

Chapter 1

Building Your Teaching Skills

In This Chapter

- ▶ Developing a teaching style that works for you
- ▶ Discovering how to communicate effectively with your students
- ▶ Understanding how to manage and teach your class
- ▶ Examining the kind of relationships you want to build with students, staff and parents
- ▶ Exploring how to develop your skills beyond the classroom

Being a teacher is a tricky job – you have so many different areas to get right. You have to develop a style of teaching that works for you and your students. You have to communicate with both classes and individuals, and build up bonds between you and your students. You also have to know how to plan and teach your lessons, so your students get to learn loads, and hopefully have fun at the same time. And on top of all that, you need to build up effective relationships with staff and parents as well. The job's a big one!

But teaching's well worth doing. Being a teacher is one of the best jobs to have. If you get things right, you help your students discover new things each and every day. If you get things right, you *inspire* your students to go on to great things. As the saying goes, nobody forgets a good teacher. This book can help you become the best teacher you can possibly be, and this chapter gives an overview of the challenges that await you.

Developing Your Teaching Style

As a teacher you have your own, individual teaching style – a teaching personality that's as unique to you as your fingerprints. Some teachers take a firm, strict, old-school approach, like the classic sergeant major with his authoritarian manner and loud voice. Other teachers have a fun, relaxed and even comic style, using humour to get the best out of their students.



No one style is right for every teacher, although some styles work better than others. Similarly, no one style is right for every class. Some students respond brilliantly to a teacher who's strict and scary; others become confrontational if the teacher tries to lay down the law. Much depends on the type of students and the sort of class you're teaching.

The more you develop the positive aspects of your teaching style, the better teacher you become. This development's all part of the process of becoming a great teacher. The following sections give an overview of the key characteristics of a successful, confident teaching style, and Chapters 2 and 3 offer a variety of other strategies you can use to develop a style that works for you.

Understanding your teaching style

The key to success is to understand your teaching style: to become aware of which parts of your style work well and how to develop them; and to know which parts of your style aren't so effective and how you can improve them. To develop your teaching style to its peak of perfection, you need to:

- ✓ Reflect on your teaching approaches and how well they're working, preferably *while* you're teaching.
- ✓ Be conscious of how your behaviour in the classroom affects the way your students respond to you.
- ✓ Adapt the methods and strategies you use to suit the way your students respond (again, preferably during the course of the lesson).
- ✓ Vary the approaches you use according to the age and type of students.
- ✓ Adapt the style you use to fit with the mood and 'feel' of the class or of individual students.
- ✓ Watch other teachers in action to see what works and what doesn't.
- ✓ Work out which strategies and style best fit the setting where you teach.
- ✓ Build a style that's confident, definite, aware, positive and flexible.

The better you understand yourself as a teacher, the better your students respond, behave and learn – and the more you can get on with the fun bit, which is, of course, the teaching.

Becoming a confident teacher

I can remember being terrified the first time I set foot in a classroom as a teacher. I had a sick, hollow feeling in my stomach, like you get when you ride a rollercoaster and it drops suddenly down a steep slope. My head was full of self-doubt. Were the students going to like me? Were they going to understand my explanations? Were they even going to listen to me so I could teach them?



Feeling nervous at first is entirely natural. In fact, you should probably be worried if you *don't* feel nervous the first few times you set foot in the classroom, because being over-confident can be a recipe for disaster. If you're too sure of yourself, before you even know the class, you may appear unresponsive to the students sitting in front of you. Take care that self belief doesn't tip over into arrogance or aggression.

Remember that how you feel inside doesn't matter, because you can still project an air of confidence on the outside. Your aim is to develop an air of confidence, self-control and a mastery of everything that happens in your classroom. This comes with time and experience, and with loads and loads of self-reflection. (If you're new to teaching, you can fake this until you begin to believe it.) As a confident teacher:

- ✓ You put on a 'teacher character' – you show that you're in control of the work, the students and, crucially, yourself.
- ✓ You give your students a feeling of security.
- ✓ You take charge of what goes on in your classroom while staying responsive to what the students think as well.
- ✓ You use a firm, fair and fun approach to your role.
- ✓ You adapt the approaches you use to the needs of your students.
- ✓ Your confident, effective approach gives your students the freedom to get on with doing their work.
- ✓ Your confidence shines through in everything you say and do.

