Sometimes the key is to let a student know how much other students have benefited from the assistance that you are recommending.

At the end of each term, there are students that always surprise me with their success. They are the ones who do poorly for the first half or more of the term, receive a wake-up call and turn their grades around. Instead of failing, these students pass and sometimes earn good grades considering the problems that dogged them earlier. Despite the odds, these students succeed.

I've discovered three challenges that students who turn things around and come out on top must learn to master.

**Erratic test or assignment performance**

This type of student may need help in test taking, reading, writing or study skills but may not know where to go for help. They may be too shy to ask for guidance. You can't make a student seek help, but sometimes the key is to let a student know how much other students have benefited from the assistance that you are recommending.

**Poor time and energy management**

Some students have a hard time prioritizing their life activities and need instruction and counseling on how to better manage their time and prioritize their work load. For example, many students have never heard of using a simple A, B, C designation system or other strategies for prioritizing study time and assignment completions.

**Overwhelmed by the college environment**

Students coming to college from high school may see college as the 13th grade, rather than understand college to be a unique, independent learning environment with a different set of behavioral expectations. Thus, they may not be initially prepared to succeed in higher education.

Returning students who have been out of school for sometime can also suffer culture shock. They may fear they lack the academic skills necessary to do well, or that they won’t fit in with the younger students.

In both cases, the students may need specialized advice to help them cope with the changes they’re going to have to make to succeed. You can serve as a stepping stone, or recommend that they seek the services of a college counselor.

**You can make the difference**

Remember the fable of the tortoise and the hair? It looked like that slowpoke turtle was going to lose the race, didn’t it? With some of the right help, any student facing special challenges can be a winner if they have the desire. Your understanding, wisdom and willingness to go the extra mile by pinpointing the most efficacious help students need will often make the difference between success and failure. When you stop to observe, listen and recommend appropriate help, you teach for success!
I love to teach chemistry with the help of slide projectors, molecular models and PowerPoint presentations to supplement traditional blackboard, lecture-based teaching methods.

Besides traditional handouts and other aids designed to help students understand chemistry, I ask each student to contribute a class presentation. Each chooses a topic from the syllabus; no duplicate topics are allowed. This assignment requires students to deliver a brief introduction about the topic followed by a short description of the properties of the chemical they are studying.

This is followed by a review or summary of the textbook’s look at the biological or medical applications of the chemical. They can also discuss any other practical applications of the chemical that are important to our daily lives.

Besides the traditional tools to help students learn chemistry, I have each student contribute a class presentation.

To increase audience understanding, students create several forms of visual aids to use during their presentations including handouts. If needed, I can photocopy these handouts for them. They distribute their handouts before they begin their presentation. They also prepare slides, create overhead projection sheets or design a short PowerPoint vignette for their 10-minute presentations.

Students find this project extremely helpful because they can relate organic and biochemistry to their own lives. What is more, they are learning from several sources: the instructor, the textbooks and their peers. My students also learn valuable public speaking skills on top of the chemistry material they have learned through the presentations they give and listen to in class.

I teach a developmental course called Introduction to College Writing. My students have a great deal of difficulty varying their sentences and punctuating them correctly. I got an idea for a learning activity to help them after receiving, as a birthday gift, a group of words and punctuation marks on small, magnetized tiles. Using these tiles, my daughters had such fun placing strange comments on my refrigerator that I saw a great classroom application. Although a few blank tiles were included in the set, I was able to create additional tiles by using magnetized strips that are available at discount stores. These strips can be trimmed to any size.

To prepare the class activity, I provide a large assortment of tiles containing nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, prepositions and conjunctions. I also include punctuation marks: periods, question marks, commas, semicolons and colons. Students use a metal surface to hold the magnetic tiles and create the sentences.

I suggest students work in pairs or larger groups, writing sentences and punctuating them correctly—usually amid much laughter. In smaller classes, the groups write short stories.

If you try this fun and helpful educational activity, be prepared for much silliness. To add to the fun, you could also include a few interjections and exclamation marks.

The hands-on aspect of this activity, the peer interaction and the sense of fun attract both traditional and non-traditional students to this lesson that often causes yawns when presented in a lecture format.
Envision a shaman. You might see a wise man or woman, probably old, a teller of tales and a bringer of truths, maybe even a user of magic. Well, this is how some of your students probably see you!

