Teaching Without Tears

Your First Year in the Secondary School

Jenny Gray

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Preface

"Teacher training" is a misnomer. Today's teacher candidate in most American colleges and universities receives a thorough indoctrination in the philosophy and theory of education; he learns to evaluate the accomplishments and shortcomings of the American secondary school; he learns to design and conduct educational research projects. But, typically, he won't emerge from his teacher training course any wiser than he entered it as far as the everyday functions, tools, and booby traps of his trade are concerned. What will he *do* all day long? He won't know, exactly; and his fumblings will become a source of humiliation to himself, exasperation to his co-workers, and chaos to his hapless students.

It's true he will get his toes damp (not really wet) in his practice teaching experience. But something beyond this token baptismal sprinkling is required to convert college seniors, no matter how dedicated, into competent practitioners of the instructional arts in today's secondary schools. Although the material contained in this book moves in the direction of meeting this need, the reader should be cautioned against viewing it as a pedagogical panacea to the problem of the well-educated but poorly-trained teacher.

In the first place, this is a cookbook (no apology offered); and, like all cookbooks, its usefulness will be limited. A recipe may tell you to break an egg into the batter, but not what to do should the egg turn out to be rotten. More important, there are other educators who are undoubtedly better qualified than I to write a book of this kind, but so far they haven't. Until such time as their consciences goad them into coming forward to do their duty, I find myself operating as a self-appointed oracle. It is only fair, therefore, that the reader be advised of the source of the oracular preachments he will find in the pages to come.

First, I drew on a ten-year accumulation of shoptalk with teacher colleagues, both "new" and "old," in Arkansas, Indiana, Arizona, and California. Elementary school teachers,

as well as junior and senior high school teachers, are represented, as are teachers in the antipoverty and manpower training schools and from adult education programs.

Second, I am indebted for the off-the-cuff accounts of experiences and the value judgments of a number of supervisors and principals, most notably my present principal, James Erickson.

Third, there is my own 11,000 hours in the classroom and 2,000 hours of service with teacher organizations, in-service training programs, student clubs, and so on. Mention should also be made of a three-year period of writing, testing, researching, and classroom teaching with programmed instruction and educational systems. The ideas implicit in both programming and educational systems have made a singular impact on teaching practice generally. Many suggestions throughout *Teaching Without Tears* will illustrate that they have affected my teaching particularly.

My own teacher training was not much help in preparing this book. Although I frequently consulted textbooks and old class notes, it was to decide what material should be left out, not to check up on material I intended to put in. If an item of information was covered in the textbooks—at least in *my* textbooks—I felt there was nothing to be gained by covering it again; so, for the most part, I didn't. There are a few exceptions. Test construction is one, for in many states teachers enter employment before they have completed requirements for a general credential and may not have been exposed to training in tests and measurements.

Teaching Without Tears will have been written in vain if it doesn't start a few good arguments. The people who should have written this book but didn't, will disagree with many of the assumptions made and positions taken. Good! I'm flexible; maybe they'll change *my* mind. There's only one point I feel so strongly about that I'd refuse to budge an inch: The classroom and what goes on in it is tremendously important to all of us—so important that it deserves vastly more attention than it's getting.

JENNY GRAY

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Welcome to the Club

Months, weeks, or, because the world of education moves quickly nowadays, a few hours ago, you were offered your first teaching position and accepted it. Lucky you! From an historical point of view, you couldn't have happened along in a better time or place. Never before has a nation exhibited such interest in its public schools or been so willing to part with hard cash to improve them.

Education is in the process of becoming the biggest business in the land. In doing so, it has inevitably attracted the interest of big industry. Technological innovations now in the process of development will find their way into nearly all of the nation's schools within the next ten years—your first years in the classroom—and into schools in the rest of the world for the next hundred years. You, yourself, will pioneer in the use of many of these innovations.

It will be a thrilling and rewarding time, but not necessarily an easy one. Pioneers run into difficulties. The man who, at sixty-five, has the satisfaction of boasting, "Our family owned

the first automobile in town," can also tell you about the time the family was without transportation for two weeks while his father tried unsuccessfully to patch a tire. In your turn, you will be able to say proudly that yours was the first school in the county to schedule and report grades by computer. But you may also recount to your grandchildren how you flunked all your students one semester because you misunderstood instructions for bubbling your class cards for the computer.

These adventures will come in due time. At the moment, the greatest adventure of all, your first year of teaching, awaits you. With the proper planning, it can be one of the most thrilling years of your life.