Most teachers feel nervous at the start of the school year. When you've been away from the classroom over the summer holidays, you may feel as though you've 'forgotten' how to teach. But teaching's like riding a bike – after you have the hang of it, you never really forget.

Improving how you communicate

Teaching's all about communication. You communicate what you want to your class; they communicate their understanding (or lack of understanding) back to you. Your communication skills can also reinforce or undermine the air of confidence you want to project (discussed in the preceding section). If you look like you mean what you're saying, and believe in yourself, this gives your students a perception that you're confident and in control.

You communicate with your students in lots of different ways – some obvious, some not so apparent. You communicate:

- ✓ **By talking to your class:** Well, of course you do! But communication isn't as simple as just opening your mouth and speaking. It's about getting the volume, tone, pace, vocabulary and emotional quality of your voice just right.
- ✓ **By listening to your students:** Communication is a two-way street. When you invite a response, by asking a question, use your verbal and non-verbal skills to demonstrate your interest.
- ✓ **Through your face and facial expressions:** You can use your eyes and face to connect with a class, or to indicate that you're displeased. A single raised eyebrow can say more than a thousand words.
- ✓ **With your hands:** Your hands are one of the most expressive parts of your body. Use them to communicate instructions, commands, praise or enthusiasm. Let your hands do the talking.
- ✓ **Through your body postures and positions:** Your students 'read' a lot about you by the way you stand and hold yourself. A relaxed, confident and welcoming posture helps you build relationships with a class.
- ✓ **By the way you move around the classroom:** Don't get stuck at the front by the board when the troublemakers are at the back, plotting mischief. Move around the space, a bit like a cat patrolling its territory.
- ✓ **Through the way you control the space:** Make clear that this is *your* space, and you are in control of how it looks and how it's used. The students are very welcome inside it, but you're the one in charge.

Strike a balance between verbal and non-verbal communication. Remember that *how* you say something is often more important than *what* you say. Talking too long is a mistake – use other approaches to get your point across.

Develop your communication skills so that what you say is concise and easy to follow. When you give an instruction, keep it short and clear. When you offer an explanation, you can make it longer but keep it succinct. Use plenty of non-verbal cues to keep your students focused on what you're saying.



Remember that your students are continually interpreting your tone of voice and your body language, and responding to the messages you give. Become fully aware of the verbal and non-verbal messages you send your class, particularly the subconscious messages. Reflect on everything you say and do, and the effect that has on your students. Discover how to step outside yourself and see and hear how you appear to your students.

You can find loads of advice about effective verbal and non-verbal communication in Chapter 3.

Managing and Teaching Your Class

Your key job as a teacher is, of course, to *teach*. But the job isn't quite that simple. Not only must you plan, prepare and deliver fantastic, high-quality lessons, you must also manage the behaviour of your students while they're in your classroom. You may prepare the most brilliant lesson in the history of the world, but if you can't get your students to let you deliver it, they never find out how great it is.



You may find a strong link between the way you teach your class and how well you manage the students during their lessons. If you make your lessons interesting and engaging, they're more likely to listen and behave. This isn't a magic formula for solving behaviour issues in a really challenging school. But getting your students to *want* to learn is a good starting point.

Creating fantastic lessons

Creating really great lessons starts with good preparation (most of the time). As you can see in Chapter 4, planning's a tricky business. Your plans may have tons of detail or very little at all. So long as they actually *work* for you, in your classroom, with your students, in your situation, that's what counts.



Don't allow lesson planning to take over your life. Follow the 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' mantra in Chapter 4 to limit the amount of time you spend on planning. You can't be an effective teacher if your work takes up every spare minute of every day – give yourself some time out too.



If you're training as a teacher or are new to the job, you'll be expected to give plenty of detail in your plans. As you gain experience, hold onto a few of these more detailed plans, or even just the templates that you used to write them. That way, you can whip them out during inspections or observations.

