorite colour was, if I had pets, what kind of music I liked, and what my favourite movie was. When I think back on my own school career, I realize that I don’t remember the time my teacher had everything ready for my lesson and it rolled on like clockwork. The teachers I remember – the ones who made a difference for me – were the ones who showed themselves to be real people: imperfect, but genuine. My students would not remember the “perfect” teaching moment (if there really is such a thing). They would remember that I loved my dogs, that I really liked to joke around, and, of course, the time I tripped over the reading carpet and fell flat on my face!

I am not saying that I callously threw lessons together and ignored my students’ progress. Parents and administrators never let me forget that these are the primary components of my job. But, I was developing little people, so I decided that we should laugh together, celebrate together and grow together, and that we should do it often.

And so, throughout it all – the mountain of marking, the evaluations, the technical difficulties (the photocopier and I have had some words) – I have had to remember to laugh. I made mistakes in September, and by October I knew I would still be making some in June! But my biggest mistake was to spend so much of my first month sweating the small stuff. When I showed myself as a real person who was fallible but who continually strived to do better, my students took notice. I had passed their first test: I was human, and I wasn’t afraid to show it. |

KARINE DUHAMEL IS NOW A SECOND-YEAR FRENCH IMMERSION TEACHER AT ECOLE ROBERT H. SCHOOL IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA.

