





All The Ways  
I Screwed Up  
My First Year  
of Teaching  
  
*and How You Can  
Avoid Doing It, Too*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Paradise and Reality

How my tropical island dream turns into a big fat  
hairy nightmare.



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## ***Hey, Bruh!"***

*"Howzit, Auntie!"*

*People shouted greetings, waved, and kissed each other as they boarded the little Aloha Airlines prop plane for the thirty-minute flight from Honolulu to Molokai, Hawaii. Thick beautiful pidgin swelled all around me. I understood none of it. Quite a few*



*passengers brought huge fast-food takeout bags on board and crammed duct-taped white foam coolers into the overhead bins.*

*As we lifted off, I pressed my face to the window. Or I would have, if I could have reached it. A regal-looking Hawaiian auntie wearing a flower lei, colorful muumuu, and large hand-woven hat occupied the seat next to me. I enjoyed the spicy scent of her flowers while I strained to peek around her to get a glimpse of my new island home.*

*I couldn't wait to start the first chapter of my new adventure as a third grade teacher in Hawaii. I was a brand-new teacher, six months out of college, whose solo teaching experiences consisted of a few hours as a substitute.*

*Molokai had a chronic teacher shortage. The locals still laugh about one culture-shocked mainland-lander who climbed off the plane, took one look around, and raced back to the airport to catch the next plane to Honolulu. Although I loved the peaceful feeling of the island the minute I arrived, many young teachers fresh out of college preferred a more*

*urban setting. So the Hawaii Department of Education sent recruiters to teacher colleges on the mainland each year. When they came to my college, I interviewed just for the heck of it, and to my shock, the recruiter hired me on the spot.*

*Even though I was new to teaching, I had some life experience under my belt before climbing on the plane to Molokai. I had quit my corporate job because I wanted to make a difference in the world instead of shuffling papers from desk to desk for the rest of my life. My husband told me I was a born teacher. Then he said he didn't want me to teach, because it would remind him of his own miserable school experiences. We split up the following year.*

*To get into the School of Education, I had to complete two years of undergraduate work first, then write essays, participate in numerous interviews, and fill out lengthy applications. No one in our program had a college GPA below 3.0, and most, like me, were straight-A students. The program turned away two people for every person accepted.*

*Once you were in, you weren't guaranteed to stay*

*in. About half the students either opted out or failed out. Because of the exclusivity and rigor of my teacher training program, I felt justified thinking I was a better-than-average new teacher. I knew I had a lot to learn, of course, but I had just made it through that horrific program, hadn't I? And I managed to go through a divorce and work to support myself at the same time. If I survived that, I should be able to get through my first year of teaching with no problem at all, right?*

*Yeah, not so much. I gained thirty pounds and a drinking habit after my first year. After two years I was on antidepressants and close to a nervous breakdown. It was definitely not a good two years of my life, although it did have its moments, such as skinny dipping in the beautiful blue ocean next to a deserted white sand beach.*

*I learned a lot, though, and I turned it all around in my third and fourth years of teaching, thanks to a **classroom management**<sup>1</sup> class, support from my*

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<sup>1</sup> Bold words are in the Glossary of Teacher-Speak on page 105.

*church, and the antidepressants I mentioned. The classroom management class was the most important thing. It taught me all the practical skills that had somehow been missing from classes in my teacher education program. Yes, the theoretical stuff is important, but a lot is missing, which leads me to the purpose for this collection of essays.*

*I don't want anyone to have to go through what I went through in my first two years of teaching. Not only that, but I don't want any students to suffer through a teacher as incompetent as I was. I hope I entertain you (because many of my mistakes are pretty funny, in retrospect) and I hope I give you some practical suggestions and hints.*

*I am on a mission to help you become the inspirational teacher you know you can be. With that in mind, I dedicate this book to you, and invite you to the sunny red-dirt island of Molokai with me as I showcase all the mistakes I made and explain what I think you can do to avoid them.*

*I'm going to tell it like it really was for me, which might conflict with what some of the experts say.*

*I'm not writing a textbook here (because God knows enough textbooks exist in the world already!) I'm just sharing my own experiences with you, hoping they will help.*

*If your experiences are different, and they probably are, I invite you to contribute your perspective with the Positive Educator Community at [PositiveTeachingStrategies.com](http://PositiveTeachingStrategies.com) and at [Facebook.com/PositiveTeachingStrategies](https://www.facebook.com/PositiveTeachingStrategies). Please share what you think about my first-year teaching mistakes, as well as any teaching hints to help others in the community. Today's educators need all the help we can get, and we aren't getting it from politicians, parents, or our school districts. It's up to us to help ourselves if we are going to change the world.*





## CHAPTER 1

### Watch Out, Martha Stewart

Why it's important to stay out of the dangerous,  
addictive teacher supply store.