Fantastic, high-quality lessons have some or all of the following:

- ✓ A clear sense of structure, so your students know where they're going and what they're meant to be doing.
- ✓ A learning objective, so you know what you're aiming to teach.
- ✓ A balance between focused learning and understanding how long your students can concentrate effectively on any one activity.
- ✓ A lot of hands-on, practical activities to keep everyone involved.
- ✓ A good balance of activities – some teacher talk (but not too much), some student-led learning and so on.
- ✓ A sense of forward momentum, created by setting targets to achieve and time limits within which to meet them.
- ✓ High-quality instructions, so the students know what they're meant to do and how they're meant to do it.
- ✓ Multisensory approaches, and activities that take account of how everybody learns best.
- ✓ Interactive tasks, which encourage your students to get fully engaged with their discoveries.
- ✓ Content that reflects the needs and interests of your students, and that they can relate to their lives outside school.
- ✓ Work that's differentiated to the needs of your students, so everyone can feel successful.
- ✓ A sense of fun.

Having said all that, don't put too much pressure on yourself to create multimedia, whiz-bang style lessons. Doing so isn't possible *all* the time. Do your best, but don't be afraid to take your foot off the pedal a bit when you need a rest.



Don't get so hooked up on structure that you forget the reality: some of the best lessons are those that develop organically, in partnership with a class. Sometimes, be brave enough to throw caution to the wind and let your creative side have the upper hand.

Being a brilliant teacher

Some teachers are naturally brilliant: they have 'it'. Charisma, a bond with the children, a natural ability to communicate. Plenty of strategies exist that can help mere mortals to emulate these 'natural' teachers. To become the best teacher you can be, aim to:

- ✓ Find interesting and imaginative ways to get your students' attention – focus on the creative side of the job as well as the daily routines.
- ✓ Hold onto the passion and enthusiasm that got you into the classroom in the first place. Aim to be an inspiration to your students.
- ✓ Maintain your own interest in the job, by keeping things fresh for yourself as well as for your students.
- ✓ Strive to be the best teacher that ever lived, taking every tip and opportunity to develop that comes your way.
- ✓ Use your voice and body in an engaging way – communicate your love of knowledge through the way you speak and present yourself to your class.
- ✓ Be a role model for your students, someone they want to please.
- ✓ Maintain a sense of humour and perspective at all times.
- ✓ Be genuine and caring with your students and find ways to engage with them and build relationships.
- ✓ Build on the natural sense of curiosity everyone has as a young child – make your students *want* to know.
- ✓ Go against the norm – be a bit subversive, crazy or surprising in your efforts to engage with your class.
- ✓ Play around with different sensory responses, bringing your lessons to life in a fully rounded way.

The more effort you put into varied approaches, the better your students behave and learn. This isn't an instant solution, but you do have total control – you can be the teacher *you* want to be.

Taking control of your classroom

Your aim is to get the most out of your students while they're with you, whether that's once a week in some secondary subjects or every day in a primary school. You want them working at their peak, so they can discover as much as possible in your lessons together.

You can get the most out of your students by keeping them engaged, using strategies like these:

- ✓ Ensuring that they stay on task during lessons, setting activities that suit their needs and setting them in a way your students understand.
- ✓ Building a bank of rules together, so that it becomes 'our' classroom, and you create a feeling of mutual respect and ownership of lessons.

- ✓ Using targets and time limits to create a sense of focus and increase on-task behaviour.
- ✓ Incorporating a lot of rewards into your teaching, using positive methods far more than you use sanctions.
- ✓ Building a sense of pace into your lessons and your teaching, particularly through the way you use your voice.
- ✓ Helping them to develop their concentration, but understanding how long you can reasonably expect students to focus at one time.
- ✓ Encouraging them to develop good listening skills and managing the noise levels within the room.
- ✓ Using assessment effectively, as a method of showing your students where they are now and where they need to go next.
- ✓ Incorporating a wide variety of interesting and engaging activities within your lessons, so your students *want* to stay on task.
- ✓ Utilising resources in the best possible way, and thinking about the more unusual types of resources that may inspire your students.
- ✓ Using displays to develop and extend their discoveries and to make your classroom a more creative place in which to spend time.

With all these strategies in place, your students should get the most out of the time you spend together. They should also look forward to being in your lessons, so they arrive with a good feeling about what's going to happen. Head to Chapters 5 and 6 for more information.

Talking 'bout my generation

Remember that the students you teach are *this* generation, not *yours*. These young people have been brought up in a world that's very different to the one that existed even a couple of decades ago. Even if you're close to your students in age, they're still a world apart from you.