Meet Your Principal

After you have signed your contract, go to your school for a private conference with your principal as soon as possible. He will show you your classroom and see that keys are issued so you can come and go as you like. He will talk to you about school philosophy, go over the curriculum related to your teaching assignment, and review daily routine as it affects your particular schedule. During the discussion, the principal will give you some basic understanding of how he deals with his faculty. He will explain teacher ratings and faculty meetings.

The principal will inform you about terms commonly used in the school. Do they call it "homeroom," "division," or "registration" period? Is it "college prep," "academic," or "honors" track? The principal will explain how materials, supplies, and audio-visual equipment are obtained. He will indicate how deeply he expects you to become involved in extracurricular activities. He will discuss both district and school policy concerning classroom discipline.

The principal can also give you advice about other things. He can steer you away from that groovy apartment smack in the middle of the town's red-light district, for example.

Looking for a roommate? He can make a phone call or two and line up some people for you to talk to. He may send you to the district office to fill out forms for withholding federal and state taxes and to sign up for insurance plans offered by the district. Attending to these details early takes the pressure off you later on.

Most important of all, the principal will give you your copy of the teachers' handbook. This literary treasure, usually mimeographed and stapled together, comprises the school's operation and procedures manual, calendar, Bible, and helpful household hints, all packed together in one volume. Nothing will be as valuable the first week of school as this handbook. Underline and make marginal notes to your heart's content; it's yours. Every hour spent studying its contents will avoid three hours of wasted time later on, when you can least afford to squander it.

On your initial visit to the school, you may meet your department head, the secretaries (good people to know), and perhaps a few of your new colleagues. If circumstances permit, take time to get to know these people. You will be asking them a lot of questions.

Your Preschool Homework

After you have said good-by to your principal at the end of your first conference, gather together the goodies he has turned over to you and go home and study as you have never studied before.

First, try to get an over-all picture of what duties the teacher—any teacher—in your school is expected to perform and how he is expected to go about performing them. Be sure you understand how the schedule works; the lunch periods may be tricky. Make a list of your responsibilities as homeroom teacher. In most schools, homeroom is a housekeeping period where lockers are assigned, textbooks are checked out to students for the year, accident insurance cards are filled out for the school clinic, and so on. Slip-ups in numbering and irregularities in alphabetical order may seem inconsequential details at the time, but they may be with you all year and compound your clerical difficulties from week to week. Try to get it right the first time.

Once the homeroom operation is clear to you, take a moment to consider your teaching assignment. A one-preparation teaching load is generally considered tops. If you have only one lesson plan to worry about, you'll have time to make that one plan a good one. You'll be able to track down the supplementary material you need, type up the spirit duplicator masters, prepare the charts, and so on. But a one-preparation assignment isn't always as appetizing as it appears on the surface. For one thing, five classes in ninth-grade science, for example, won't be all that much alike. Some sections will learn faster than others. Also, assemblies and pep rallies will throw one or two classes behind.

The fact that the classes themselves aren't synchronized presents no problem, but complications arise when you finish the unit and give the test on different days. Your test scores will rise from day to day as information about the test items gets around among your other students. Students in the last section to take the test will have picked the brains of students from earlier sections and will, therefore, have an unfair ad-

vantage. To an extent, you can control this by placing all scores on the same curve and pointing out to your first-period students how they scuttle themselves by squealing to the last-period students, but you won't get rid of the problem entirely.

Another fly in the one-preparation ointment is that teaching the same lesson plan over and over can be tiresome. If you're planning to give the same test to each class, you must obviously say and do the same things with each class, bring out the same points when you go over the homework assignment, and provide the same commentary on the text. Month after month of going through four carbon copies of the same class can give you a minor hang-up. You might find yourself in a worse fix than the first-grade teacher with the flat tire. It won't be, "Oh, oh, oh; look, look, look; damn, damn, damn"; it will be "Oh, oh, oh, oh oh; look, look, look, look, look; damn, damn, damn, damn, *damn*!!!"

