

Survival Skills for the Teacher in Uncertain Times

Introduction

An existential crisis impacts us all in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Its consequences are especially detrimental to the wellbeing of our young people and adolescents, as noted by the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland's (ASTI, 2022) Dáil submission on mental health.

The ever-growing complexities of the modern world present all citizens, especially our youngsters, with a growing identity crisis in the context of what Bauman (2000) aptly describes as our 'liquid society'. Having spent some thirty-five years in the classroom at second level, I offer in this article some survival skills for the teacher (and, by default, the taught) in the light of these complexities.

As a lecturer in wellbeing on the B.A. and B.Ed. programme in Dublin City University, I stress the following six points, which are described in more detail below:

1. Cultivate positive healthy relationships
2. Share your knowledge: an interdisciplinary approach
3. Find a mentor and co-teach
4. Be a good leader
5. Share your story
6. Learn to belong.

Facing wicked problems

It can be disturbing for us to hear that there are no definite answers or easy solutions to complex moral, emotional, social, and political problems and crises. In this context Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, in her recent presentation at the Education Matters Summit (Ohlmeyer, 2022), alluded to what Rittel and Webber (1973, p.160) designated as 'wicked problems' to draw



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attention to the complexities and challenges of addressing planning and social policy problems in the modern era.

While none of us has a simple answer to these complex questions, one way or another they have a way of presenting themselves in our classrooms at all levels of education. Relating positively to our students, and they to us, is crucial for both teacher and taught in their efforts to survive in ever more uncertain times. The following pointers in this task, though aimed primarily at the teacher, also promote students' wellbeing.

Survival skills for teachers

1. Cultivate positive healthy relationships

People who neglect their personal as well as professional development leave themselves open to a multitude of stressors in today's fraught world. While teachers may engage in much professional development and forget about their personal development, they do so to their own detriment. Well-adjusted professionals have learnt to develop a positive relationship with themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

While knowledge of one's subject area and the appropriate teaching methodologies are highly desired qualities in describing the professionalism of any teacher, so too is dedication to personal and professional development. Much of value has been written on self-care and mindfulness practices to aid us in this endeavour. Teachers with high self-esteem and an insight into human development will engage positively with any class.

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2. Share your knowledge: an interdisciplinary approach

To return to Professor Ohlmeyer's presentation alluded to above, the 'wicked problems' of our 'liquid society', encountered by all teachers, can only be tackled by an interdisciplinary approach. While her study was mainly concerned with third level, her findings are also readily applicable to other levels.

Transition Year obviously offers much scope for an interdisciplinary approach. For example, a topic like climate change could be profitably tackled from many points of view: geography, history, the pure sciences, statistics, and moral/religious education, to name several among many. It is worth emphasising that true discipline and wellbeing are team enterprises.

3. Find a mentor and co-teach

If the school runs a mentoring system, all the better for someone starting out on their career. If not, beginner and even experienced teachers should find a

colleague or two with whom they can co-teach. Such an approach obviously needs timetabling and support from management and staff. There is much readily accessible research that backs up the efficacy of co-teaching at secondary school.

4. Be a good leader

All good teachers are good leaders. Leaders know that real power is empowering of their students and never disempowering. They don't micro-manage; they inspire initiative. The Centre for Creative Leadership (2023) underscores the fact that good leaders are also good communicators and great delegators. Most especially they show empathy and respect for their charges.

5. Share your story

The old cliché 'We are all in the one boat' is worth repeating when it comes to our mortality and humanity. At times in classrooms, sharing personal feelings is appropriate for the teacher. This requires humility: 'I cannot answer your question, but I will check that for you', or 'I too experienced that when I was your age.' This takes courage, too, and knowledge of boundaries that can be learnt only through experience and dedication to further learning.

Koole et al. (2006) showed that appropriate sharing always enhances relationships and builds up trust in any human encounter. This boils down to our native instinct to share our stories, which is at the heart of any culture. Professor Shane O'Mara (2023), a neuroscientist at Trinity College Dublin, has written a timely book on how conversation builds the world around us – and how, together, we can talk our way into a better tomorrow. Teachers are an important part of that storytelling.

6. Learn to belong

When we find a school whose ethos appeals to us and where we feel part of the community of learning and caring, we are well on the way to building up our own positive mental health and that of our colleagues and students. In Connemara, older people often ask of a person they do not know in the community, 'Cé dár díobh thú?', which translates literally as 'Whose are you?' In other words, they are trying to find out where the person belongs.

Central to Alfred Adler's theory and practice of psychotherapy is the individual's social needs, especially the need to belong. In dealing with our students and staff members, a good indication of positive wellbeing is how far they feel they belong to the community of learning that is the school.

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Conclusion

These six short pointers are worth considering, as is the more obvious attention we must pay to our physical health. We will then have embodied, as the old Latin adage puts it, a healthy mind in a healthy body.

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The **Irish Science Teachers' Association, Eol Oidí na hÉireann**, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website (www.ista.ie) and through its Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members three times a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally held during Science Week since 1990 and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. The next conference will be held in the **Southeast Technological University in Waterford on 1st & 2nd March 2024**. The theme will be: **Senior Cycle Reform – Implications for Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Leaving Certificate Biology, Chemistry and Physics**.



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