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**Before I even buy** my one-way ticket to Hawaii, I pack boxes of classroom supplies and mail them to the school where I'll be teaching. When I arrive, a pile of dented, bedraggled boxes awaits me in **the office**. The secretary smiles one of those "if it wasn't my job to be nice to you, I'd probably kill you" smiles and lets me know my classroom is filled



with “quite a few” more boxes.

Out of the fifty boxes I sent over, about thirty contain clothes, kitchen supplies, bedding, and other household goods. I stuffed the rest with bulletin board borders, books, posters, maps, photographs, stick-on lettering systems, calendars, and pocket charts. I threw in a few books of worksheets to photocopy, textbooks from teacher college with all their great ideas, and my final **work sample project**—a **unit** on insects. (After all, what’s the purpose of doing the work sample project with all its lesson plans and materials lists if I’m not going to teach it in the classroom my first year?) Mostly, though, I packed those boxes full of stuff for setting up my room. The teacher supply store in Oregon loved me!

(For those who don’t know, a teacher supply store is an irresistible combination of office supply store, book store, and gift shop for teachers. It stocks every conceivable cutesy prize, poster, game, book, or manual a teacher could ever want. Don’t go there! It’s dangerous and highly addictive.)

I open the bulging boxes and get ready for the

first day of school. I scrub counters and create clever bulletin boards. I plaster every available wall space with a colorful poster or banner declaring, *This is a Learning Zone*, *There is No 'I' in TEAM*, and *You Only Lose When You Quit*. Of course I hang the obligatory **alphabet chart** over the chalkboard.

(For those of you too young to remember, a “chalkboard” was a green piece of slate or slate-like material teachers wrote on with chalk a million years ago before whiteboards, SMART boards, and document cameras. At the end of the day, a thick layer of chalk dust covered all teachers’ hands and clothing unless they were lucky enough to own a little metal holder for their chalk.)

I now realize none of the decorating was necessary. None of it! Sure, cute little pillows for the reading area are nice, and it’s fun to have some color in the room, but beyond someplace for the students to sit and a place for their supplies, none of it is important for learning.

The most important thing to do in the weeks before school is plan. And whatever you do, don’t

“plan” the way I did. I filled the first two weeks of squares in my new teacher plan book (another \$12.95 dropped at the teacher supply store) with getting-to-know-you activities and games. I figured the rest would fall into place after that. (After all, I had my insect unit, remember?)

I will give my New Teacher Self a little credit. I thought everything fell into place after the first two weeks because my **cooperating teacher** made it look like that’s what happened. She had opened school for about twenty years and knew the rhythm and sequence of her year. She did all the planning before I even met her, and when I showed up, eager and enthusiastic, she gave me a bulletin board project to burn off some of my excess energy. She told me how she planned the year, but I sort of forgot in my initial enthusiasm and teacher-supply-store-induced adrenaline rush.

If I could travel back in time and have a little talk with my New Teacher Self, I would give her a big hug and some hard-earned advice:



**Forget about decorating. Get** the student textbook (Gasp! The textbook! How old fashioned!) for the subjects you teach. Flip to the table of contents and look at the topics and the order they come in. Make a list.

Make an appointment with an experienced teacher at your grade level or subject. The best option is someone at your school, preferably next door to you. If you are the only one in your school, reach out to an experienced teacher at a nearby school. Show her the list or textbook and ask her which of the topics she teaches and which she leaves out. Ask her which month she usually teaches each topic. Write this down! She may even have a schedule. If she does, by all means steal it!

Get that new teacher plan book out. Fill in all the dates. Mark out the holidays and vacations. Make a list of the topics for each month on a sticky note and attach it to the appropriate page of your plan book.