If this is their perception, how well do you fit the mythic image of the shaman?

Are you wise, a teller of tales and a bringer of truths? Do you bring your stories to meaningful conclusion by skillfully bringing forth the truth of the matter for all to see? Are you a fount of information or know where to find it if you don’t know? Do you have more experience with your subject matter and, maybe, the world around us than do your students? Have you been down roads they have yet to travel?

Like shamans, you have some resource advantages. You have the Instructor’s Edition of the text complete with test banks, quizzes, lecture, discussion notes, etc. You also have the ideas from many conferences, magazines, journals, and newsletters (TFS included!) to help keep you in touch with the teaching profession and the greater world around you. Your use of these resources may help you further impress your students with your masterful actions.

Skilled in communication, it’s your native talent to reach people, to engage in conversation across cultural, gender, economic and social barriers. To be so gifted is to teach with the understanding of a shaman.

In short, it’s your wit and intelligence mixed with a healthy dose of good humor that enables you to invoke trust and rapport with your students, to bring forth the true spirit of learning in and out of your classroom. And bringing forth passion for the truth, you make the spirit of learning indeed magical.

None of us are like the teachers of Harry Potter’s Hogwarts school, but we still lead our learners down magical paths that will last a lifetime.

Beyond the subject matter we teach, if we do our jobs in the right spirit, we bring to the minds of our students very real perceptions of accomplishment, pride and positivism. In short, we can help students transform themselves—so unrefined that first day of class—into finely-honed thinkers who see the world from a broader, deeper perspective.

The shaman factor can be used positively to win the respect of your students, and build rapport and a collaborative spirit within them. Or it can be used negatively to widen the gulf between student and teacher. It’s your choice.

Win $300 to $25 in the TFS 2003 SuperIdeas Contest!

But, to win you must enter. Send your entries to us by E-mail (much preferred!), fax or mail by May 31, 2003.

See the bottom of page 2 for TFS postal and e-mail addresses and fax number. Submissions must fit into one of two idea categories: full-length SuperIdea articles (approx. 450-900 words) and QuickTips (approx. 50-449 words).

In addition, all articles submitted will be eligible for publication in upcoming TFS issues. The winners will be notified after July 1, 2003, and featured in the August, Sept. and Oct. 2003 issues. The copyright to all published articles must be assigned to Pentronics Publishing.
I have just passed the 20-year mark of full time college teaching. A very brief stint in the military and five years as an industrial chemist did little to prepare me for my first year in the college classroom. Facing a lecture of 120 students for the first time induced a commotion of fearful thoughts.

The panic was more than I could have conjured up in war and in an industrial accident. Those situations I was adequately prepared for. Graduate work did not prepare me for teaching in spite of the experience of three years on a graduate teaching assistantship. My graduate studies were aimed at producing a researcher and not a teacher.

Year one of being a young professor was filled with drudgery and disappointment. All my great lectures seemed to be falling on deaf ears. The students’ grades on my tests did not seem to reflect the quality of information being presented. They felt overwhelmed with the facts and had trouble applying the information in problem-solving activities. Whining about assignments was a regular event. The next two years were a tedious repeat of the first. I remember thinking, “Why did I not pursue research? Why did I not stay in industry? Why did I not stick with the Air Force?”

The renowned educator John Dewey was known for scrutinizing the teachers under his administration and tutelage. He regularly asked what they were gaining from teaching year to year in the classroom. His most profound inquiry was said to be something along the lines of, “What have you gotten out of your 20 years of teaching? Did you gain 20 years of experience or did you do twenty years of your first year?” I will admit for the first 3 years I repeated the same mistakes. Then I went back to college to work on a higher education degree for an upcoming administrative position at a university. The program taught me how to gain experience from my teaching and from my life. Thus, the remaining 17 years of teaching then became a ladder of learning experiences.