The most vicious assignment possible is at the other extreme, to have five different preparations—for example, one tenth-grade basic English, one twelfth-grade college prep English, one twelfth-grade business English, one first-year French, and one second-year French. Administrators avoid such assignments, because they realize it means a year of sloppy teaching; it isn't humanly possible to do a decent job with such a nightmare of subjects and students to teach. Yet, sometimes there are circumstances an administrator can't control. He may have staffed his school for 1,500 students, and on opening day 1,700 show up. When this happens,

he must abandon arrangements for what he knows to be good education and do what he can with the personnel available. The situation becomes even worse when he must hand this difficult assignment, not to an experienced teacher, but to a hired-at-the-last-minute tyro already suffering from first-year jitters. (A good reason for getting your teaching job lined up early. The last hired get the roughest assignments.) If there is a shortage of classrooms as well, this teacher will "float," meeting his first-period students in this classroom, second-period students in that classroom, upstairs, downstairs, east wing, west wing, carrying his books and supplies with him as he goes.

Needless to say, the fundamental problem for such a teacher isn't instruction at all; it is survival. He must cut out nonessentials and get all the help he can from other teachers, supervisors, and the school's clerical staff, all of whom will be aware of his plight. He will have all the help he needs if he asks for it. Most important of all, he should indulge in a perspicacious amount of good-natured bellyaching to the proper authorities ("proper" being the ones he can get to listen) to make certain he gets a fair shake his second year.

Quo Vadis?

Just as experienced playwrights often write the last act first, many experienced teachers revise last year's final exam, or compose a new one from the course of study, as the year's first item of business. With this statement of teaching goals written down and available as a guide for teaching strategy throughout the year, they are ready to construct their unit tests, units, and daily lesson plans in a sensible way.

You may, if you wish, borrow a final examination from your department head or from a colleague with the same teaching assignments as yours, and use it as a guide for your year's teaching. It wouldn't be a good idea to construct your own final examination before you've acquired some experience in the classroom. You may be forced to work out your lesson plans directly from the course of study your

first year, but construct your first-year final exams with permanent use in mind.

Before school starts is the time to make up tentative lesson plans for your first week. Don't work out final details or type up spirit duplicator masters for instructional material until you have gone over the plans with your department head. He will know whether your level of difficulty is too high or too low for the students who have been assigned to you, whether the film you have scheduled is likely to be available, and whether there is enough equipment to go around.

Don't plan to do anything but get acquainted the first day. You will be too busy with other things to try anything serious in the way of instruction.

Go through your lesson plan book and write in assemblies, rallies, and school holidays in pencil on the dates on which they will take place. You will find these in your teachers' handbook (look in the Index under "Calendar"). There may be changes, so fill them in your lesson plan book only up to Thanksgiving.

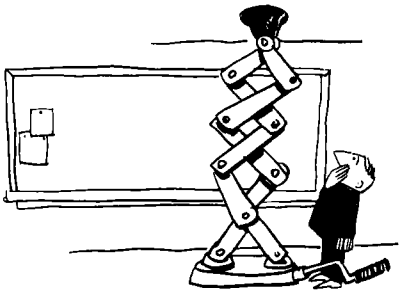
From the course of study, try to make a tentative decision as to what you'd like to cover the first semester and what in the second. Read your textbooks. (Yes, that's right; read your textbooks.) Make marginal notes in pencil as ideas come to you for lesson plans. How does the textbook material tie in with the course of study? Make pencil notes on the table of contents or in the text itself about what to include and what to omit. Does the course of study call for instruction in areas for which you seem to have no material at all? Write yourself a reminder to ask your department head about it.

Your Classroom

Take an afternoon off from your study session to go back to school for a look at the room where you will teach. It will be your job to turn your classroom into an educational "home" for your students. If you don't have a knack for beautification but your wife does, bring her along.

If you are in an old building, there are certain things to watch out for. That yellowed picture of Horace Mann you want to take down is undoubtedly hiding a rectangle of pale wall. Take Horace Mann down, but be sure your new photograph will cover the pale spot on the wall. Don't throw away those slender, two-foot lengths of wood. They are there to hold the windows in place when you open them—so they won't come crashing down and break the glass in the panes.

Go slow about discarding any strange wands, hooks, knobs, or screws you find in the room. Your predecessor may have scrounged for months to obtain these items, and he may have left them for you with tenderness in his heart. They are for something—to open the transom, turn on the radiator, or unlock the steel file.



If you have a cracked window, notify the principal right away, in writing, so he'll have a note to route to the custodian. Give your name, room number, and window(s) identification. Do the same for damaged desks or broken shelving. No, it may not all be fixed before the students arrive for the first day of school; but send the note anyway. Your chances of getting something done about it now, before the other teachers arrive and send in their notes, are better than they'll ever be.

How will you black out your room to show films? Are there shades? *Whole* ones? Masking tape makes excellent patching material if the shades are frayed. If you discover you cannot show films in your classroom but must share a viewing room with several other teachers, it's better to find out ahead of time so you can take account of it in your lesson planning.

