

YOUR FIRST FEW WEEKS AT SCHOOL

A Guide for Interns in the DePaul Urban Teacher Corps Program established by AT&T

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Introduction

Your first few days are just around the corner, and here are some last minute details as well as some ideas and thoughts about teaching students from a different culture, or from a familiar culture that you haven't been around in a while.

When you start any new job, you are going to be on trial and under observation for several months. It is simply a matter of trust and credibility which can only come over time. Sooner than you think, students will be excited to see you and will count on seeing you. The first few days will seem exhausting, but they should be interesting and you're bound to come home with stories. Write those stories down; you will look back at them in June with amazement.

Your first few days

This is the time when Maslow would recommend you to take care of your basic needs. Where is the faculty bathroom? Where can you store your personal belongings? What food service is available? Is there a refrigerator or microwave available? What is appropriate dress (if you look young, you may wish to dress up a bit more to distinguish yourselves from the eighth graders!)? How do you want students to address you (Mr., Ms., Mrs., or Miss)? What is the phone number of the school? How can you receive a call? Where is a safe place to park your car? Which doors are open in the morning? Where do I sign in/out? Where's the pop machine? Where can you hang your coat? Where is a safe place for your purse, etc.? How early must you leave your home to get to school on time?

Use this time to get acquainted with the building and the people who work there. Introduce yourself to everyone. Even when you're too tired to meet another person, do it anyway; it'll pay off later. Your site liaison is usually very helpful with introductions. Tell people who you are and why you're there. "I'm an intern with DePaul's Urban Teacher Corps. . . it's a new program designed to better train future teachers for Chicago's urban schools with an emphasis on the practical aspect. I'll be here everyday for the entire year. I have specific jobs to do, and I hope to be able to work with you at some point."

Make a special trip to the custodial staff office, and an extra-special visit with the school clerk. It is extremely important to have a good working relationship with the school engineer and the school clerk. They can help you in numerous ways. The school clerk will be very busy for the first few weeks, but it's vital that you meet him/her.

The clerk orders and distributes your check, schedules substitutes (and on paper, you are a substitute) for class coverage, takes your phone messages, handles school files, and orchestrates many other functions in the school. In summary, if there's one person whom you should remember with cookies around holiday time, it's the school clerk.

Your job will be as a general assistant for the first two weeks. You will be doing a variety of jobs until the school gets rolling, and you may suggest what you'd like to be doing or where you'd like to be working. Be flexible.

If there is a school fact book, get a copy. This is a great way to learn the names of students, faculty, and staff. Pick up a local newspaper. Ask a student to translate it if necessary. Get tips on how to pronounce unfamiliar names. When is the next LSC meeting? Go! In general, don't act like a savior who has come to resurrect the school, nor should you act like a know-it-all (because you don't). Above all, as the clerk from Hayte E.S. recommends, ASK QUESTIONS!

Your Principal

By now you should've met your principal. Also a very busy person, the principal is your employer, and should be treated as such. Most of your problems and questions can and should be worked out with your site liaison and other teachers, but for things such as permission to miss a day of school, asking for a letter of reference, extremely problematic situations with your not receiving a check, as well as any other situation that your site liaison cannot help you with. Don't be surprised to find your principal, because of the nature of the job, to be a bit of a politician; after all, we *are* in Chicago!

Fellow Teachers

Surprising as it may be, your greatest challenges may not come from your students, but from other teachers. You're entering a culture in itself of Chicago Public School teachers, a rare breed. You will be working with some of the most caring, diligent, wonderfully creative and talented professionals around. These teachers will inspire you, and you in turn will affirm their commitment and dedication to the children and to the City of Chicago.

You may also be working with some teachers who at one time were dedicated and excited about their work, but because of many factors, have become disenchanted with inner-city teaching, the system, and teaching in general. Many of them are waiting around for retirement. It won't take you long to identify both types.