Here are thirty ways to improve your teaching gleaned from twenty years of teaching:

1. I am here for the students.
2. Learner-centered teaching works.
3. Respect of students comes with competency.
4. Learn from your students’ successes in class.
5. Learn from your students’ failures in class.
6. Tests are not an absolute measure of student mastery.
7. Good tests aren’t easy to design.
8. Good tests aren’t easy to grade.
9. Be an expert; not a know-it-all.
10. Students gain more by learning to look up information.
11. Students gain more by learning to apply information.
12. Students gain more by learning to evaluate information.
13. Do regular formative assessments of student learning.
14. Give students resources, not just facts.
15. Good teachers instruct students on life skills.
16. Good teaching goes beyond presenting basic content.
17. Quality of content coverage is more important than quantity of content coverage.
18. Good laboratory sessions are open-ended and encourage inquiry.
19. Good laboratory sessions stress safety and environmental stewardship.
20. Encourage students to ask questions.
21. Cut down on lecture and increase active learning.
22. Pause in a lecture to give applications and examples of factual information.
23. Stress that knowledge was acquired by the scientific method.
24. Be excited about teaching.
25. Be excited about science.
26. Show enthusiasm in the classroom.
27. Appropriate humor improves learning.
28. Be friendly and smile.
29. Avoid too much criticism and cynicism.
30. Good teaching takes a lot of work.

Teaching has moved from giving lectures to teaching using the latest pedagogical strategies. In addition, there is a growing emphasis on developing a learning environment rather than just providing a physical classroom or laboratory space for teaching. Faculty are now expected to provide the skills students need to master the information and to be life-long learners.

The best instructors now emphasize applying educational theories to improve retention and success in science and other courses.
Learning a foreign language can be very demanding and often frustrating, since it means acquiring an immense amount of vocabulary, complicated grammar concepts, and sometimes seemingly senseless rules. Above all, the most intricate aspect of learning any new language is correct pronunciation. The English language is no exception. Most ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors have taught students who quickly grasped the basic skills of a language, only to fail in distinct pronunciation. And if words are not pronounced well, spoken communication becomes difficult to understand.

Mastering another language involves more than memorizing grammatical concepts, linguistic structure or similar technical principles. Our ear is accustomed to the sound of our native speech; as a result, our speech organs become permanently adjusted to or inhibited by our spoken language. This may be partially due to our inexperience in processing different sounds or to gradual elimination of those sounds.

In many instances, the art of reproducing new sounds depends on the individual's ability to sing. Why not set aside a few minutes each class to help students improve their speech through the one element that has been overlooked when teaching foreign languages: music?

For most of us, music represents a comforting and entertaining element. Most of students enjoy listening to popular music using MP3 technology or on CDs, tapes, television or radio. They may also have fun singing Karaoke from time to time. Music is a permanent part of our lives; it is difficult to imagine life without the sound of music.

Taking ten or fifteen minutes at the end of each class for singing will prove not only relaxing but educational as well. Consider a catchy tune, a popular song, a folk song or a patriotic or holiday-themed one that students have heard before. Print the lyrics to the song, using the same tools used to help pronunciation that students would find in the course's textbook or practice book.

While I have used this exercise to teach English to ESL students, instructors teaching foreign languages to English-speaking students can also use singing as an effective learning tool to help vocabulary and pronunciation as well.

Learning by singing to music does not have to involve an unusual skill or great effort. For those of us who don’t play a portable musical instrument such as a guitar or electronic keyboard, there is always the cassette recorder. The wonderful aspect is that students never tire of singing.

Vladimira Williams
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Singing Helps Foreign Language and ESL Students

Find Fame and Fortune as a TFS Partner Author?

Well, we can’t promise that, but TFS Partner Authors (PAs) do have more fun, and being published can give your next job or tenure application a real boost. If you like to write about teaching improvement, consider becoming a TFS Freelance Partner Author (PA).

TFS needs authors who can develop content for the next series of QuickCourses or write articles for TFS Monthly. Also, TFS Partners can earn a 10 percent finder’s fee for successfully recommending TFS to a nonsubscribing college or university. This fee can range from $20 - $159 depending on the subscription type. If you would like to find out more, contact Jack Shrawder at 800-757-1183 or jack@teachingforsuccess.com.

Teaching using singing to music does not have to involve an unusual skill or great effort. Students find music a welcome deviation from their standard in-class routines. Without an occasional break from work or studies, fatigue and boredom set in, and both can lead to low motivation. To prevent this, get away from regular instruction and inject a song into your classroom.

