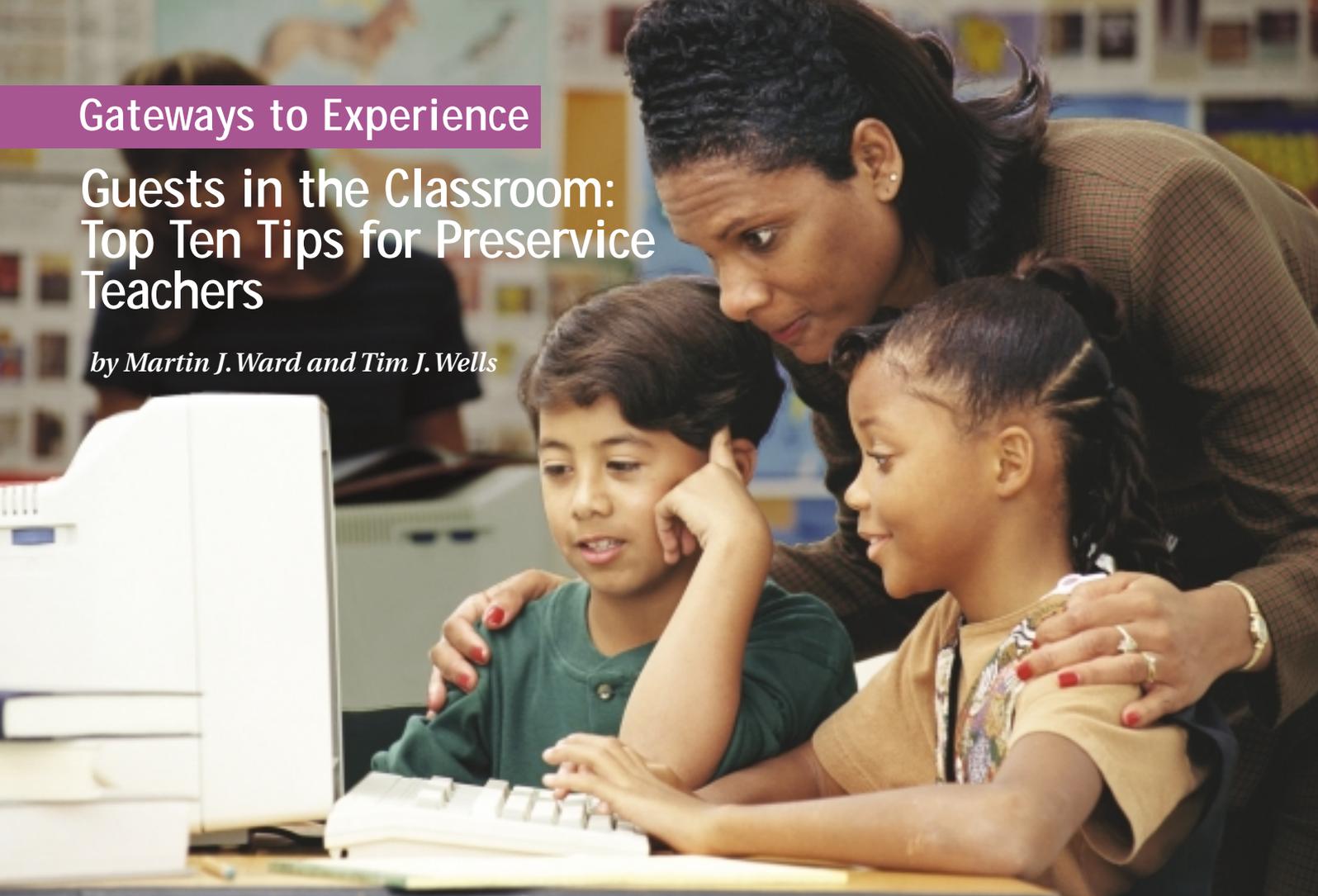


Guests in the Classroom: Top Ten Tips for Preservice Teachers

by Martin J. Ward and Tim J. Wells



Preservice teachers generally are confident and enthusiastic about their abilities to teach effectively (Lortie 1975). These

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desirable qualities are based, for the most part, on the preservice teachers' previous experiences as students in the classroom, not as teachers (Dunkin, Precians, and Nettle 1994; Holt-Reynolds 1992; Pajares 1993). While the personal experience a preservice teacher brings to his or her teacher-preparation program represents an important foundation for professional growth, the role as an instructional leader in the classroom is one that must be learned.

Learning to teach occurs in varied settings in most university teacher-education programs. At Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, the transformation from college students to preservice teachers occurs in a field-based block hosted by partner schools. This intensive field-based experi-

ence helps prepare preservice teachers for the program's culminating student teaching semester. The process of learning to teach in the classroom of another teacher typically produces excellent results. The dynamics of entering another teacher's classroom, however, requires sensitivity, patience, and flexibility in this mentoring relationship. Preservice teachers, as guests in the classroom of the cooperating teachers, are best received when they adhere to specific etiquette.

Preservice Teacher Etiquette

The following top ten tips for preservice teachers entering the classrooms of cooperating teachers are based on the authors' experiences, observations, and feedback gained as university site professors

through a partnership with a local high school.

#1 Remember that you are a guest in the cooperating teacher's classroom.

Though preservice teachers, in a sense, provide “free labor,” most cooperating teachers still consider it much easier to just “do it themselves.” Cooperating teachers do not know in advance what they are going to get in terms of a preservice teacher's attitude, abilities, personality, and teaching philosophies. In some cases, the preservice teacher actually may be viewed as an additional burden for the already overworked cooperating teacher. Furthermore, many effective teachers hesitate to give up their class for fear that their students may be shortchanged. Preservice teachers who enter their cooperating teachers' classrooms determined to be “good guests” are more likely to be rewarded with teaching opportunities and ever-increasing responsibilities.

