



**FIRST
CLASS**

TEACHING

10 LESSONS
YOU *DON'T* LEARN IN COLLEGE

MICHELLE EMERSON

JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

FIRST
CLASS
TEACHING

FIRST CLASS TEACHING

10 Lessons You *Don't*
Learn in College

Michelle Emerson



JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

Copyright © 2023 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Brand

111 River St., Hoboken NJ 07030

www.josseybass.com

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates, in the United States and other countries, and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: The publisher and the author make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this work and specifically disclaim all warranties, including without limitation warranties of fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales or promotional materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for every situation. This work is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional services. If professional assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought. Neither the publisher nor the author shall be liable for damages arising herefrom. The fact that an organization or website is referred to in this work as a citation and/or a potential source of further information does not mean that the author or the publisher endorses the information the organization or website may provide or recommendations it may make. Further, readers should be aware the Internet sites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand.

If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>.

For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available:

ISBN 9781119984900 (Paperback)

ISBN 9781119984924 (ePDF)

ISBN 9781119984917 (epub)

Cover Design: Paul McCarthy

Cover Art: ©Gettyimages/Ediebloom

©Gettyimages/Nycshooter

To my husband and best friend, Billy, who has been by my side since my student teaching and willingly helped me cut lamination more times than I could count. You set the standard high for teacher-partners everywhere.

To all my students, who taught me far more than I could ever teach them. I am proud to have been your teacher, and don't forget to thank me in all your acceptance speeches. I'm serious.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Practice What You Teach	9
Chapter 2: Don't Be a Teacher of All Trades . . . Be a Master of One	29
Chapter 3: Relationships Aren't Built in a Day	53
Chapter 4: Pencil It in But Play It by Year	71
Chapter 5: What a Student Throws Up Must Come Down	91
Chapter 6: When Teaching Gives You Stress, Go to Recess	109
Chapter 7: You Can Be Saved by the Bells and Whistles	123
Chapter 8: A Classroom Isn't Always Cleaner on the Other Side	139

Chapter 9: Don't Get Your Stickers in a Twist	153
Chapter 10: You Can't Have Your Apple and Eat It Too	167
About the Author	183
Index	185

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wouldn't have been able to write this book and you wouldn't have been able to read it without the influence and guidance of teachers. Thank you to all the teachers, in their many forms, who make the world a better place through their selfless service.

A very special thank you to my husband, Billy, who has been by my side every step of the way throughout my journey as a teacher. I knew you were a keeper when you voluntarily glued white paper triangles and googly eyes on party hats to create shark hats for my students after only a few weeks of dating, and your support has never wavered. When I first pitched the idea of writing a book, you immediately brainstormed titles and patiently waited for me to bring it to life years later. In the words of *The Office's* Michael Scott, "Sometimes I'll start a sentence and I don't even know where it's going. I just hope I find it along the way." Thank you for always helping me finishing my sentences. I couldn't have done this without you and I love you more than you know.

To my parents, who have always supported my passions and encouraged my ambitions. I know you really want grandkids, but this book will have to do as my "baby" for now. It might be hard to find a magnet strong enough to hold it up on the fridge but I'm sure you'll figure it out. Thank you for everything you did to get me to where I am today, from giving

me that easel all those years ago so I could play school on the front porch to helping me set up my first classroom. I love you both!

To all the individuals who granted permission for their stories to be included in this book. You know who you are, and I am incredibly thankful for our experiences together. You played a role in getting me to where I am today and I can't begin to express how appreciative I am.

To my best friend, Bridget, who always encourages my crazy ideas even when she probably shouldn't. It is so on brand for us to write books at the same time and there's no one else I'd want to go through this challenging but rewarding process with. Thank you for listening to all my rambling voice messages and giving me the much needed confidence boosts along the way. I love you, lady!

To Mr. Pelan, the teacher who made me fall in love with school and pursue teaching (you also inspired me to learn how to play guitar but let's just say I'm a way better teacher than I am a musician). Your passion was infectious, and I strive to positively impact others the way you impacted me. Thanks for getting me the reading intervention I needed in second grade, because otherwise this book wouldn't exist. Seriously, I was on the reading struggle bus and you worked some teacher magic!

To Dr. Gorrow, who made us write down a lifetime goal on the first day of her Classroom Management course in undergrad. My goal was to write a book. Thank you for sharing your experience as an author with the class and helping me believe my goal was actually achievable.

Last but not least, thank you to all the people I don't know personally who have supported me virtually over the years. As an introvert, the thought of sharing so much of my life with strangers on the internet was initially terrifying but

stepping out of my comfort zone in that way has allowed me to form so many genuine connections that have improved my life in incredible ways and never would have been possible otherwise. I still don't understand "why me" but I am humbled by your support on a daily basis and will be forever grateful for the opportunities you've brought my way, including writing this book. I hope I can thank you in person someday if our paths ever cross.

