

## **Surviving your Travels: Reflections of a Traveling First-Year Teacher**

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### **Abstract**

This scholarly essay shares reflections from a traveling teacher finishing her first year teaching high school English. The article addresses the lack of practical help offered to new teachers without their own classroom as well as the challenges of organization, method, collaboration, and transportation that come with issues of space and territory. Suggestions for cooperating with other teachers, alerting students to teacher whereabouts, and keeping organized are offered.

I work in a high school that hired three new teachers without adding any new space for them. As a result, I have the privilege of lugging my classroom materials from place to place though out the building. When I first learned that I would not be given my own classroom and that my “office” would be a conference room shared between three teachers, I started researching traveling teaching, looking for helpful hints and ways to organize myself to survive not only the constant movement, but my first year as a practicing teacher, fresh out of college. Sadly, I found very little helpful information. Sure, there were plenty of blogs full of teachers complaining about traveling, but few with any truly constructive tips. I hope to rectify that oversight by sharing many practices I developed (and stole from others) that allowed me to preserve at least a scrap of sanity by the end of the year.

First and foremost: when you discover that you’ll be traveling, schedule brief meetings with the teachers that are sharing their classrooms with you. As someone completely new to the district, I had no notion of which teachers were not happy about sharing and which teachers were ready to accommodate someone new. You must exercise diplomacy and make the first move in creating positive relationships with these classroom teachers. I discovered through many misunderstandings the added stress that comes with constant territorial negotiations. First year teachers – well, any teachers – do not need an additional pressure.

Before you meet, you should have some idea of what you want for the classroom’s physical space. I found the best way to do this is to sneak into the room alone before you meet and think about how much space you ideally want and how much space is actually sufficient. Decide how you would arrange the room if it was all yours, and make notes of the possible “boundary disputes”, such as white boards, file cabinets, shelves, cupboards, computer, and wall space – especially wall space. We love to show

off our students and create a home for them in our classroom. We all have varying opinions of how best to do this, and I have found that wall space is the most precious commodity in a high school classroom, so tread carefully.

When you meet together, be specific and frank about classroom needs and sharing. Outline, verbally or in writing, exactly specific usage for shared or individual space and devise how you'll use classroom materials. These questions proved helpful in framing these discussions:

1. **How long have you been in our room?** This question major pieces of information: how long he or she has been teaching at your school and how attached he or she is to the arrangement of the room. This tells you how openly or cautiously you should approach sharing.
2. **How should we use or store supplies?** Basically, do you want to share the cost and use of art supplies, white board markers, extra pens, paper, etc., or each supply our own?
3. **Let's say I need a pair of scissors or a post-it note: May I simply borrow from your desk, or do I need to make sure that I have my own always in our room?** I needed to ask this more often, because I found that a teacher may claim that he or she does not mind sharing post-its, but once you borrow a pair of scissors, the gloves come off! BE SPECIFIC. You are basically establishing exactly the appropriate and inappropriate use of your classroom.
4. **Do you use the entire white board on a normal basis, or can we portion off space for a daily puzzle, calendar, announcements, and so on?** Second in prime classroom real estate is the white board. I shared one room with a foreign language teacher who used posted a question every day and needed that space regularly. Another teacher did not care a wink how much space I used. You should also talk about whether either of you may carry over what is on the white board to the next day, or if you should both expect to be able to erase anything from another class to use it yourself, or any degree between.
5. **Do you rearrange the room often?** Once again, you learn about this teacher's philosophy on classroom organization. I like to rearrange the room for group work, circle discussions, individual practice, and so on. Consequently, I needed to know if teachers expected the desks returned to exactly their original position, if they also are dynamic in arranging desks, and if the base configuration would ever change. I have found that rows and columns teachers usually remain so the entire year, while circle teachers tend to rearrange often.
6. **How clean is "clean"?** I learned to ask this question the hard way as well. I am by nature a clutter bug. To me, if all the most evident scraps of paper are in the trash and the markers and pencils are separated properly in their bins, the room is clean. Other teachers, however are more particular about the meaning of clean. To avoid confrontation and the complaint mill, lay out your expectations early.

7. **Is there anywhere else you can work while I am teaching?** Decide how you feel about other teachers in your room while you are conducting class and be assertive about wanting the space to yourself when you have students if that is how you feel. I have to leave when other teachers are teaching and I expect the same treatment. When I am teaching, I have immediate priority over the space and in return, will not interrupt to retrieve forgotten papers during my plan periods.

Once you have laid out your expectations, the year will run much more smoothly. You can always your policies, but if you are a new teacher, you will not have to worry as often about overstepping invisible boundaries.

