

Basketball and Learning to Teach

Learning to be a teacher is hard. It's a lot of work, and some of the skills are ones a beginning teacher has never faced before. They're skills that *most adults don't have*.

For example, it takes a lot of confidence to walk into a classroom, gain the attention of the students, not start the lesson until every student is sitting down and quiet, and *stop* the lesson when a student talks out of turn, dealing with the problem effectively and in a caring way. A new teacher has to learn to do all of this using a 'teacher voice' ... one that gets through to the kids and shows them that he or she is in charge. And then she has to teach them something!

This can be a very scary thing, the first time you try it. The very first time I had to do this I failed miserably. But I got better at it.

A common problem that new teachers have is being too 'timid'. They are afraid to speak sternly to a misbehaving child. They hang back and let things happen in the classroom, and don't jump in and get involved. They aren't sure what to do, so they do nothing.

This is a normal experience for a new teacher ... we all went through it.

I remember feeling that way. My first ever lesson activity was helping kids prepare for a science fair; they were doing research in the library. My supervising teacher told me to help them.

I wandered around for a while, but didn't talk to any of them. I didn't know what to say. And I was pretty shy, and not very confident.

My supervising teacher told me something when he noticed me hanging back; it's something I've never forgotten. He told me that I didn't have to say anything ... my job was to *ask questions*, and get the students to explain things to me. He pointed out a student to me, and told me to go ask him what his project was all about.

Ten minutes later, after listening to that kid's enthusiastic description of his project and what he'd found out, I realized he was a person, with

something interesting to say. Before then I'd seen the kids as terrifying unknowns.

I've never forgotten that advice. When you don't know what to say, jump right in and ask questions! Good advice for any new teacher ... and for shy people too! (That was me as well).

I'm reminded of basketball, when kids first learn to play the game. I saw this here just a few days ago in an Elementary PhysEd class.

There are kids who jump right in and chase after the ball. Wherever the ball is, that's where they are, trying to get it and run with it. They're not afraid to mix it up.

Other kids hang back. They stand on the sidelines and watch the play move back and forth, and get out of the way when it gets too close. They don't know what to do, and are afraid of messing up, so they wait and do nothing.

It's pretty obvious that the first kind of kid will become a great basketball player. But what about the second kind, the kind who hangs back and doesn't get involved?

They can become good basketball players too. I've seen it happen. But two things are necessary: a good coach, and the willingness of that kid to take a risk and 'jump in'.

As a teacher, I've always had good 'coaches', who showed me what to do and encouraged me to do it. I could never have become a good teacher without their encouragement. But I was also willing to 'jump in'. The first few times in the classroom were intimidating, and I didn't do well. But I learned from my mistakes, and kept trying until it became second nature.

The very best teacher I had in the Education Department at U of T was one who was trying to show us the best ways to teach mathematics (or any other subject, for that matter). One of his stock phrases was to practice 'FLAB and SLAB' This is short for 'Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee', which you may recognize as how the great Muhammed Ali characterized his own boxing style. It's also a *perfect description* of how an effective

teacher will wander around the room, glancing at students' work, and jumping in to help someone who needs it.

I no longer have a fear of entering a classroom and teaching a lesson, even to kids I've never met before. I have to do this every year now, when I teach a new VC class that includes students in remote locations. But I had forgotten how terrifying it used to be.