

The Autobiographical Lens

Survival Advice Memo

The decisions we make every day, in and out of the classroom, are driven by our various assumptions about teaching, learning, and our students. For example, we may assume that the nobility of our motivations, intentions, and actions are perceived as such by our students and guarantee that our teaching is resulting in our desired affects. In reality, many of the actions that stem from our purest motivations might be experienced by our students as restricting and demoralizing. *(Some sample assumptions are listed on the back of this page.)*

Because we generally take our assumptions for granted, it can be challenging to identify them. This exercise is designed to help you examine any current assumptions you may have about teaching, learning, and your students.

Instructions

Imagine you are leaving your current teaching position and you wish for whoever replaces you to benefit from your experiences and wisdom. Write a letter outlining your most essential survival advice. Include tips on what is needed to stay afloat in the classroom, what you wish someone had told you when you first started, and things your successor should avoid thinking, doing, or assuming. Provide evidence to support what you are telling your successor. What happened in your own experiences that make you believe your advice is warranted and accurate? Describe examples that show how well your advice works in action. Conclude your letter with general reflections on your teaching career.

After you finish the letter...

Read back over what you've written and look for possible assumptions you may have about higher education, teaching, learning, your students, your colleagues, your institution, and/or your community. Alternatively, ask a colleague or two to do this for you; it might be easier for another, objective person to identify potential assumptions.

Once you have identified your assumptions, consider the following:

- Is this assumption valid, and has it been confirmed by my own experiences? In what ways does this belief help me in my job and benefit my students?
- What if I challenged the veracity of this assumption? What if it is inaccurate? How would this recognition change what I do in my classes?
- Based on what you've written, summarize the skills and insights that you believe are crucial to success in teaching. Which of these would you like to strengthen?

Finally, allow any insights from this exercise to direct the next steps for your professional development.

Sample Assumptions

Of course, not all assumptions we make as educators are false or incorrect. Many help us paint accurate pictures of our students and their needs. Yet some easily lend themselves to overgeneralization or misapplication, so it's important to identify our assumptions and determine whether they are valid. Consider the following commonly-made assumptions:

"No matter what I do in the classroom, there will be a certain percentage of students who will not learn the material..."

"Students who are single mothers seem to be more motivated..."

"Good educational processes are inherently democratic..."

"Adults are self-directed learners..."

"My returning students have greater maturity and more rich life experiences to draw from..."

"If I make a mistake in front of students, this creates a trustful environment where students don't fear mistakes or failure..."

"Visiting small groups while they are working demonstrates my attentiveness and commitment..."

"If I listen to small groups working, they are inhibited and become concerned about saying what they think I want to hear..."

"Students like group discussions because they feel involved and respected..."

"If I downplay my knowledge and expertise or practice self-deprecating humor, my students will feel more comfortable around me..."

"If I just search hard enough on the internet or by talking to colleagues, I'll be able to solve my classroom problem..."

"Consistently strong students evaluations are a sign of good teaching..."

"I need to withhold my opinion so I don't unduly influence the original thinking of my students..."