



Exploratorium Teacher Institute

Coaching Guide

The suggestions in this guide reflect ten years' experience coaching teachers in our Beginning Teacher Program. It's important to keep in mind, though, that each situation is unique. Each teacher has different needs and different comfort levels with being helped. These two factors will influence virtually every coaching decision you make in your efforts to create, and then strengthen, an effective and rewarding relationship between you and a new teacher.

Before You Meet Your New Teachers

- Make sure you have current contact information, including school addresses.
- Send a “Hi, I’m your Exploratorium Beginning Teacher Program coach . . .” note emphasizing your helper role. (See **Model Letter of Introduction** on page 7.)
- Call or e-mail each teacher to set up a time to meet. (E-mail is often the preferred method of contact for the new teachers.) This first meeting may take place in the new teacher’s school before or after class, or somewhere else such as a café. Sometimes a phone conversation is enough to prepare for the first class visit. The purpose of the first meeting is to put the new teacher at ease, and to find out if there are any immediate needs or requests he or she has.
- Ask the new teachers what is the best time and method to contact them.
- Make sure you have business cards or some kind of note available to leave in the office for the principal. You should also have a badge, supplied by the Teacher Institute, identifying you as an Exploratorium coach.

The Initial Meeting

- Share something about yourself and your own science teaching experience. Establishing yourself as a fellow teacher will help to foster mutual positive regard. In the current education climate, classroom visitors may be evaluating a teacher’s performance for a

district's administrative purposes or may represent rigid agendas that are threatening to the new teacher. You must make sure the new teacher understands that Exploratorium coaches are different; they are there to support the teacher, free of ties to the district and the administration. Their job is to help, not to evaluate.

- Discuss the variety of ways a coach can work with a new teacher. (If you have a list of all available mentors and coaches and their specialties, you may want to go over that with the new teacher. This may give him or her an idea of something to ask for.)
- It can be helpful to ask about focus: What would be useful to the teacher for you to concentrate on during a visit? (This serves the perceived needs of the new teacher first. However, many new teachers may have no idea of what they want.)
- Ask about the teacher's school: What is the student population like, does the school resemble the schools he or she attended as a student, are the science labs well equipped, and so on. If you are at the school, ask where the teacher spends prep periods and lunch. Where is the teacher lounge and the teacher workroom? Ask to take a tour of these areas if it seems appropriate.
- Inquire about science equipment and materials. The teachers could fill out a form indicating what they have and what they need.
- Ask about the school day: Are there numerous interruptions from the PA system, are there frequent assemblies, has the teacher noticed a pattern in the school day as far as student behavior is concerned? New teachers need information about handling classroom interruptions, and this can be a good introductory topic.
- Get a copy of the teacher's class schedule, and find out the best way to reach the teacher during the school day, such as by calling the school phone number and classroom extension. One coach said, "The most effective phone calls I have made are during the new teacher's prep period, and they are short and to the point!"
- Find out the teacher's preference for your visit times, and tell the teacher that there is a time limit for your visits. (The time limit is up to you, but it sometimes puts the new teacher at ease to know you won't just be "hanging out" in the classroom.)
- Agree on how the teacher will introduce you to the students when you visit.

The First Classroom Visit

Before you go, get directions, find out where to park and where the office is, and ask about the school's policies concerning visitors. When you get to the school, stop in the office to sign in, and leave your card with the secretary.

What to expect

- The teacher may be very nervous.
- For your first visits, the new teacher may prepare wonderful hands-on lessons, doing his or her best to make a good impression. As the teacher becomes more comfortable with being coached, you will probably see more regular lessons rather than these "extra-special" lessons. Let the teacher know that you do not expect to see a hands-on activity every time you visit.

