

10 Things That I Wish I Knew When I Started Teaching

Matthew Chi Lee
John P Stevens High School
Edison, New Jersey

matthew.lee@edison.k12.nj.us

These are things that I wish I knew when I first started teaching choir. As they say, there's no better teacher than experience. I hope that this helps you, even if it is old information!

This is excerpted from an orientation document that I provide to my student teachers every year. It is my hope that these reminders help them act as professionally and as efficiently as possible.

1. **We learn by doing** - It's essential that we take risks and try something new. If you've never done it, you won't know until you do. If someone you know has done something that you haven't, ask them for help! No person should have to reinvent the wheel. *We aren't truly alone - although it may feel that way. ACDA has ample opportunities for teachers to connect with each other to share ideas and methods.*
2. **Your students learn by doing, too.** When you address a musical issue, such as cut offs, vowel shape, rhythm, etc., it needs to happen before it happens - just talking about it or telling them how it should be, will not ultimately stick for 80% of your students. *The earlier you communicate your musical expectations, the more likely it is to stay until the performance. The key here is also to be consistent - ask for it every time you practice the piece, whether it be a cut-off, tone choice, vowel choice, etc.*
3. **You get as much out of your singers as you put in.** The more prepared you are, the more results will come from what you do. Being prepared preps your brain and your ear to anticipate and react to things. If you are sight-reading along with your students it's not likely that you'll be able to detect errors. Having an idea of what you want will enable you to hear "the choir in your head" and comparison between that choir and the choir in front of you is what rehearsal is all about.
4. **If what you're doing isn't working, don't be too proud to try something else or take feedback from your students.** They know how they're doing after all- they'll tell you if they're confused, but you have to keep an open mind and an open ear. Sometimes you might just have to ask your students, "OK, that wasn't working – what do you need to be successful?" You might be surprised at the answer. Sometimes they may say "we just need to try it again." Other times they may say "We don't know what page we're on." Transparency and communication is a two way street!

5. **YOU are the teacher.** That doesn't mean you should always stick to a "my way or the highway" mentality, but know what you want but more importantly why you want it. Practice articulating the rationale behind your decisions, and think about the reasons behind it. Before we make any judgment call or decision about our program, our students, or concerts, grading choices, repertoire choices, etc., we convey value. What do your decisions say about your values? Are these good reflections, and do they serve the students?
6. **YOU are the teacher.** You are not there to be their friend, though you can be friendly and get to know your students as human beings. Learn more about them outside of choir, but establish **boundaries**. You don't have to answer questions about yourself if it's an over-share, and vice versa. While students trusting you is a great thing, keep it professional. You can connect to their world, but always keep it professional. If you're worried that a conversation or interaction could be misinterpreted by a colleague or parent, chances are that it's inappropriate. Not a likely scenario but good to remember.
7. **Some battles aren't worth dying for;** think long term, and be willing to let some things go, especially when arguing about it will lead to tension or resentment. Be willing to compromise within reason. In the same vein, think about your to-do list. Not everything is worth spending a prep period doing. Some items are more important others – prioritize your time and energy on what matters *the most*.
8. **A phone call can make all the difference.** When you start writing that email explaining why Johnny didn't earn an A in choir, do you find it exceeding 4 sentences? Are you moving onto your second paragraph? If so, maybe a phone call would be better. It reminds me of some other good advice for any professional - *Never, never, never send a hot email*. Unless you're OK with it being on the front page of the *Times*. A phone call is more personable and can clear up any confusion that might otherwise exist in written form.
9. **Always give criticism in person when possible. Praise publicly when possible.** Each student is a person, first and foremost. We can't expect them to give up their world for your choir; they have a lot on their plates. You are managing people first and foremost, and you need them to **want** to make music with you. They aren't working **for** you - they're feeding their personal and musical souls first. If they are personally dissatisfied (due to feeling mistreated or feeling like things aren't fair) or musically dissatisfied (the music isn't gratifying because it's either too difficult or too easy,) and the finished product isn't something they're proud of) then it will be hard to keep them invested and they eventually leave the choir. Praise and compliment your students as they deserve it. Never do it and they'll grow jaded and discouraged. Do it too much and it will seem insincere. Only offer constructive criticism or consequences in private. "Praise in public, criticize in private." **Never** humiliate or embarrass a student no matter how much you may think they may deserve it.
10. **Things will not just "work out."** They seldom do. You need to know what you want the music to sound like by the performance, but plan to get there at least 1-2 weeks before then. If you add new elements (choreography, other musical changes), the later you add it the less likely that it will actually work. Planning for your end product is paramount, but more importantly, how you'll get there and when.

11. Lastly - ***create time for yourself***. You cannot pour from an empty cup. When you take care of yourself, don't feel guilty about it! How can you take care of others when you can't take care of yourself? On an airplane, you must put on your oxygen mask first before assisting others. As choral educators it's our instinct to put others first – but in doing so burnout can happen. Make time and space for yourself where your phone is off. Turn off the email at least one day a week. Go for walks, read a book - do something for yourself before you return to the classroom, and it may make a big difference in the way you teach. (This could be an article by itself...)

I hope that some of the takeaways were helpful to you. Are there any on this list that resonate with you? Are there any that you disagree with? I'd love to know your perspective. I hope that this helped someone out there! Matthew.lee@edison.k12.nj.us