

Academics in the ALPs

For most instructors, their first teaching experience is at the ALPs. The reasons that this system has been successful for the past twenty-five years has been that usually only dedicated staff choose to work with our students and they are willing to learn as the year progresses. Each staff person brings his or her own interests, talents, and unique vision to his or her classes. While the program provides the texts, curricula, and topics to be covered, the actual creation of the class is left to the individual instructor. While this can be a rewarding experience for both the staff and the students, it can be overwhelming to a person just starting in the field of education. This, along with the student population in the ALPs, can make the creation of a class intimidating. With that in mind, please remember the following:

1. **No one expects you to be an expert** – Head teachers are aware that teaching is new to you, and expect you to have questions. Don't suffer in a class that isn't working because you are afraid that asking questions will lead your head teacher to believe you can't teach. There is probably a simple solution to your problem, or you may have uncovered an academic deficiency that was previously undiagnosed.
2. **A well-planned class will make your life easier** – A class with no free time will always run smoother than one with unstructured time. Ask yourself this question- would you rather spend the time it takes to plan out your full 50 minute classes, or deal with manic, hyper students who can't handle five minutes of free time? These are the sort of students who were always getting kicked out of your high school classes, and they need constructive activity and structure.
3. **Classes should be interactive** – Students shouldn't be doing large amounts of independent work. For example, English class should not consist of students reading silently four days a week and talking about what they read for one day. Again, if our students were capable of large amounts of independent work without teacher guidance and support, they wouldn't be here.
4. **Keep on schedule** – Every class that is taught has a corresponding planning guide that lists what needs to be covered. If you get too far off track, ask your head teacher for ways to get back on. Don't, for example, teach an American history class and only get to the Revolutionary War by winter break. If you can see that you are having trouble, ask for help.
5. **Ask specific questions about specific kids** – If you are having trouble with a particular student in a class, ask that student's head teacher for help. Chances are they have encountered the problem before and can be of assistance. Make sure you are specific – don't say "I'm having a problem in *English class*." It is much easier for the teacher to help if s/he knows exactly what is causing your concern.

6. **Tell them what you expect** – At the start of each class period, you should try to tell the students what you expect them to accomplish by the end of the period. You should also tell them what would happen if they do not complete their work. We shouldn't be surprising students with consequences. They don't have to like what happens, but they should know what is coming. If a student develops a pattern of not working in your class, tell the head teacher.
 7. **Lesson plans should be clear** – Your lesson plans should be written in a way that a teacher can go into your class and understand what is going on at all times. When you go to annex or are out, someone will have to cover your class and make sense of what you want done. "Talk about erosion" is inadequate, as the person covering your class may know nothing about that topic. It is always a good idea to have review work set up so that if you have to go to annex and haven't completely caught up on your lesson plans, you can give easily coverable work to the teacher.
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Academic Approaches

One of the most important things to remember when teaching our students is that they don't acquire information like most people. One of the main reasons that they were referred to special education in the first place was because they were unable to manage the academic expectations of the regular ed. class. They cannot sit for fifty minutes while you lecture to them about photosynthesis, for example. Most of our students need multi-sensory instruction in order for real learning to take place. That means that as a teacher, you must vary what you are doing from lesson to lesson or from day to day. Students who have difficulty with reading need more project-based learning as well as information presented to them orally rather than in written form. Below are some different types of instructional methods that have worked with our students in the past. Specific questions about individual students should be taken to that student's head teacher.

1. **Cooperative Learning Groups** – Cooperative learning is a method of instruction where students are allowed to work together. By working with other students and listen to their ideas on a topic, students are better able to grasp the concept that is being taught. Students should always be made constantly aware of the following:
 - The parameters of the project – There should be a simple, concise scope to the topic. Often students will start out on a presentation on one topic and then quickly their attention and focus will switch to

another. By listing out what exactly is expected, students are more likely to stay on topic.

- **Timeline** – Sometimes projects get extended well beyond what was set at the beginning of the project. There are always exceptions that should be met, but if a project goes on for too long it often leads to the neglect of other material that needs to be covered.
- **Academic & behavioral expectations** – It should be made very clear at the start of the project what is and is not acceptable, both behaviorally and academically. Academically, this often comes apart when students are rushing at the last moment to complete the assignment. Behaviorally, this happens when student interest wanes or they begin to have difficulty academically. In either case, you should tell students **AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT** what would result in the group being split up. It is then supremely important that you stick to what you said. Remember, the more you let slide, the harder it is to be firm later on.

2. **Videos** – Videos can often be a helpful tool in teaching students who have difficulty reading or who have trouble with more traditional-style schoolwork. The video library has over 500 films on different topics, many with pre-made curriculum. When using videos in a class, it is important to remember the following:

- **Preview the tape** – Don't come in and decide that you are going to watch a film about frogs and then hope to find one. You should take the video out in advance and watch it to make sure it is what you are looking for and appropriate for your level of class. Also, there have been times when the tape has become defective, and the only way to know that is to view it before hand.
- **Don't sit and watch** – Watching the video should be accompanied by explanations and discussion about what is being seen. Often times there is vocabulary or material in the film that is completely foreign to our students. Unless you ensure that they understand it, they will pretend as if they do, negating the whole point of watching the film.
- **Give them something to do** – Having the students take notes on the film or complete a worksheet that accompanies it or some other assignment accomplishes two things. First, it makes sure that they are paying attention, and second, it helps you get a better grasp of what they comprehend and what they are not.
- **Help the students with writing issues** – Giving these students an alternate assignment to go along with the video makes them part of the class and makes sure that they pay attention as well.