Outline the first month's lessons. You don't need

to create every handout and activity, but know the main projects. Include room procedure lessons and team building activities, but intersperse them with **subject area content**.

Plan the heck out of the first two weeks, including handouts, activities, and worksheets. (Swipe these from the experienced teacher if you can.) Don't worry about preparing too much work. Readyng more activities than you need is much better than finishing a two-day lesson in thirty minutes and trying to make something up on the spot.

If your principal or other teachers pressure you to decorate, hang *Student Work* and *We Love to Learn* signs on your bulletin boards. On the first day of school, you will identify The Student Who Finishes Everything Early. Ask her to staple your class's first assignment to the bulletin boards. Done. Go take a nap.

Above all I would tell my New Teacher Self to take it easy on herself. You don't have to be perfect or know everything, nor does your room have to be

a work of art. Spend your best effort learning the most effective ways to teach your content, and later you can create a beautiful learning kingdom with all the bells and whistles.



## CHAPTER 2

### I Can Do It All

In which I microwave paper, battle the Monster Copier, and never, never stop working, ever.



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**I stand on the** counter about a week before the first day of school in my bare feet and my shorts, wielding a stapler, singing along to Bonnie Raitt, and stapling in time. I've been in Hawaii three weeks and I'm tired and punchy. I work in my room eight or nine hours nearly every day in addition to unpacking and settling in at home. And of course I spend a little bit of time going to the beach and



exploring the island. But it's crunch time now. School starts next Monday.

I spend time each day in the copy room, which is approximately the size of a large walk-in closet, learning the idiosyncrasies of the evil office machinery. One of the photocopiers (which I will nickname the Monster Copier to avoid a lawsuit from the manufacturer) imprints the original document onto a strange transparent piece of paper called a "master" which looks and feels like a cross between waxed paper and tissue paper. The Monster Copier makes copies from the masters (if it's in the mood,) crumples the used masters, and crams them into a little box. Every couple of hours I have to empty the little box, a procedure which almost always results in black ink streaks on my hands, legs, and clothing.

The Monster Copier also jams a lot, and when it does, I have to open a mysterious series of doors and trays in order and pull and/or crank various levers in different directions until I find and release the ink-soaked paper and pry it off the roller (smearing me once again with smelly black ink.) After I follow all

the weird directions, close all the drawers and doors, and push the reset button, the red light still flashes and the Monster Copier still refuses to work. It's like a really cruel real-life video game or an experiment designed to test the intelligence of lab rats before rewarding them with a piece of cheese.

The regular photocopier jams also, and it sometimes prints on only the top half of the paper. Other times it comes out gray, with the words showing faintly like a shadow. I later learn this happens because the paper absorbs humidity from the air. The other teachers suggest I microwave the paper to get the moisture out before sending it through the copier. Who knew the microwave was an essential piece of office equipment?

After battling the copy machines, moving desks and bookcases, and hanging up posters all day, I spend my evenings working at home. I trim laminated materials, color posters, plan lessons, and create worksheets to photocopy the next day (if the copier gods are smiling.)

If this sounds like it takes a long time, you're

right. It does. It takes me one to two hours of preparation work (or more) for every hour spent actually delivering the lesson to the students. In the typical six-hour school day, I get one hour without students (usually spent in some sort of meeting,) which leaves five hours to teach. If your math teachers did their jobs, you can easily figure out that I have two to ten hours of prep work to do each day after my students go home. Once I take time to sleep, I have almost zero time for anything else, such as grocery shopping.

Still, I'm going to do whatever it takes to be a great teacher, and I'm not going to cut corners. I put in the hours, lugging a large canvas tote filled with work everywhere I go. Other teachers tell me it goes with the territory. You have to spend a lot of time in your first year and any time you switch grade levels or subjects. This is true. However, it is not necessary to spend every waking hour working.

The secret? Borrow, work cooperatively, out-source, and make the kids do more work than you.



