



A FIRST YEAR TEACHER'S TOP 5

Over the past few months, I've learned that teachers – *all* teachers – are huge fans of lists. We have lists for everything: what we need to accomplish today, long-term goals, missing assignments, follow-ups, and the list goes on! We even make lists about making lists! In fact, without lists, I'm quite sure that the whole educational world would be thrown into complete chaos.

In that spirit, I thought that I, too, would draft a list. Like many new teachers, I have, at times, wondered whether this profession is worth it. Is it worth all of the devotion, all of the stress, all of the time? Because for me, no matter how much I tried to isolate it, teaching has been an almost all-consuming profession. Over the past year, it has impacted and encroached on all areas of my daily life, not only on my working life, but on my social and family life as well.

To help me discover whether I am, in fact, willing to continue to make such a commitment, I hereby present my own Top 5 list of the lessons I learned during my first year of teaching. Curiously enough, these are actually not only work lessons, but life lessons as well.

1. Don't sweat the small stuff.

From the embarrassing mishap on my first day, detailed in the first article in this series, to the litany of other mistakes I made throughout the year, I've learned that some things can't be controlled. This is a valuable lesson, because I think in every teacher lies a drill sergeant and a bit of a control freak. It's the small stuff that has made teaching worthwhile, and in the end, it is the small stuff that my former students will remember!

2. Take care of yourself, and everything else will take care of itself.

As a teacher, I often find myself thinking about how I might help my students or what I might plan for on the weekend instead of thinking about what I need for myself, whether it be rest, fun or just temporary closure from school. What this lesson has meant for me is that I do leave work at work, and I enjoy my home time all the more for it. I might spend my evening walking, reading or just hanging out watching some brainless television. The point is, I have learned to at least *try* to remove myself from the long and sticky tentacles that represent my encroaching work life and to always remember myself. This, in turn, has made me a more eager and creative teacher, who looks forward to each day instead of just looking forward to the weekend!

3. Remember to talk to adults.

I remember some long stretches of time during my first year when I am sure I did not talk to another adult in any meaningful way, and I suffered for it. I actually became a little tired of children, because I forgot how great they are. How did I remember? By talking to a bunch of adults! For first year teachers, the classroom can be a vortex of isolation. I always have to remind myself to go to the staffroom, to attend social functions, and to go out with other adults.

4. Flexibility is key.

Schools are hubs of activity where unexpected things happen every day. In dealing with the unexpected, flexibility is key. My ability to reorient or reorganize quickly, without missing a beat, has been invaluable this year. It is often impossible to stick to a plan – but thank goodness for that! Improvisation has led me to far more teachable moments than has structure.

5. Be sure: You have made a difference.

This year I've encountered very different opinions of teachers: from self-sacrificing individuals who devote our lives to children to spoiled and lazy people who work too little and enjoy too many holidays and "perks". One of the hardest parts about teaching is that our impact is often not visible years; in fact, we often never see it. For some students, I will be nothing but a flash in the pan. But there will be some for whom the lessons I taught will come back when they are faced with an unexpected challenge. These are the students that I work for, and these are the ones who will remember and value the lessons I taught them far beyond their school days.

So to return to my original question, have the lessons I have learned and the moments I have experienced made this a profession worth pursuing? Like many young teachers, I know of many other opportunities out there, careers that involve less work for greater financial reward. I have seen many of my friends reach positions of importance in the private sector; but have they experienced the personal growth that teaching has offered me? I am ending the year a different person than I began. I have not yet decided whether the classroom is the very best place *for* me, but it is a place that brings out the very best *in* me.

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