3. **Internet** – The Internet can be a great way to expose the students to topics they would not be able to access otherwise. Obviously, it can also be a source of trouble if students are on the Internet unsupervised. Always:

- **Keep an eye on what they are doing** - Often you will have one student at one computer and another at a different one in another room or part of the school. You should divide your time evenly and make sure that if there is someone in the area (usually a head teacher) to watch one

student while you are with the other that they do so if they can. If you have concerns about leaving a student alone – don't.

- Watch for alternate usage - As soon as you leave them, some students will take that opportunity to go to inappropriate sites online. They will spend more time trying to download their favorite songs than they will on your assignment.
- Set up a timeline – Students are famous for "needing more time for research." Make sure you clearly state at the start of the project how much time they will be allotted for online work.

4. **Art & Creative Projects** – This is a common practice to use with students who will have trouble with written output. Just because it is an art project however, there should still be expectations. It shouldn't be something that students do to get out of real academic work. You should:

- Make sure that the creativity is tied directly to real, quantifiable, academic topics and concepts.
- Tell the students how they will be evaluated. To which parts of the project should they devote the majority of their attention?
- Have standards. Don't accept rushed, shoddy work. If you are going to have something like this in your class, then it should be of high quality.

5. **Student Interest** - Letting students in some way direct the flow of a class can be one way to ensure student involvement in your class. Usually the "illusion of options" is the best way to approach this. Does it matter whether you do the short story or poetry segment first? Usually it doesn't. If that is the case, letting the students pick not only gives you some slack ("Hey, you guys said this is what you wanted to do.") when it comes to student complaints, but also makes the students feel as they have some measure of control. Never say to them, "We can do whatever you want" or else you'll be asked to read Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas.

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Grading can be a difficult aspect of teaching. It can be even more difficult if you are trying to determine what the student completed versus what they could have completed had they not acted out behaviorally. Grades, however, are what determine whether or not a student receives credit in a class, so it is important that their grade reflects what they produced in the class. When giving grades it is important to remember:

- Students should be aware of the criteria they are being graded on before the assignment is given. Do not assume that the students know what you are looking for; what is obvious to you can be unimportant to them. Providing them with a check sheet that accompanies their assignment is an effective strategy.

- Students are graded in isolation. They are not graded in comparison with one another. You may ask two students who have different academic strengths to complete the same assignment, but you should be sure to have different academic expectations for each of them. Students should be graded on how well they complete an assignment/master a skill in relation to their own potential to do so.
- Students should always have a chance to improve their grade. For example, if you have a student who received a C+ for their portion of the group project you assigned, you could give them an independent assignment to help boost their overall grade. Do this especially if you believe that the student is capable of receiving a better grade. It is our job to help the students maximize their capabilities and one of the most effective ways to do that is to help them correct or improve upon something that they could have done better.
- Letter and number grades are not as good as commenting specifically on student work. Telling students what they did right on assignment is as important as telling them what they did wrong. Always try to include positive comments, even on work that isn't particularly great. You want to encourage the students to continue to try and strive to do better.
- If you believe that a student is trying on your assignments but is nevertheless earning sub-par grades, talk to your head teacher. Chances are that you are asking the student to do something that is extremely hard for them to do and you might be able to assess them in another way. It is important that you have academic standards for our students (often, their previous teachers had none) but at the same time always try to assess them accurately and fairly and always give them a chance to improve.

Grades are due at the end of each quarter. At that time, you will be asked to submit grades for your students based on two criteria. First the grade they received on all of the tests, quizzes, and other projects you had them complete during the quarter. The second component of their grade is their Daily Grade score. The daily grade is the grade that each student receives for each day they are in class, and it should be recorded in the labeled place on your lesson plan forms. The grade is broken into two parts: behavior and academics. The student is eligible to earn five points in each category each class. The behavior grade is based on how well the student managed their behavior in class. If they followed all the rules of the classroom and were completely appropriate, then they would receive a '5'. Behavior less than that would result in a lower grade. For example, if you have to ask a student to leave class, chances are they earned a 0, 1, or at most a 2. Again, you should always let the students know what they are being graded on. You might ask them what they think they should get for a grade- the will often times be harder on themselves than you would be. The second part of the 'Daily Grade' is based on the student's academic performance in class. This is different than assessing them on the particular assignment you give them. The academic grade should be a reflection of how well the student

mastered the concept that was being talked about in class – in relation to their own ability. A student for whom math is difficult and tries valiantly in class to master a concept and makes marginal progress should receive a '5'. At the end of the week you will have a fraction, e.g. "Melissa's daily grade for the week was a 38/50". There may be times when students are absent from your class because of illness, court appointment, or other reason. You should check with the head teacher to see if it is an excused or unexcused absence. If it were unexcused, that day would factor in as a 0/10 into the weekly grade. At the end of the quarter you add all of those fractions and divide the numerator by the denominator to get the average percentile grade. That grade is half of the student's grade for the quarter. The other half of the grade is the compiled score of all the traditional assignments you have given over the quarter.