Young people these days know all about their rights. This can be negative in some respects

(when they insist that asking them to work is 'against their human rights'). But I'm glad to work with youngsters who stand up for themselves, and who don't allow teachers to demand respect simply because of a supposed position of authority. I want to *earn* their respect, thanks.

Using structures to develop effective learning

As Chapter 7 explains, the way you set up your classroom and the approaches you use to structure your lessons all contribute to high-quality learning. You need to create routines and structures that really work. Establishing these routines is an ongoing process, but after you get the task underway, you free up much more time for the fun part – the teaching.

Get your structures and routines right by:

- ✓ Setting up routines for how students behave within lessons – the way they enter and leave the classroom, how they approach group work, and so on.
- ✓ Adapting the structures you use according to the needs and age of your students, and the kind of environment in which you work.
- ✓ Maintaining and developing your routines over time, so you adapt them until they work optimally for everyone.
- ✓ Taking care to manage lesson time in an effective way, so no one feels rushed, but equally, no one gets bored.
- ✓ Ensuring that you differentiate the activities you use, so that all students can access the work.
- ✓ Being particularly careful about the way you start and finish your lessons or your day, and understanding why this is so important.
- ✓ Using effective approaches and structures for group activities, so the students use this format in the best possible way.
- ✓ Setting up, and adapting, your teaching space so it helps you both manage behaviour and teach more effectively.
- ✓ Exploring the benefits and downsides of various layouts, and being willing to try different approaches to find what works best for you.
- ✓ Managing the students within the space: thinking about where they sit in relation to you, and how this may affect their learning and behaviour.
- ✓ Using the space in an interesting way yourself, as a method of both controlling the class and also making your teaching more effective.

The ideal is for your structures and routines to become ‘invisible’. For them to work in such a way that the students don’t realise how you’re controlling them, even though they’re aware that the control’s going on.

Handling behaviour in a positive way

Managing behaviour is one of the key concerns for many teachers. After all, if you can't get your students to behave, then you aren't able to teach them properly. Behaviour management is a complex issue, which Chapter 8 explains in detail and you can't find any easy answers. But with time and practice you can get behaviour management right, and make great strides forward, even in the most challenging situations.



To handle behaviour in the most positive way possible, follow these suggestions:

- ✓ Establish clear expectations at the start of your time with any class: explain the behaviour you want, and what happens if that behaviour doesn't occur.
- ✓ Use every possible way to get silent attention from your students when you need to address them. Refuse to talk over a class that isn't listening.
- ✓ Find ways to get your students to maintain their focus, so what you tell them actually sinks in.
- ✓ Play up to your strengths and take account of your weaknesses. Have an understanding of how your students perceive you.
- ✓ Build strong and solid relationships with your students, establishing a sense of empathy with the class.
- ✓ Aim for a confident appearance, even if you don't feel confident inside. Refer to the earlier section, 'Becoming a confident teacher', for an overview, and Chapter 2 for pointers on projecting confidence.
- ✓ Keep calm as much of the time as humanly possible. Think about the triggers that cause you to lose your temper, and find ways to avoid them.
- ✓ Be consistent, and aim to treat each and every student in a fair and equitable way.
- ✓ Maintain a bit of distance between yourself and your students – don't try to be their friend, because they honestly don't *want* you as a mate!
- ✓ Stick to your guns – once you've set your standards, don't get drawn into endless debates about what is and isn't fair.
- ✓ Steer well clear of aggressive approaches: avoid getting angry when a student is difficult, since this only exacerbates the problem.
- ✓ Be clear about the school policies for dealing with behaviour, making sure that your sanctions and rewards follow the whole-school approach.
- ✓ Match the strategies you use to your own situation – understand that what works well with one set of students may not be helpful for another.

This last point is vital for getting behaviour management right. You can find lots of suggestions and strategies in this book, so choose the ones that work in your own unique classroom situation.



While most of the behaviour issues you face are low level, you also need to understand what to do when a more serious incident develops. Examine your approaches ahead of time; when a challenging situation arises, you need to be sure what action to take.