INTRODUCTION

YOU'RE HIRED

“How’s it going in here?”

I was standing on a chair in the middle of my classroom trying to hang tissue paper lanterns using a paperclip to wedge the string between the light fixture and ceiling tile when I heard a voice coming from my doorway. It’s worth mentioning that I’m only five foot, three inches on a good day, so I had the added obstacle of standing on my tippy toes and still barely reached the ceiling. I delicately turned around and braced myself to be scolded by whoever this was at my door because I was almost certainly committing either an OSHA violation, fire code violation, or both.

I caught a glimpse of her face and instantly knew she looked familiar but couldn’t remember who she was or where I had seen her before. Did she work in the front office? Was she the librarian? The past two weeks since I was hired as a first-year teacher had been an absolute whirlwind, and I was still trying to catch my breath. I had attended more meetings than I could count and left each one more confused than when I went in. I had met and shook hands with dozens of my new coworkers, only to forget their names seconds later. She smiled at me but waited patiently for my answer before saying anything else.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’m doing and feel like I’m going to throw up but other than that . . . I’m great!”

Humor. This was, and still is, my coping mechanism when I feel uncomfortable.

“Well, let us know if you need anything from us!”

My joke obviously didn’t land. In that moment of failed comedy, I realized who she was. I had just told my assistant principal, who had hired me two weeks ago, that I had no idea what I was doing. Crap. I could feel the blood rushing to my face as she disappeared from my doorway, surely headed back to her office to call HR and tell them she had made a huge mistake when she hired me.

“Ms. Ferré?”

Well, that was fast. I was standing directly under the intercom speaker and could practically feel the sound waves vibrating throughout my entire body. This was it. This would be my last moment as a teacher.

“Yes?”

“We’re making an adjustment to your class list. We are moving a student to another second grade class just to balance things out. Check your email for the updated roster.”

Click. The intercom cut off, and I could finally process everything that had just transpired in the past 30 seconds. Let’s see . . . I told my assistant principal I wanted to throw up. Not my best moment but not my worst. I still had a class list, which meant I still had a job. Wonderful! A wave of relief washed over me but was quickly replaced with an even stronger feeling of humiliation. I knew what “balance things out” was code for. I was new, but I wasn’t stupid.

I was hired at twenty years old as a first-year teacher with no real classroom experience besides my student teaching internship, which was glorified hand-holding. Word had gotten out to parents in the community that I was inexperienced, and they were requesting to move their children out of my class. Ouch. Don’t get me wrong . . . I expected to receive

pushback as a new teacher. I anticipated the questions, the concerns, and the doubt from parents because I was feeling the exact same skepticism toward myself. Unfortunately, that didn't make it sting any less. I had exactly one week to pick my pride up off the floor, somehow discover my nonexistent confidence, and step into the spotlight in my classroom.

SHOWTIME

“Good morning! I’m Ms. Ferré and I’m going to be your second grade teacher this year. I’m so excited you’re in my class!” I had rehearsed these opening lines in my head about a hundred times as if I was preparing to give an acceptance speech for an award. Spoiler alert: my first day of teaching was *definitely* not an Oscar-worthy performance. Despite my best effort, the words escaped my mouth jumbled and nervy as I greeted students on the first day of school. It worked in my favor, or so I thought, that most of the students were every bit as nervous as I was so they funneled in and took their seats quietly while I aimlessly bounced around the room like a pinball that desperately needed some bumpers for guidance.

“I don’t feel so good . . .” A small boy was walking toward me with both of his arms wrapped tightly around his stomach. I recognized his picture from the class list and remembered he was the boy who just transferred from another school within the county.

“You’re probably just feeling nervous because it’s the first day of school. Here, let me show you your desk and help you unpa—”

My fake-it-until-you-make-it teaching mentality may not have been in the running for any Oscar nominations but

I truly believe this singular moment should have won an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film. I was fifteen minutes into my first day of teaching, my shoes were now covered in vomit (more on that in a later chapter), and no less than ten different emotions had swept across my face in a matter of seconds. It was truly an incredible performance. I took an imaginary bow in my head while my audience of wide-eyed second graders eagerly awaited the next scene.

