

Five Hacks of Effective Teaching

Maliha Ahsan

One, two, three – eyes on me!"
"One, two – eyes on you!"

With this teacher-student exchange, I began the school day with my third-grade students at a primary school that I taught in for two years. Instantly, my students would know that their attention had to be focused on the teacher, and, hence, they would automatically sit upright, facing me, with their notebooks neatly dated, pencils sharpened, ready to start another day of fun-filled learning. This level of regulation in a class does not seem that extraordinary, does it? Well, it might seem a bit incredulous if I add that there were over ninety students in my classroom, and this was a highly under-resourced government primary school that I worked in through a Non-Government Organization. In that school, there was a huge shortage of teachers, there was poor infrastructural support, and all the students came from extremely poverty-stricken families. Most of the fathers of the students were rickshaw-pullers and most mothers either were stay-at-home moms or garments-workers. My students never had a sense of discipline before, neither did many have any eagerness to come to school, let alone learn. Incredibly, these very students became the single most precious gift to me, and they taught me the most valuable lesson of my life: no matter the family background, the social status, or even the situation of the learning environment, every child can learn.

My circumstances as a newbie teacher were obviously unique. For a classroom, with broken tables and benches, accommodating ninety-eight screaming, screeching and shrieking eight-year-olds, the conventional rules of teaching clearly would not work. I had to struggle like never before during my initial three months, failing

miserably every single day to create even an alpha position for myself amongst the lot. Then again, my commitment to my students is what urged me to step beyond my comfort zone, to brainstorm outside the box, and to formulate adaptive teaching methods that would be most relevant for the situation of my pupils. I share my most effective hacks below.

"Teamwork is the best way to work"

Initially, my classroom was arranged in the typical style, with rows of benches lined up throughout the room. With almost a hundred students, the entire space was occupied with desks, with very little walking space. Also, I was struggling to control so many students by myself.

As soon as I was able to identify students with natural leadership qualities, I put an end to this jumbled architecture; I designed a planned seating arrangement. Instead of having students sitting in separate benches, I joined their desks to form groups. Each group accommodated eight students facing each other, and for each group, I assigned one group captain, who would be in charge of maintaining discipline of the others. The captains would have to report to me with their data at the end of the day.

By doing this, the advantages were: 1) more control over students and their behavior, as now my responsibility over ninety students were divided among the captains, 2) a lot more space in the room, giving me the opportunity to teach from anywhere in the class, not just the front, and 3) easier assignment of group work, which taught the students to work collectively and to engage in discussions.

"Rules are not meant to be broken"

Controlling students is no easy task if the teacher's authoritative role is not strong enough. In my situation, with such a large number of students, I had to set strict boundaries before the students took charge of my class. Without delay, I designed children-friendly classroom rules on a poster, making sure to include drawings for easier comprehension, and hanging it up on the front wall. We spent some time discussing the importance of having rules, and the negative aspects of breaking them. The whole class understood this need, and we put them into effect. Our class rules were clear and simple: 1) Raise your hand and wait to be called upon, 2) No fighting, 3) Keep the classroom clean, 4) Share materials and return with a 'thank you', and 5) Show a 'thumbs-up'

when your work is done.

Having class rules made my expectations clear to the students, and it made a big difference in holding students accountable for their behavior. Also, by first discussing why we need rules, it did not feel like an imposition, and students were more eager to follow through.

"Consistency is key"

Although we set the class rules, there were obviously those rare times when they were broken, like if a student blurted out a question or a small fight occurred. On the flip side, some students were doing deeds that were exceptional, like picking up classmates' trash or spending break-time helping a friend with reading. Both these extremes had to be addressed. That is when I designed a reward and consequence system. Students with negative behavior would get warnings and have their name on the board, getting tick marks if they persisted in misbehaving. As soon as they would start behaving again, their name would be taken down. If their name stayed, they would have to forgo recess. As for the students with good behavior, a sticker or stamp would be given for them to collect, and for every twenty stickers, they would earn a prize.

In designing such a system, I had to maintain strict consistency. If ever I was ignoring a good or a bad action, it indicated to the students that either they can get away with being naughty, or that I was not being caring to their exceptionally good behavior, which are both irresponsible acts of a teacher.

Maintaining perfect consistency in rewarding and giving consequences to my students showed them that I am in charge, and that they would be held responsible for their behavior. Also, the sticker rewards they could collect gave them a goal to look forward to. They would compete to earn the prizes.

"Learning can be all fun and games"

Preaching can never beat practice. When we actually do something, we are involving most of our senses in the activity, and so we feel a deeper connection, than if we only used our ears for hearing. This is evident when it comes to teaching children. The more we involve them in conducting activities and learning through games, the faster they learn concepts and the more they remember.

In my class, I tried to design games and activities for

almost every new topic. We learned verbs by playing charades, we practiced spelling through BINGO; we used sticks and dough in geometry, pebbles in arithmetic; in Science, we used art and wall posters to study the different countries; we engaged in role plays and dramas to portray the various forms of pollution. While designing the activities, I just had to make sure that the objective of the learning outcome was being fulfilled. After introducing this form of fun-filled intervention, I noticed that every student paid more attention and were doing better in their studies than before. More than that, the joy in our classroom was exceedingly high when we played games; some students would even want to stay back in school to play and learn more.

"Now Hiring: Young Leaders"

Maintaining a classroom is hard work; there is an incredible amount of duties to be fulfilled, and that responsibility typically falls on the teacher. What we do not often pay attention to is that some of our students have an inherent knack for completing tasks, just as well, if not better, than adults. Also, as the saying goes, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop," and so many of my restless students, after quickly finishing their classwork, would often cause disturbance just to release their excess energy. Hence, my classroom had two situations: a ton of chores to be taken care of and a ton of students with potential to be engaged in some activity. I immediately solved this mystery by merging the two problems: I introduced student jobs, naming the group 'young leaders'. Available posts in my class included: librarian, paper distributor, office aide, homework helper, teaching assistant, and queue maintainer. Each month, new students would be employed through a fair voting system. Having students perform jobs around the class, thus, had many plus points: 1) students learned to practice leadership, 2) the naughty ones were now focused in positive work, 3) there was a continuous flow of tasks being done around the class without anyone being told to, and 4) a lot of unnecessary burden was taken off my shoulders.

These were the five strategies that helped me survive as a teacher to so many students in such a challenging environment. When these methods began taking form, I started loving teaching, and it now has become my passion. These methods can be used for any group of students, and they may even work well with adult learners. Teaching and learning can be so much more meaningful with clever interventions as these. ■