Find Fame and Fortune as a TFS Partner Author?
If you teach an on-line course, are all of your exams and quizzes paperless, i.e. administered via the Internet? Do you require any of your assessments to be proctored, or given on campus? Please describe.

The exams are on the Web. Some are mailed to students and administered at home or at other institutions.

—Brian R. Shnaefsky, Ph.D., TFS Partner Editor Biology & Environmental Sciences, Kingwood College, TX.

Approximately 10 percent of their grade is made up of on-line quizzes and 50 percent of their grade is equally divided between a Midterm and Final Exam. I administer on-line quizzes that are available all weekend.

Students are allowed multiple attempts, with a time limit, until they pass the quiz with at least a 75% (questions are selected randomly from a quiz pool in every attempt). The Midterm and Final Exam are paper exams, contain similar questions to their quizzes and are proctored. They have one week to take each exam at a testing center.

—Rebecca Schantz, Assistant Professor Mathematics, Prairie State College, Chicago Heights, IL.

I require only the final exam to be proctored at any legitimate distance education facility. I am now looking into on-line testing.

—Dr. Virginia Ragan, Geology/Geography Department, Maple Woods Community College, Kansas City, MO.

Quizzes are via the internet, tests are to be taken in the campus testing center; papers are mailed/faxed/delivered to me, with a synopsis posted on-line for peers to read.

—Theresa Chop, Full-time faculty, Penn Valley Community College, Kansas City, MO.

My course has options for on-line and paper assignments. Because we meet once a week the students have the option to turn in some assignments at that time. Also, they learn to take on-line quizzes, use Internet/CD ROM practice material, and interact face to face as well as on the bulletin board discussions. They do have to take one departmental final that is handwritten and proctored on campus for assessment purposes.

—Gayle Feng Checkett, Professor of English/ESL, St. Charles Community College, St. Peters, MO.

I have two exams, both on-campus, that I proctor. If the date and time is impossible for some students to make, they can make arrangements to take the exam under supervision, usually with me. Exams can be proctored by designated people at libraries and schools close to where the student lives.

—Gayle Feng Checkett, Professor of English/ESL, St. Charles Community College St. Peters, MO.

For my class, the students have to come on campus and take the exam under supervision, usually with me. For other on-line classes, there are tutors available at the distance sites.

—Rebecca Schantz, Assistant Professor Mathematics, TFS QQ Editor, Prairie State College, Chicago Heights, IL.

Exams can be proctored by designated people at libraries and schools close to where the student lives. A proctor agreement must be filled out before the student can take the test.

—Brian R. Shnaefsky, Ph.D., TFS Partner Editor Biology & Environmental Sciences, Kingwood College, TX.

Quizzes are via the internet, tests are to be taken in the campus testing center; papers are mailed/faxed/delivered to me, with a synopsis posted on-line for peers to read.

—Theresa Chop, Full-time faculty, Penn Valley Community College, Kansas City, MO.

The student can take the test at any institution with distance learning that agrees to proctor the test. Arrangements are made by the student with the institution whose representative contacts me. My courses have a significant portion of discussion and essay questions, in addition to E-mail. The students are recognizable by individual personality expressed in writing throughout the course.

—Dr. Virginia Ragan, Geology/Geography Department, Maple Woods Community College Kansas City, MO.
Creating a Shared Interest Humanizes Learning

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I find that by interjecting myself as a topic into listening, speaking and grammar classes creates a shared interest that we can build as the semester progresses. By doing this I have found that students pay more careful attention than they would in lessons involving hypothetical people in a textbook. You can also use these self-telling exercises—infusing your own life and experiences into your lectures and discussions—to help students embrace almost any discipline of study. My tips below are written from my own experience teaching ESL students, but with a little effort, you can alter them to fit your course, too.

Listening made easy
In the lower level listening and speaking course I use an approach where students write everything I put on the board. Going through phases of my life history, students listen and write. Speaking on their part starts when they are ready, when they have reached their threshold of absorbing enough information to confidently respond. Naturally, as I am relating these events, I check for comprehension at every step using sentence completion, yes/no responses, informational, and multiple-choice questions as needed. I’m careful to proceed only if I have verified that understanding and retention on the part of the students have taken place.

Positive reactions to real history
During my mini-presentations about my life, students interact by asking questions or adding information as they wish. What holds their interest is personal and cultural details about people and events related to me. After presenting the material, I review it quickly, allowing the students to complete sentences. As a wrap-up, students write this piece of my history in sentence form using their notes and hand it in.