- The teacher may have too much planned, and move too quickly through the lesson without checking for understanding. As a result, students may be lost, bored, or off task.
- The teacher may not have a method for dealing with classroom interruptions such as the PA system or the arrival of a new student.
- Students may change their behavior because there is a stranger in the room. They may show off or misbehave, or even be better behaved than usual.
- The teacher may continually call on the same few students.
- The teacher may lack classroom procedures and classroom control. There may be a degree of chaos in the room—students up and about the classroom, sharpening pencils, throwing things in the wastebasket, speaking out without being called on, or leaving at the bell rather than waiting to be dismissed.
- The teacher may have rules and procedures but be inconsistent about following or enforcing them.
- Instructions may be poorly presented, too complex, or not modeled.
- The teacher may be unsure of the content she or he is teaching.
- The teacher may be trying to have students work above their ability or preparation level in order to “get through” the curriculum.
- The classroom may appear disorganized.
- There may be piles of unaddressed student work. The new teacher is likely not to have a priority system for dealing with large numbers of ungraded papers.

When you talk with the teacher

- The teacher may blame herself or himself for any poor behavior shown by students, feeling that a good teacher has no discipline problems.
- The teacher may be defensive, offering elaborate explanations for things that didn’t go well.
- The teacher may be completely focused on what didn’t go well and be unaware of what did go well.

What to do

Accent the positive

It’s important to note positives when you give feedback. The teacher is probably very nervous about things that have gone wrong and may want to start out by talking about these things. Focus on what you saw that went well and specifically identify several things that you reacted positively to. Sometimes just a comment about a nice classroom environment sets the tone.

Build bridges, not walls, with your questions

Ask questions that don’t reflect on the teacher’s performance. Questions such as “How many teachers are in your department?” or “What textbook are you using?” or “Are you able to make photocopies?” will lead teachers to share a lot of information with you about their teaching conditions. Toward the end of the visit you can ask, “What would you like me to focus on next time I come?” or “What is your biggest concern about your classroom?” Save questions such as “How do you think things went today?” for later visits.

Triage

If you see multiple problems, you'll need to triage. Think about the order in which problems can best be addressed. Choose a task, or a component of a task to focus on, and make sure your goal is attainable. However, it's of the utmost importance that the new teacher be in agreement about which situation to work on, as she or he may have different priorities. Coaches may have to let go of some of their favorite ideas in order to deal with the new teacher's primary concerns.

Know your limits

Recognize what you can and cannot do, and what kinds of help you feel competent and comfortable offering. Keep in mind that not everything is under the teacher's control, so any changes you suggest must be able to fit into the climate of the school and work with the particular student population. Remember that you can't talk with the administration about the teacher or get involved in an evaluative process.

Be a good listener

This is key to developing a good relationship. Some new teachers feel isolated from colleagues, and their greatest need is for someone to talk to about their day-to-day professional concerns. New teachers welcome the opportunity to discuss their students with someone else who's been in their classroom. Do lots of listening and little talking.

Have a low-key demeanor

Even if the new teacher feels that the classroom is a disaster, he or she certainly doesn't want others to dwell on that. And even if several things—or many things—went wrong during your visit, they can't all be solved at once. Find one effective change that can be made—for instance, presenting a “warm-up” clearly written on an overhead transparency, with a time limit. You probably have some suggestions for warm-up topics. Propose that the teacher focus on warm-ups for now. Working effectively on a small problem can lay the groundwork for more change later.

If most things are going well in the classroom, a low-key demeanor is still recommended. Being overly enthusiastic can seem phony to a new teacher who hasn't met you before. Absolutely accentuate the positive, but be restrained.

Offer to help in ways that are not overwhelming

If the teacher has no ideas about what she or he needs help with, you can make some suggestions. Offer to clean out or organize a closet, help grade papers, look up some supplies in a catalog, and so on. Make sure your attempts to help don't cost the teacher extra time and effort.

Set a date and agenda for your next visit

If you have agreed to bring things to the teacher or to send them before your next visit, make a list and go over it together. Decide whether you will come for the same or different classes on your next visit, and what will be the visit's focus. You might consider focusing on the pacing of the lesson, identifying students who are off task, or streamlining classroom procedures.

“ [The teacher] was feeling frustrated and overwhelmed with managing students in his new position. At first, our conversation centered around these feelings: his venting with a sympathetic listener. Later we discussed specific pitfalls of management and student discipline. Suggestions included the following: slow down in establishing procedures, use a behavior log, recognize more positive behavior, use the words ‘you have a choice,’ and watch out for manipulations.”