To handle challenging behaviour effectively, check out these ideas:

- ✓ Develop a clear understanding of why some students may become confrontational with you.
- ✓ Be honest about how you sometimes contribute to the tensions that arise in your classroom.
- ✓ Develop a teaching style that circumvents the need for students to become confrontational – be positive, assertive, calm and fair.
- ✓ Understand the kind of approaches that work best in defusing a confrontation, and be aware of your legal position.
- ✓ Look for support when you need it and consider joining a union as a source of back-up and advice.
- ✓ Take care to handle the aftermath of misbehaviour for yourself, as well as for the student. These incidents affect you too; take this into account after the event.
- ✓ Know the kind of approaches you can take with the most difficult classes, and discover ways to win them back.
- ✓ Understand how to deal with really difficult individuals, adapting the strategies you use to the specific situation or student.
- ✓ Have plenty of ideas about how to manage your own stress levels and to stop yourself from getting too caught up in your work.

Remember that these high-level incidents are rare in most schools. If you work in a really challenging situation, insist on the support and back-up you need when the worst does happen. Go to Chapter 10 for more on dealing with challenging situations.

Creating a positive classroom climate

In addition to using strategies to manage behaviour and control your class, the ideal is for you to create a climate where good behaviour and hard work are a matter of course. Make your classroom feel like a great place to be – look for the positive, rather than focusing on the negative. To create a positive feeling in your classroom, you need to:

- ✓ Be friendly, welcoming and positive with your students – make them feel that you're happy to work with them, and that you want the best for them.
- ✓ Use rewards and positive ways of motivating your students; avoid negative approaches to classroom and behaviour management.
- ✓ Maintain and build on your positive climate throughout the school year, taking particular account of times when standards might slip.
- ✓ Keep a handle on your moods and emotions, and refuse to allow yourself to respond in a negative way when students mess you around.
- ✓ Discover how rewards work. Understand that some students are naturally self-motivated, whereas others need external motivators.
- ✓ Use sanctions in a positive way. You do need to punish, but you should aim to do so in a way that may actually change the student's behaviour.
- ✓ Give your students choices about how they behave – help them understand that their actions have consequences.

With both you and your students in a positive frame of mind, your time spent in the classroom is much happier, and much more effective. Go to Chapter 9 for more in-depth information.

Getting to Know the Main Characters

You come across a whole host of characters in your role as a teacher. Obviously, the students themselves are the main players. But you also need to develop a sense of team work with the other staff at your school. Plus you have to build up partnerships with parents and carers to help you develop your students to their fullest.

Building relationships with your students

When you relate well with your students and they feel that you have their best interests at heart, you're bound to get better results in your classroom. Building up these bonds takes time and commitment, but the results that you get are well worth the effort you expend. To build strong, positive relationships with your students, you must:

- ✓ View them as *people* and not just as pupils.
- ✓ Get to know their names quickly and use them frequently.
- ✓ Adapt the way you handle different students according to students' needs.

- ✓ Help your students develop into fully rounded people. Teach them life skills, such as being cooperative and respectful, as well as developing their academic side.
- ✓ Develop the pastoral side of your role. If you work as a form tutor or primary class teacher, focus on helping your students develop as people, as well as on getting them to learn.

The more students you teach, the harder you may find developing a bond with each one. If you're a secondary teacher working with hundreds of different students, you have a hard task ahead of you. You can still make headway, though, by following the advice and guidance in Chapter 11.



The vast majority of young people *want* to build up good relationships with their teachers. Don't let them get too close, though. You need to maintain a certain distance so you can do your job effectively.

Playing your part in the staff team

Although your role as a teacher can seem quite isolated, in fact you play a key part in the bigger team at your school. This team includes both teaching and non-teaching staff. From the caretaker to the lunchtime supervisors, everyone has a vital part to play. To become an effective team member, you should:

- ✓ Understand and respect the different roles that various staff play in the daily life of the school.
- ✓ Remember that all these roles support the whole-school ethos – and that no one job is more deserving of respect than another.
- ✓ Look for support when you need it, and make sure that you give support to others as well.
- ✓ Find ways to work effectively with support staff in your classroom. Understand that these people can make a huge difference to your students' chances of success.
- ✓ Get to know the 'right' people and avoid getting caught up with the 'wrong' ones.

Every school or setting has its own particular challenges when working as a staff team. Whether your school has only a few members of staff or over a hundred, you benefit yourself and your students by working effectively together. Go to Chapter 12 for details on how to be part of an educational team.