Building on the known
The next time we meet, I expand on my history and tell students about events that occur in my life, weaving the information into the world around us.

On a regular basis, I update students on my family and friends, letting them ask questions if they want. Through our open communication, I have found that students see me more as an equal. I’m someone that they need not feel intimidated by in their quest for understanding of the language and the culture in which they live.

Does it work with advanced students?
Using the same approach of focusing on information about me, I teach advanced students the sophisticated English verb tense system, which has twelve forms, some of which do not show up in other languages. Textbooks successfully present the forms in isolation, but my goal is to have them internalize the various parts so that they can use them more fluently.

To help students grasp the intricacy of the English verb tense system, I create a timeline of my life, using 12 sentences, each featuring one of the 12 different verb tense forms. After working through a timeline of my major life events as a sample, we start work on student timelines. Each time the class meets, a different student brings in a timeline made up of twelve sentences minus the verbs. The other students take an assigned sentence and put the verb answer on the board. Together we go through the sentences to check for correct answers, getting us into discussions about variations of the verb tenses and the student’s life based on the timeline.

Isn’t this risky?
By taking my students’ focus off of themselves and their books and onto their teacher, my classes have changed from merely good enough to dynamic. It’s true that my students end up knowing a lot about me, my past, my present and my future. Yet, in divulging this information, I create trust between me and my students, allowing an environment where they can feel free to share information about their lives to others in class. At the very least, they come to know a teacher on a multidimensional, personal level and this interaction allows students to see me more as a peer than an imposing authority figure.

If you decide to use a similar series of exercises in your classes, students should be encouraged to embrace the American experience while listening to your stories, but also be invited to share information and attitudes from their own cultures and countries as well.

When a student can show a real human interest in the subject matter they are studying, they are more ready, willing and able to understand and remember that material. And if you build a common ground with your students throughout the course, you will help them to grow as students, and individuals as well.
When the Spell-check Function Falls Short
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No matter how advanced computer technology becomes, students still must be responsible for one very basic part of their education—spelling. My students typically depend on the spell-check tool in their word processor program to bail them out. Unfortunately, what often happens is an incorrect word (correctly spelled) is substituted and changes the meaning of the sentence. For example, one student wrote, “I defiantly want to spend more time in Colorado next year.” Of course, the adverb she meant to use was definitely.

In order to combat this, I provide students with study guides to help them spot commonly made mistakes. In one of these guides, I included errors in a series of double-spaced, one-page narratives. Students can generally spot an error if a sentence is presented in isolation; however, if the same error is presented in context, in the middle of a long paragraph, it becomes more difficult to locate and correct.

I explain to students that some of these could be typographical errors while others are just plain using the wrong word. For instance, the difference between “quiet” and “quite” is merely a transposition of letters—an easy mistake to make if you spend much time in front of a word processor, and one that a spell-check program will not catch.

My study guide also contains a page of words that can be confused with each other. Common offenders include: there/their/they’re; no/now/know; affect/effect; and it’s/its. Students can use these guides as they write papers thinking for themselves instead of relying solely on a machine to make proofing decisions.

Using a Bad Date Experience to Teach Good Writing
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As an English Composition instructor, I try to teach my students to use vivid, concrete details in their essays and to avoid vague, abstract descriptions that leave the reader wondering what exactly the author had in mind.

An engaging learning activity
To illustrate the power of descriptive language, I ask students to write early in the term a paragraph describing a bad date they’ve experienced. I then explain to the students that if they describe the complex social interaction of a date merely as bad, they might think they’re being clear, but the reader may not know exactly what they mean.

I ask each of the students to read his or her description to the class. The class gets a few laughs from hearing about dates ranging from the amusing to the outrageous. The exercise helps create the relaxed, informal learning environment that I try to establish in the classroom. Most importantly, students are surprised by the variety of forms a bad date can take, and they realize how abstract terms can mean very different things to different people.

This very personal, concrete writing exercise seems to stick with the students. When they turn in an essay that contains abstract wording, I write a comment urging them to use descriptive language. I also add, “Remember those bad dates?” Their rewrites show that my students do indeed remember the lesson.

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