Although it will be tempting to voice your opinion and feelings about certain teachers, hold your tongue. There is a huge grapevine, and there are many teachers who would love to welcome you into their "gossip" or "toilet-talk" (as some schools refer to it as the lounge is usually next to the bathroom). This can be dangerous at any time, but especially at the beginning. It will be difficult to resist voicing your frustration at seeing the way some teachers or staff members work, or don't work.

Wait at least until after many months have passed before you even remotely add to those conversations. By that time you will have made friends with colleagues whom you can trust with your opinions.

Your colleagues are your greatest resource. At every opportunity, learn from them, observe them, and question them. You can learn what to do (and what not to do!). That's the whole purpose of this program. Ask them to observe you and for feedback on your work (but also remember that they are not the final authority on your ability; filter all criticism: decide what is useful and throw out what is not).

The Students

These are the people from whom you hopefully will receive your greatest happiness. It will be difficult at first as they will test you. Follow through on what you say. Be reliable. Begin to build trust. Your first few weeks will require a lot of energy from you to teach them how you want to be treated, and how you expect them to behave. If you do that at the beginning, the rest of the year should be a breeze. Some people believe "Don't smile until Christmas." Others say: "Get to know some of the popular boys who have influence on others, be able to call them by name in the hall and in the classroom, you may never know when you will need them." A teacher at Amundsen H.S. says: "Be friendly, but don't be their friend. They have plenty of friends. You are of better use to them as a teacher, you're always their authority figure. They need it, and it's right. Raise them to your level, when they reach it, raise your standard."

Cross-cultural Training

Some of the RPCV interns last year mentioned how similar urban teaching was to their Peace Corps experience. You don't have to go far to find an unfamiliar culture in Chicago. As an effective urban teacher who is with students from a different culture, you should feel competent in your ability to:

1. verbalize your own cultural attitudes and values.
2. acknowledge and analyze your personal prejudices.
3. understand your role as an urban teacher.
4. identify your personal strengths and weaknesses and how it might impact your role as an urban teacher.
5. differentiate between realistic and unrealistic expectations.
6. to talk openly and honestly about issues, concerns, and fears about teaching in urban Chicago.
7. to identify appropriate support systems that could be used to reduce stress and assist with the new culture.
8. respect and accept differences.
9. to assess motivation and readiness for the Urban Teacher Corps.

[Adapted from: Peace Corps Stateside Teacher Training for Volunteers in Liberia]

Responding to a New Culture

Many people who work in a new culture experience what has been labeled as culture shock. Although everyone experiences culture shock differently, the following are some of the signs that may (they don't always) indicate you're on the old culture shock trip:

1. Minimizing contact with that group.
2. Hanging around with others of your ethnic group.
3. Finding yourself talking about "them," "these people," and blaming "them" for the problem you're having in your work or in your personal adjustment.
4. Finding yourself drinking excessively.
5. Or avoiding contact with people of the new culture in any of a hundred other ways which all boil down to one fact: you may be in culture shock, and you owe it to yourself to start doing something about it.

Be careful not to go the other extreme: overidentification--it can really turn people off. You're saying you think you can fool them. It's not real and they'll know it. Instead, be genuinely curious and interested in your students culture. What part of Mexico are you from? How do you say 'good morning' in Polish? What is soul food like? Would you bring in pictures of the Philippines to show me? Can you bring in some music from Pakistan? Have you ever visited relatives in The South?

[Adapted from: Cross-Cultural Training for Peace Corps Volunteers]

EXERCISES

1. Transitions

Starting a new career, especially in the urban public school environment, is a transition. You have been through many transitions in your life, when your circumstances changed and you had to adjust to new people, a new environment, a new personal or professional role. When you first moved away from home, you had to adjust to a new set of conditions. If you've ever changed jobs, you have gone from the culture of one organization to the culture of another. Going from being single to being married, from being married to having a child, from marriage to divorce, experiencing the death of a spouse, parents--these are all examples of transition, when you had to change your behavior to adjust to changed conditions. Thus it is that you already have many of the skills, techniques, and instincts you need to adjust to a new culture. Think of two distinct occasions in your life when you went through a major change, of place or circumstances/lifestyle or both, and describe them below.