Handling parents

As a teacher, you come into contact with all sorts of parents and carers – from those who want nothing more than to support you in working with their children, to those who make your life as difficult as they can. In truth, the vast majority fall somewhere in between. Yes, they do want something from you (a good education for their children), but they're happy to give something in return.

To work effectively with parents and carers, you need to:

- ✓ Build up the lines of communication – let parents know what goes on in your classroom and show them ways to support their children at home.
- ✓ Use the same kind of strategies with parents that you use on a tricky child: be polite, fair and reasonable, but stick to your standards.
- ✓ Follow up on every offer of help – whether that's volunteers to help with readers or a parental 'expert' to come in and talk with your class.
- ✓ Make sure that you report good news to parents as well as contacting them when things are going wrong.

The parents' evening is an opportunity to talk with parents and carers and a great time to set targets for future improvement. You may feel a bit nervous at your first few parents' evenings. Follow the advice in Chapter 13 to help you.

Building Your Skills Beyond the Classroom

Your role as a teacher doesn't stop at the classroom door. You must also handle all that paperwork and cope with your marking load. And on the positive side, you should think about developing yourself and your career for the future. Building your teaching skills beyond the classroom can have a powerfully positive influence on the work you do with your students. Part V tackles these issues in detail.

Dealing with paperwork

You need to be ruthlessly efficient if you're not going to let paperwork take over your life. Stick to the approaches I give in Chapter 14 and you should be able to keep things in check. Check out these additional tips:

- ✔ Be ruthless about binning the papers you don't need.
- ✔ Deal instantly with those bits of paper that need a response.
- ✔ Pass paperwork on so it becomes someone else's problem.
- ✔ Avoid creating a huge 'to do' mountain for yourself.
- ✔ Use your time as effectively as possible.
- ✔ Create a clear and simple 'to do' list when you have a lot going on.

A great piece of advice about time management is to try to handle each piece of paper *only once*. Although, to be honest, if you can manage that, you're a better, more efficient person than me!

The school report is one very important type of paperwork. It's one of the main ways in which you communicate with parents and carers. Reports allow you to show where your students are doing well and to set clear targets for improvement. But reports can be incredibly time consuming to write, especially if you teach a large number of different classes. Factor this into your timings when you know reports are coming up.

Balancing your marking

You may find a tension between the need to get books 'looking' marked and the actual value of the marking you do in educational terms. If you want to, you can spend every waking hour marking books in great detail and still not feel you've done everything. To keep your marking load reasonable, and to get the best value out of the marking you do, you should:

- ✔ Use a variety of approaches for marking – detailed marking, a quick tick and flick, marking for specific areas of improvement and so on.
- ✔ Avoid setting too many activities that involve a lot of marking at any one time.
- ✔ Balance the type of tasks you set throughout the week, so you spread your marking load.
- ✔ Get your students involved in assessing each other's work; this isn't only helpful for you, but educationally valuable for them.
- ✔ Make sure that your students *read* what you've written, so they actually benefit from the marking you do.

Some subjects generate a lot more marking than others. Be aware of this when you're teaching a writing-based subject or topic. If you teach a subject where the students do a lot of written work, consider how you can find the time to get everything marked. Chapter 14 has all the information you need.

Working with your students beyond the classroom

One of the most enjoyable ways to develop your teaching skills is to get involved with your students beyond the classroom. This may mean taking part in some extra-curricular activities. Doing so is a really great way to boost your skills and also to develop positive relationships with young people. Of course, another great way to develop yourself as a teacher is to take your class out on a trip, or to hitch a ride on a trip that someone else has organised. For many young people, a school trip is one of the most memorable experiences they have at school. Go to Chapter 15 for ideas and advice on how to teach and interact with your students beyond the classroom.

Reflecting on and developing your skills

All the time as a teacher, you want to reflect on your skills and find ways to develop them further. This may mean taking an additional qualification that adds to your classroom practice. It can involve preparing for, and learning from, observations and inspections.

Perhaps the most useful approach is to develop the ability to reflect on your own classroom practice in an informal manner, learning from the mistakes you make in your lessons and also celebrating your successes. For more thoughts about building your skills in this area, go to Chapter 16.