—from a coach's report

“ I offered several strategies [the teacher] could use to help students draw conclusions from their lab observations. I also suggested she call on specific students randomly to keep them involved in the class discussions. I suggested she ask students who she knew would be unable to answer questions to restate answers given by other students.”

—from a coach's report

Follow-up to First Classroom Visit

Decide how to share information with the new teacher. E-mail often works best. When communicating with the new teacher about your visit, remember to include the following:

- What made an impression.
- Good things you saw.
- Ideas that might help the students.
- If something happened that got in the way of teaching, find a way to stress the positive before you offer a suggestion: “You did a good job of not letting that distraction take too much time. . . .”
- Refer to any discussion you and the new teacher had during or after the visit and any arrangements you made.

File your report! You may include communications to the new teacher in your report. The Teacher Institute will respect the confidential nature of your contact with the teacher.

Arrange electronic or physical delivery of things you have promised (e.g., activities or supplies). Follow up in a timely manner to make sure the items were received.

Setting Goals for the Coaching Year

After you have established a relationship with your new teachers, you may want to set some long-term goals with them. Although some goals can be fairly straightforward, such as supplementing the science textbook with engaging activities, others may be more complex, such as the new teacher becoming more successful in having ELL students participate in class discussions. Often the goals will change as you and the new teacher become more aware of the real needs and constraints of the situation.

Continuing Visits

Some new teachers will need frequent visits and intense support at first, then become more self-sufficient. Others may increase their requests for support as they come to know better what they need and how the program can help them.

Try to prevent misunderstandings about your availability by telling your new teachers if you will be away for a period of time, or if there are regular days when you cannot visit.

A new teacher may want you to always come to the best or the worst class. It’s good to have some continuity in your visits, but it’s also of benefit to both you and the new teachers for you to see them in different situations. If possible, plan a subsequent visit that spans several class periods in order to see the flow of the day.

Things to Observe over Time

At the beginning of the year you will need to observe the arrangement of the classroom, and how wall space is used (the absence or presence of posters, guidelines, and student work). The manner in which the teacher speaks to students, and his or her expectations of all students are also important starting points.

“Steel yourself and exude warmth and caring.”
—from an e-mail to a new teacher

During the course of the year you may want to suggest changes in the classroom arrangement to facilitate teaching. Your observations of the interaction between students, class participation, and group work will be important. It will help you to decide whether a problem can be avoided by separating particular students. Notice whether the student work displayed includes a representative sample of the students.

As the year progresses, other questions become primary: How does the teacher encourage student participation? Does the teacher create a safe environment for students to give incorrect answers? Does the class understand how to come in and start work, how to clean up, how to leave the class, how to get help from other students or from the teacher? How does the teacher deal with discipline and how much time is spent on this? What is the level of organization of materials, presentations, and demos? How is homework assigned? Does the teacher choose selectively which student papers to grade? How does the teacher use hands-on activities? Many new teachers can use help with classroom management.

There is great variety in the way that teachers understand their subject matter and in the ways that they understand how they can teach it. A teacher's knowledge about the curriculum may change drastically over time. During the first several years, this will be reflected in the absence or presence of long-term planning, how the teacher deals with the standards, whether or not the teacher teaches for understanding, and how the teacher uses the text, alternative materials, and hands-on activities. "Are students engaged with the lessons?" is a critical question in thinking about how to help beginning teachers. Over time the coach can guide the new teacher from immediate concerns with curriculum or procedure towards reflecting on deeper and broader questions about their practice.

Model Letter of Introduction

Hi _____,

Welcome to the Beginning Teacher Program! I'll be your coach from the Exploratorium Teacher Institute. I can help with a variety of aspects of teaching: long-term planning, lessons, demonstrations, classroom or paper management, student discipline, bulletin boards, questions, research—almost anything you might need as a new teacher.

I'm a retired middle school math and science teacher, and much of my teaching background is with ELL students and newcomers. For the last three years, I've been working at the Exploratorium.

I'm looking forward to meeting you Saturday at the Beginning Teacher Orientation Day. Perhaps on Saturday we can plan a time to get together, either after school or during a prep or lunch period.

Hope your classes have started well.

Regards,

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