You may decide to do a bit of painting—not the room, of course, but perhaps a reading table or a set of shelves. Check with your department head or principal first. Don't ask unless you really intend to do it. You'll get the green light if the building is five years old or more.

Want an extra table in your room? Study carrels? A magazine rack? Talk to your department head. Equipment inventories are sometimes kept on a departmental basis and sometimes on a building-wide basis. You'll need to find out who is the man to see in your school.

Sometimes furniture swaps are worked out between teachers themselves: "I'll trade you the five lab chairs I don't need for your extra specimen case." But wait to see how many students show up before doing anything about student desks.

Don't expect to get everything you feel you need by the end of the first week or the first month—or even the first year if it's an item that costs fifty dollars or more. Seniority plays a big part in who gets what, and for a good reason. What has happened the longest is most likely to keep on happening. It makes sense for the district to invest money in a teacher who has taught the same subject in the same room for four years; he will probably be open for business at the same lemonade stand for quite a while yet. On the other hand, a first-year teacher might get married and quit, or transfer. Who knows?

If your building is new, you're in luck. There will be less difficulty in making your classroom look cheerful and livable. Plastic sprays of ivy and philodendron, paper flowers, and dried grasses all make attractive and durable decorations. If your bulletin board stumps you, get yourself a book of bulletin board ideas. You'll probably find one in the library's collection of teachers' professional books.

Set off a bulletin board area no smaller than 2′ x 3′ for posting school notices. You will need another area about the same size on the chalkboard (not the bulletin board) for present, past, and future homework assignments. You might want to decorate your assignment board with colored chalk, which you can get from the art teacher.

Caution: Use masking tape for putting pictures on your chalkboard. The gummed backing from cellophane tape is almost impossible to remove. Instead of washing your chalkboard, ask the custodian for the special cleaner to be used on it. Water will warp it. If you can't get the special cleaner, work on it with a barely-damp sponge and a clean, dry cloth.

Before you drive nails into your walls for pictures, ask someone. There may be a certain kind of nail you should use.

You can get a fresh desk blotter from the office at the same time you get your paper clips, rubber bands, ruler, stapler, and pads of hall passes and absence slips. While you're getting these things, ask if there are book ends and letter trays available for issue to teachers. You'll need a set of book ends to organize the top of your desk, and a double set of letter trays is a necessity for incoming (to be graded) and outgoing (graded, ready to return to students) reports, exercises, and themes.

If you do not have one at home and are not issued one, buy yourself a desk calendar with a separate sheet for each day. It is on this calendar that you will remind yourself when you are to supervise the football game, when the next faculty meeting is scheduled, and so on.

Female teachers only: How's the view from the student side when you are seated at your desk? If you have one of those see-through jobs, get the custodian to bring you a desk with a back to it. There'll be days when you'll want to adjust your girdle, and that's nobody's business but yours.

Examine your chair and desk for splinters or nails that might snag your clothing; sand them down or pound them in. (Ladies can make do with an emery board and a high-heeled shoe.) Chair squeak? Grease it. Is it too high or too low? Adjust the knobs underneath until it's the right height. Your desk and chair will be your work area thirty-five hours a week for the next nine months. Fix them and forget it.

District Orientation

When you signed your contract, you were given a mimeographed sheet of information about your new school district. Somewhere on that sheet may be found the date and time you must report for regular staff meetings that all teachers will attend. The meetings you're especially interested in, however, are the new-teacher orientation meetings, which will be scheduled a day or two prior to the regular ones.

After your classroom has been prepared to your satisfaction, or nearly so, you will want to glance over your teachers' handbook once more. If you have done your homework thoroughly, the scheduled new-teacher orientation will make sense to you. You'll be able to ask intelligent questions and know what to do with the answers you receive.

You will be ill at ease when you arrive for this first orientation meeting, but you shouldn't be. The people in charge will be charming, helpful, and not in the least forbidding. The meeting will probably start on time, so get there! If it turns out you're the one who's early and the school people are running late, strike up conversations with the other new teachers gathered about. You'll be seeing them all again later.

When it comes to the agenda, orientation meetings usually start at the top and work down. By that I mean they will consider matters of concern to the entire district first, then proceed to the individual school level, and finish in your own department.

There's often an exhilarating, "sick-'em-tiger" atmosphere about these meetings, and you may emerge feeling so oriented you're ready to lick your weight in chalkboard erasers. Not