I prayed for some movie magic as I looked at the clock and desperately hoped it read 3:45 so I could go home. Nope. Nine o'clock. The day wasn't a wrap, but it was time to take my students to art, and I welcomed the opportunity to collect myself. I could handle this. I guided my students into something that resembled a line and we chaotically entered the hallway. The line leader followed my directions through the maze of classrooms until we arrived at what I thought was the art room . . . but why were the lights off? My students waited patiently against the wall while I double-checked the placard outside the door. Art. It said art. I peeked my head through the doorway and quickly scanned the room. A feeling of pure panic washed over me as I realized there were no paint palettes or brushes, and, more importantly, there was no art teacher. I reluctantly returned to my former line that now resembled a squiggle of students and decided to improvise.

"We're a little early so we are just going to practice walking in the hallway for a bit." I had bought myself time, but sadly my next move was still a mystery. My eyes darted around as I nervously began leading my class along the colored tile floor without a destination in sight. After what felt like an eternity of aimless walking, I finally made eye contact with another staff member who, thankfully, must have either seen

the look of terror plastered all over my face or been able to smell my fear because she stopped to help me without drawing too much attention. We exchanged a few whispers, and she informed me that the art room had been moved to a portable classroom in the fenced area outside of the main school building. In other words, the exact last place I would have looked for it. She deserved a standing ovation for her performance as Best Supporting Role in the horror film that was my first day of teaching.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Like a fish out of water, suddenly I was a teacher fresh out of college and I was terrified to admit I felt more out of place than I ever could have imagined. When I was studying all the educational theories and best teaching practices while earning my degree, everything made sense. I had attended all the lectures, created detailed lesson plans, gotten hundreds of hours of hands-on experience in real classrooms, worked with incredible mentor teachers, and answered questions well enough in my interview to be hired for my current role. In theory, I was ready to be a teacher.

But the moment I stepped foot into my own classroom, I struggled to put what I had learned into practice. It was like giving a student basic directions that were confidently acknowledged as understood with a thumbs up only to have the student immediately forget everything you just told her when she returned to her seat to actually start the assignment (except I was the confused student in this situation instead of the teacher). The issue wasn't the knowledge or understanding, it was the execution. Most of the strategies you learn in college are designed for "ideal"

circumstances, but real-life classrooms are far from textbook. This leaves you feeling inadequate, defective, and defeated when you try to implement them but no matter how hard you try, they aren't working. You feel as if *you* are the reason the strategies are failing, when in actuality the strategies are vague, outdated, and not easily applicable to a variety of situations. But regardless of the reasoning, the realities aren't matching your expectations and your passion is fizzling.

I have wanted to be a teacher since I was in second grade myself. It's cliché, but it's true. I held school for all the neighborhood kids on my front porch on the weekends and during the summer, complete with a whiteboard easel I begged my parents for, printed worksheets I somehow discovered for free online, and, yes, assigned homework I fully expected to be completed by the next day. Everyone who knew me knew I wanted to be a teacher, which of course meant they shared their opinions with me, often unsolicited. I heard all the cautionary tales about how hard it would be, how little I would make, and the thick skin I would need to grow if I truly wanted to make my dream a reality. I developed a list of go-to responses I would unconsciously recite any time I faced these warnings. My favorites were, "I'm in it for the outcome, not the income!" and "Teaching is a calling, not a profession," which I often quoted with a smile wrapped so far around my face the corners of my mouth practically met behind my head. I invited every horror story I heard about teaching as a challenge because I thought my work ethic and passion for the profession were unmatched. I sincerely believed I would be an anomaly and thrive as a first-year teacher, but as you can already tell, that wasn't the case.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

One of the first things you hear echoed in your preparation to become a teacher is setting expectations for your students, so I want to do the same for this book. If you're looking for a manual on how to be the perfect teacher in every situation, I'm sorry to say this book isn't that (and if you ever find that book, please send it my way because I'd love to know how it's done). I don't have all the answers for you, as much as I wish I did. In fact, I'm convinced anyone who tries to persuade you that they have all the answers is lying because we are all just trying to figure out this thing called "life," which came with no instruction manual. I can't give you a blueprint for how to navigate from the first day of school until the last day of school without any road bumps. I can't give you the secret recipe for eliminating every behavior problem in your classroom at any given time. I can't give you a formula to make sure every lesson you plan flows seamlessly when you actually teach it to your students.

Before we get any further into this, I want to make it extremely clear that I am not an expert. Not even close. I taught second grade and fourth grade for seven years before transitioning to a role supporting teachers, so I don't have the most experience, the deepest knowledge, or the biggest résumé in the field of education, and I'm not going to pretend I do. But what I can offer you is my unique perspective. Over the course of my teaching career, I documented a majority of my journey online and shared my experiences with the world, almost like a virtual diary. I was able to capture the highs, the lows, and everything in-between, which allowed me to reflect on my practice and grow in ways I never could have otherwise. I've made a lot of mistakes as a teacher,