Every first year teacher experiments to determine the best means of organizing the daily paper shuffling of handouts, homework, late work, announcements, and everything else shoved in our mailboxes. As I track down my freshman's late work, they discover that, despite their best interests, that Trapper Keeper just isn't preventing them losing handouts. We adjust together, and in the process I found a few hints:

- **Find a sturdy, ample canvas bag to carry a little bit of everything – and ask around before you buy one.** Most of the teachers I met those first few days had several leftover tote bags from workshops, textbook promotions, and other events, and they worked better than the chic leather bag I bought myself. I stocked my bag with a pencil pouch holding extra pens, pencils, overhead markers, Sharpies, scissors, paper clips, rubber bands, hand sanitizer, lotion, and, most importantly, Band-aids. I do not enjoy sending a student all the way to the nurse just for a bandage that I could administer in seconds, so tuck a few in your bag or have a community Band-aid box in each room.
- **Use a plastic accordion folder, with pockets for each section, to collect homework.** As soon as I receive their work, I stick it in the appropriate period. Most of these are 6 or 8 pockets, so you can keep the front pocket for all late work. This ensures that you constantly have all the homework in one place, preventing students from claiming that you lost their assignments. (Or at least prevents them from proving anything!)
- **Use a mailbox system for collecting notes or late work when you are unavailable.** If I am in an IEP meeting, and a student needs to submit an assignment, he or she simply finds the correct period cardboard drawer (file folder, stacking tray, or whatever you have), places their assignment inside, and then logs their submission on a clipboard sitting on top of the boxes. As I empty the boxes each day, I highlight the entry, giving me a quick-glance reminder that I may or may not have some new student work to grade. If students do not log their submission, they waive any right to ask when they get their grades!
- **Create a pocket folder or file folder for each class or each period.** I could easily see what I needed to bring with me before my next plan and if I was missing anything. All my handouts and lesson plans go in the designated folder, which I load before my first class to ensure I have the necessary materials.
- **If possible, stash a few extra handouts for each day in a file cabinet in each room.** I was constantly asking students to come by after school to get handouts

from earlier that week or extra project directions because they lost the originals. In a couple classrooms, I had my own file drawer for extra handouts, but I felt about using so many extra copies for all of my rooms, so I used an additional accordion folder with enough extras for absent students.

Once I determined the supplies I needed to carry each day and how to lighten the load, my next challenge was how to keep my students organized and informed:

- **Post your daily schedule, office location, and contact information prominently in every room.** I try to provide all the information students need to find me in every room and place the responsibility on them to check the schedule and stop by during a plan period. They know when and where I am during the day, and they have a constant reminder of my office location and how to contact me from outside school. If student's guardians have a concern or students ask their parents to meet with me, the students are responsible for passing along the necessary information.
- **Create a "where am I?" message board.** This idea came from my resident assistant years ago when I lived on campus and is my newest idea for next year. I laminated a piece of cardstock along with clip art cutouts for different locations: copy room, classroom, office, meeting, and so on. Then I glued Velcro to each of the cutouts and to the board, with a designated location to place the cutout that illustrates my location. I will post this board outside my office door and train myself to switch the appropriate cutout when I come and leave. I hope my students will appreciate this information. As the year goes on and I develop personal jokes with my students, I will add humorous locations such as, "watching American Idol" or "breakdancing lessons" to keep students checking the board.
- **Make "faux white board" space for alerting students to the class schedule, late work, announcements, or detention appointments.** Simply laminate blank pages from giant desktop calendars and fill in the weekly activities. This idea worked amazingly well because, once again, I held students responsible for checking the calendar for what they missed and approaching me for the needed assignment materials. I also deterred the daily question "what are we doing today?" by simply pointing at the calendar and refusing to answer.

After a few weeks, my students figured out the schedule, how to find me, and ways to keep organized. In the end I truly needed to set up a system, train myself to use it, and train my kids to use it. This was the toughest part. In my first year, I felt overwhelmed by the barrage of information, tasks, demands, and pressures and learned most of these practices by trial and error. Here are a few last items to consider:

- **Use bell work as an opportunity to collect yourself.** Since I teach English, I always posted a journal entry each day. As students entered the classroom, they found their journal in a plastic tub, took their seats, and responded to the daily poser. Sometimes they were quick puzzles, other days they were reflective questions to fuel our discussion. I mixed in other curricular areas with logic

puzzles and history trivia supplied by the freshman history teacher. While my students warmed up, I could find my lesson plan, unpack my bag, shake off the frenzied dash to the classroom, and check in with students individually. I awarded points for completion and participation in sharing entries.

- **Recruit a neighboring teacher to monitor your kids in the hallway until you arrive.** With a couple particularly rascally sections, the door remained locked until I arrived so that another teacher could see my students and his during passing periods. Yes, this meant a crowd at the door, but I also was assured that nothing was happening without witness in the classroom.
- **Use luggage on wheels as a classroom library.** Even though my school had an operating elevator, I found that waiting to use it with a bulky cart was too time-consuming, so I switched to a canvas bag approach. On days when students had free reading time, I rolled a carry-on size black suitcase, decorated with book titles around all day. In true cheesiness I created themes tying the suitcase to reading such as “fuel for the journey” and “escape” for a positive spin on having to haul something extra that day.

Traveler teachers have the unique challenge of balancing mobility and routine. We carry our classrooms on our backs and our students’ needs in our hearts. Ultimately, the best advice I can give is to pick your battles, sleep as often as you can, and add an evening stroll to your summer routine in training for dashing through the halls.