I

II

Now try to recall what you did during those times to cope with the new situation. What did you do that helped you get used to the changed circumstances, to feel comfortable in the new environment? If you changed jobs, you may have made a point of inviting colleagues out to lunch or out for a drink so you could get to know them better. If you were single and got married, you may have purposely tried to learn a new sport or cultivate a new interest that was important to your spouse. If you moved from one part of the country to another, you may have tried to read as much as you could about the new city or region.

Try to think of very specific actions you took or attitudes/qualities you tried to cultivate (patience, humility, tolerance) that helped you. List as many of these as you can for each of these transitions. After you have done so, study the list and decide if any of them will help you now.

Transition One: What I did to cope/adjust:

Transition Two: What I did to cope/adjust:

[Adapted from Craig Storti: A Few Minor Adjustments: A Handbook for Volunteers]

2. Intercultural Skills

The following eleven qualities were shown to fifty intercultural specialists, who were asked to rank them in the order of importance for someone who is going to live and work in another culture. You should now do the same, and then compare your answers to those of the "experts."

_____ To be persistent.

_____ To learn from interacting.

_____ To be flexible.

_____ To be aware of one's own limitations.

_____ To listen and observe.

_____ To tolerate ambiguity.

_____ To respect the other culture.

_____ To avoid stereotyping.

_____ To be non-judgmental.

_____ To be able to communicate.

[From Pierre Casse: Training for the Multicultural Manager]

ANSWERS: 1.To be aware of one's own culture. 2.To be aware of one's own limitations. 3.To respect the other culture. 4.To learn from interacting. 5.To be non-judgmental. 6.To avoid stereotyping. 7.To be able to communicate. 8.To listen and observe. 9.To be flexible. 10.To tolerate ambiguity. 11.To be persistent.

Of course a good case can be made for all of these qualities, and different ones might rank higher in different circumstances, but it's interesting that the winner is awareness of one's own culture, something very few people guess. After all: "I'm going into another culture; it's that culture I need to learn about." Which is quite true; you *will* need to learn about that culture. But in order to adjust, you will need to see how you are different from "them," and what you contribute to the problem. People who are foreign to you aren't just plain different; they're different *from* something, and that *something* is you.

Understanding the culture you bring with you overseas helps you see the one you find much more clearly.

[From Craig Storti: A Few Minor Adjustments: A Handbook for Volunteers]

3. Coping With Culture

There are bound to be a few of the attitudes and behaviors of your students you will not be able to accept or approve of. Needless to say, you aren't likely to conform to these behaviors or adopt them as your own, but you may also lose some of your respect or liking for that culture because of these behaviors. This is a reality for Urban teachers. The following is an exercise to help you put this dynamic in some perspective. Try it whenever the culture starts to get to you. (Meanwhile, remember: there are no doubt things you do and think that your students can't get used to either!)

1. What is the behavior or attitude that you can't accept or find especially irritating?
2. What is the cultural explanation or rationale behind this behavior or attitude? Does knowing this make it any more tolerable?
3. Have you discussed this, in calmer moments, with a trusted colleague or friend of that culture? What does he or she say?
4. How do other people of your culture feel about or deal with this issue?
5. Can you work around it? How? How have you dealt with similar situations with a co-worker or roommate whose behavior you found especially irritating?
6. Put this behavior in perspective. Think of some of the customs and attitudes of host country people that you genuinely like. How do you feel about this behavior as seen in this context?
7. Does this behavior merit the significance you've given it by allowing it to undermine your happiness here?

[Adapted from Craig Storti: A Few Minor Adjustments: A Handbook for Volunteers]