**Borrow lessons and worksheets** instead of creating them yourself. If you are teaching a skill or topic, I guarantee you someone else in your building or online has taught it before you. Reach out to other teachers who teach or have taught your same subject and grade level and ask what they use. You can even use the teacher supply store or websites with downloadable materials as long as you don't distract yourself with cool lessons with lots of bells and whistles that aren't in your **curriculum**. Make it a habit to share anything you find with other teachers. This is good karma and will encourage them to do the same for you. (Not in a smartass, I-know-everything-even-though-I'm-a-first-year-teacher way. In a helpful, humble way.)

Work cooperatively as a team with others in your grade level to make copies for each other. It's always faster to make fifty copies of one worksheet than to make twenty-five copies of two worksheets. Better yet, find one reliable parent to make copies and pre-

pare materials for your whole team. Designate a space where you will all put work that needs to be done so the parent can stop in, grab everyone's work, and get busy without supervision.

Don't hesitate to outsource. People like to help. Parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles (yours and your students') like to trim lamination, hang bulletin boards, and color. Students will fight over who gets to use the stapler, label books, and sharpen pencils. After your first year, ask your former students to come back and help before school or during recess. Show your appreciation with stickers or other treats for the kids and Starbucks cards for the adults.

Give the copy machine a rest every once in awhile. Ask the students to copy down math problems, reading group discussion questions, writing prompts, and **graphic organizers** from the board or projector. You will save time, save paper, and teach your students an essential school skill. Shift the responsibility for student materials to the students as much as possible. Ask The Student Who Finishes Everything Early to sort or organize. This is a good

life skill, and she will love to do it.

If your employers wanted a paper hanger, copy machine guru, or laminating pro they would have hired one. You have a college degree and specialized training in teaching. Use your time, as much as possible, to teach.



## CHAPTER 3

### The Heroic Hoarder

In which I reminisce about mimeographs, breathe mildew, and wish I had listened to Miss Iaea.



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AND HOW YOU CAN AVOID DOING IT, TOO

## Glossary of Teacher-Speak

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**Alphabet Chart** A long skinny banner with the alphabet printed on it. Usually runs corner to corner near the ceiling in elementary classrooms. Versions vary, depending on grade level and Martha Stewartish tendencies of the teacher. Often populated with animals or objects which start with each letter (such as Ape for A.) Some have been in the same place so long the wall will fall apart if it is taken down.

**Angelic Student** An angel is a supernatural being of light that provides protection or information. Once I read that angels can also have a pleasing fragrance. Angelic students are quiet, neat, compliant, and usually cute. And come to think of it, they generally smell nice. A certain type of student appears to be an angel at first, but is really just very sneaky and gets away with everything.

**Behavior** The way students act, especially how well they follow directions and get along with others. Teachers talk about behavior a lot, because it sounds more objective to say “Marcus has behavior issues” than it does to say “Marcus is annoying.”

**Behavior Lesson** In my grandparents’ day a behavior lesson was a spanking (as in “I’m going to take you out to the woodshed and teach you a lesson.”) Nowadays a behavior lesson is detailed training on what the adult wants the student to do in a specific situation. Great behavior lessons can be fun and can save the teacher hours and hours of time and stress. They also do not require a paddle and rarely produce tears. I highly recommend them.

**Behavior Limits** *see Boundaries*

**Boundaries** Lines drawn in the sand which will trigger a consequence if crossed. A boundary can be a literal boundary, such as where students are allowed to sit during Sustained Silent Reading, or a figurative boundary, such as how many times students can sharpen their pencils while the teacher

is talking. (I recommend anywhere they want as long as you can see them and zero, respectively.)

**Butcher Paper** Extra-sturdy paper that comes on gigantic rolls. Used by butchers and fishmongers to wrap meat. Teachers (especially elementary teachers) use a colored version for just about everything, including but not limited to table linens, costumes, posters, window shades, and covering bookshelves at the end of the year so the books don't walk off. The most common teacher use of butcher paper is to cover up the really ugly, pockmarked, baby-poop-brown bulletin boards before decorating them. If you want to see a school-wide teacher panic, kidnap the butcher paper cart two days before school starts.

**Class Book** A handmade book created collaboratively by the whole class, usually modeled after a "real" book. Often each student will create a page using a template. For instance, the teacher reads *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, Jr., then the class creates *Silver Snake, Silver Snake, What Do You Eat?* (I probably wouldn't

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hope you enjoyed it!***

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