

Column: Teacher Reflections

What I wish I could tell my students

by Amanda Yoshida

Have you been contemplating something about your teaching or classroom experiences? In this column, we invite anyone to share their reflections with us. Please contact the editor if you would like to contribute an installment or if you just have an idea you would like to run by her. We look forward to the next installment of "Teacher Reflections."

I wrote this piece while I was working on my grades last week, and I would like to share it here. I think this could be useful, if translated into Japanese, for students at my current university and for students at other schools. So many teachers I know struggle with these kinds of issues in their classes.

I think my students need to learn some basic study skills and class culture skills. Quite a few students have told me that they "didn't attend high school" or they "quit high school", but got into my current university by taking the entrance exam. I think that many of them have trouble adjusting to the expectations of being a student, being members of a class, etc. If the following guidelines could be communicated to them, it might save some heartache at the end of the year.

If there weren't a language and cultural barrier, and I could really get through to my students with these simple pieces of advice, here is what I would say to them:

It is possible to get an A or even an A+ in my class. Every semester, there are at least one or two students who get an A. In most classes, there are several A grades ... believe it or not.

Coming to class and being on time are not optional. You would not be late for your part-time job. If you were, you'd get a warning, and then next time, you'd get fired. Classes are the same way. Every time you saunter in late, you are docked in points. It may come back to bite you at the end of the semester because those lost points add up.

Homework is not an option. It's a requirement. If I assign homework, it's because I actually expect you to complete it and then...wait for it...submit it. I am a softie. I will even accept late work...to a point. I won't accept it AFTER my own grading deadline, but I will accept it up to our last class. Go ahead. Try me.

About this optional homework thing, let me remind you, it's not optional. You follow the instructions, you complete it, you submit it. You ask me or your classmates if you don't understand something. No excuses.

If you feel you are in danger of failing or getting a low grade, do whatever you can to increase your points in other ways. Attend classes. Submit all homework. Do well on your essays or presentations. Go over and above.

Asking questions is a positive thing. I won't think you're stupid. I won't feel like you are wasting my time. I became a teacher because I like people, especially young people. And, I like helping them. So, I will sit next to you and help you with whatever you need. You just have to ask. I cannot read your mind.

One more thing about asking questions. Curious students are students who care. Students who care about learning, about improving, about their grades are looked at with great awe by us teachers. We will commit ourselves to you.

Attending class alone is not enough. You also have to participate in the lesson, write stuff down, ask and answer questions, do homework, etc. That is called being a student.

I know this will surprise you, but there may be some students who were absent 4 times, yet they still managed to get an A or B in the class. It's because they fulfilled all other requirements for the class, and they did them well. (This is rare but it DOES happen.)

I think this will also surprise you. Some students attend every single class (or almost every class) and they can still only manage to get C or D. Why? Maybe they never handed in their homework. Maybe they were never ready to do their presentations, and then refused to do it when called upon. Maybe they were always playing video games on their phones and never seemed to know what

was going on. Just because you are present does not mean you are actually learning anything in the class.

While it is true that you "get to have 4 freebie absences", it doesn't mean you should try to be absent 4 times. In fact, I would not recommend missing more than 1 or 2 classes. Coming to every class is, of course, going to ensure that you get all the information you need to pass the class.

In the same vein, even if you miss a class, for whatever reason (sports, family issues, illness, skipping, etc.), you are still expected to submit homework, perform presentations, make arrangements for missed quizzes or tests, etc. Seriously. Don't just walk into the next class and say you didn't know about today's presentation that was announced 3 weeks ago. Don't just forget about the test you missed. It will come back to bite you when I calculate your grades.

Missing all four of your freebie classes right at the beginning of the semester is probably not a good idea. Why? Because it is likely that some bad luck will come to you towards the end of the semester. You might actually become ill, a family emergency might come up...you just never know. Better to play it safe.

If you know you will be absent in the near future, don't hesitate to tell me. I will still mark you absent, but at least I won't be worried about you not knowing when the next quiz, presentation date or essay deadline is. I'll still expect you to do the work.

If you know you are running late, it's very courteous of you to email me and let me know. However, you're still late and you should have taken an early bus or train, especially if this is a weekly occurrence.

If being late is common for you, you should try to fix that. Take an earlier bus or train that day...every week...so you can get to my class on time. It's not rocket science!

I think of college students as adults. They don't need to be reminded about assignments and deadlines because they keep track of everything in a planner. They also keep their papers neatly in a file folder so they never lose things. It is not my job to chase after students and beg them to turn in assignments. So, if...at the end of the semester, you receive a low grade, it might be because you are the type of student who expected to be reminded several times a week.

That said, even when I have reminded certain students about their assignments, well-past the deadlines, they often smile sheepishly at me. They tell me that they "forgot it at home", or they "forgot all about it but will do it TONIGHT!" But usually nothing ever comes of these promises, so it's really not worth my time to chase after anyone. Students who want A's or B's will do the assignments, and they don't need reminding.

It is not hard to figure out what your teacher wants from you. Of course, every teacher is different, so it takes time to figure this out. Observe your teacher closely. What kinds of things does she praise students for? What is the purpose of her class? What can you do in this class to ensure an A or a B? Once you figure this out, you should be able to follow through with it. If you remain confused, you probably haven't been listening or watching closely enough. (Yes, stop staring at your phone.)

Finally, teachers are human too. They like to be thanked for their hard work. They like to feel somewhat appreciated. If a teacher hands back your homework to you, say thank you. She probably stays up late every night scoring loads of homework for all her students...and she still manages to get to work on time.

So, if you ever wondered how to be a student, these guidelines should help. If you really think about it, being a good student is not that hard. It all comes down to showing that you care about learning, and that you want to learn more. If that means showing up for class on time, asking and answering questions, writing some stuff down on paper, handing it in to your teacher, among other things, then just do it. Pretty soon you will be in the real world and you will long for your student days when life was so simple.



Bio: Amanda Yoshida has taught English at both the secondary and the tertiary levels in Japan for 15 years and holds an MA in TESOL. She will soon be joining the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies. Her research interests include collaborative teaching and learning, classroom-based assessment, and reflective practices. Amanda is also the mother of two elementary school-age kids and a dog. She is happiest when she is digital scrapbooking, watching Netflix alone, and drinking coffee.