#2 Observe the cooperating teacher.

It is so easy to be critical. Instead, preservice teachers should be sure to seek out the voice of experience from their cooperating teachers. These experienced teachers know their students and the environment in which they are teaching. Preservice teachers can get to know the students in the classroom and become familiar with the school, but not nearly to the extent of the cooperating teacher who is there every day from the beginning to the end of the year. Of course, everyone makes mistakes, cooperating teachers included. Even in situations when the cooperating teacher is ineffec-

tive, a preservice teacher can learn a great deal. Preservice teachers who give an impression of “knowing it all” undermine their relationship with their cooperating teacher and limit their opportunities for growth. John Wooden, championship basketball coach at UCLA, once said, “What you learn after you know it all is what counts.”

#3 Be positive.

Be a role model for the students. Smile a lot. It makes teaching more fun. Happy teachers are more productive. Negative atti-

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tudes destroy preservice teachers' relationships with students and other educators. Remember, preservice teachers need strong references from their mentors when it comes time to apply for teaching positions. A positive attitude can be demonstrated by giving some extra effort—above and beyond assigned duties, on occasion. Extra effort is viewed by others as a sign of caring. Volunteer, become a part of the school, and make it a better place.

#4 Be professional and punctual.

Dressing as a professional educator is important. Preservice teachers who question whether or

not their clothing is appropriate for teaching usually find out that it is not. Male preservice teachers who wonder about earrings or dyed hair are advised to look at the male teachers and administrators of the building in which they teach for clues regarding appropriate dress and appearance. Schools are traditionally conservative. In settings with dress codes and school uniforms, the desire of preservice teachers to “make a statement” through their personal dress or appearance is not appreciated.

Punctuality and professionalism go hand in hand. Being tardy or absent is simply unacceptable. Preservice teachers are in a position of responsibility and their cooperating teachers, along with school administrators are depending on them. Furthermore, a preservice teacher's effectiveness as a classroom teacher will be either enhanced or undermined by the way he or she manages time.

#5 Be careful what you say in the teachers' lounge, especially to other teachers.

Cooperating teachers expect cooperation, support, and respect from preservice teachers. While teachers may be overheard criticizing one of their peers, most teachers will view the same criticism expressed by a preservice teacher in an entirely different light. It simply is not the place for the apprentice to criticize the mentoring teacher or others in roles as educational leaders. Gossip is definitely best ignored or left unreported by the preservice teacher. Remember the old adage, “If you don't have anything good to say about someone, don't say anything at all.”

#6 Be prepared.

In fact, be overly prepared. Preservice teachers are advised to have “Plan B” ready in case their original intentions go awry. Though preservice teachers can ask a cooperating teacher for suggestions, they always should have ideas of their own to bounce off the experienced teacher. Preservice teachers should create their own bag of tricks for situations where they discover that they have unplanned instructional time. Observing other teachers and deeply reflecting upon what works well for other teachers might enhance preservice teachers’ effectiveness. Educational consultant Harry Wong encourages teachers to “steal from the best” (Wong 1995). He maintains that effective teachers are always on the lookout for new, innovative educational ideas and practices.

#7 Examine your school, home, and work responsibilities carefully.

Preservice teachers should enter into their teacher-education program with the understanding that they are preparing for careers as professional educators. They should ask themselves: Will the time commitment and rigor of teacher preparation fit with the other parts of my life? Field-based teacher education is intensive. Preservice teachers are asked to become involved in the school and the lives of their students. Long hours, challenging circumstances, and extra effort are a part of the preservice teaching experience.

#8 Teaching is hard work.

Preservice teachers are entering into a profession of great responsibility. They are advised to

learn each student’s name as soon as possible. They also should be familiar with the instructional objectives of the school, district, and state. They must examine the course curriculum and know where their lesson fits in the big picture. They should develop instructional objectives that connect the curriculum and established performance standards to their students’ interests and real-world use. Specific instructional objectives should guide lesson planning and inform students of a teacher’s intentions.

#9 Ideals are important, but relationships are essential.

Teaching is a “relationship-driven” endeavor (Renard and Rogers 1999). Preservice teachers should go into their field-based assignments with high expectations, but remember that every day may not always be ideal and pleasant. Preservice teachers must learn and grow from all of their experiences, the trying ones as well as the exhilarating ones. When things get tough or feelings are hurt, asking the university to move a field-based student to another setting is not the solution. Most principals and teachers do not want someone who was unsuccessful in a previous setting. Therefore, choosing to stay and work things out rather than give up and leave is in a preservice teacher’s best interest. Good communication typically prevents small problems from escalating into major ones.

#10 Listen and learn.

As a “guest” of the cooperating teacher, a preservice teacher’s primary order of business is to listen and learn. There is much to be learned: classroom rules and

procedures, students’ names, and curriculum standards. The words of Stephen Covey (1989, 233) are good advice for all educators, and are especially appropriate for preservice teachers, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Partnering for Success

The journal entry of one preservice teacher read as follows, “I’ve lost sleep, lost weight, lost fingernails, and had my deodorant fail me.” She went on to describe her overall experience as wonderful, however, and summed it up as a “partnership for success.” Preservice teachers’ entry into the classroom is a learning experience. No amount of orientation or preparation can make the initial teaching experiences smooth or stress-free. Teaching is an experiential process and, likewise, preservice teachers learn through experience. The greater the experience, whether it is good or bad, the more knowledgeable the preservice teacher becomes. The cooperating teacher plays a crucial mentoring role in the early classroom teaching experiences of a preservice teacher. Preservice teachers who follow these top ten tips will find the classrooms of their cooperating teachers to be a place of welcome.

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