

# That'll teach you

They don't let just anyone take charge of a classroom, apparently – here's what it takes to be a teacher

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And still they gaz'd, and still the wonder grew / That one small head could carry all he knew.' That's what Oliver Goldsmith wrote about a teacher in 'The Deserted Village' (1770), and when you're a small thing, you probably agree: your primary school teachers are the wise sages of your little world, dispensing wisdom at every turn; they don't exist anywhere but school, and live in the classroom waiting for your arrival every day. As you get older you realise it's more complicated – teachers can be your window on the world, or it can feel like they're slamming the door in your face, providing a design for life or just a desire to leave. And occasionally you might think one of them is fit. The ads are right, you never do forget a good teacher, but the strangest thing for etc. was realising they're human, are just doing a – probably quite difficult – job, and were trained to do it like anyone else. We have nothing but respect for those who decide to take on that level of responsibility, but some would say you'd be crazy as a beachball in a nail factory to even consider it. Then again, others – often teachers themselves – would say it's a creative, challenging and rewarding profession in which you can make a positive difference to your own – and others' – lives. **etc.** would rather gargle razor blades than stand up in front of a class and find out for ourselves, so we found some real teachers and asked them to educate us..

# What they go to school for

## Philippa Wood

People go into teaching at various times in their lives and their careers, it doesn't have to be an immediate step from university. Philippa has been teaching Biology in an all-boys secondary school since 2002, having left university, gone travelling for a year, joined the rat race, dropped out of the rat race and then re-trained as a teacher. Hers is not an unusual story. 'Like a million other students I felt an enormous pressure to move to London after university to get a job,' she says. She successfully delayed this for a while by spending a year in New Zealand, where she worked in a primary school for 6 months: 'I really just thought it would look better on my CV than working in a pub.' She came back to London and got onto a graduate training scheme with a recruitment consultant. 'I had none of the right skills for the job,' she says, 'I was stuck in this dilemma: living in London, spending crazy money on rent, not really seeing my friends because it's so difficult to meet up, and doing a job I hated.' It's a familiar story for all too many graduates, who grab a job because it's there, without thinking about whether it's what they really want to do. Nowadays it's pretty rare for a graduate to be in the same job – even the same industry – five years after graduating. 'I knew I had to do something. My friends' careers were all progressing and I couldn't stand what I was doing. I'd really enjoyed the teaching experience I'd had in New Zealand, so I thought I'd go back to university and re-train. Perhaps at the time it was an act of desperation, but looking back now it was the best thing I could ever have done.'

## Alicia Tarry

Some people are born to be teachers, they feel it in their bones [ah, the miracle of genetic predisposition. **etc.** was born to be a rock star, we just haven't grown into it yet]. Alicia graduated from Cardiff University in 2003 with a BA in Education, which, although not a teaching degree in itself, covers the history, psychology and sociology of education. 'I'd always wanted to be a primary school teacher', she says, 'I'd done work experience in schools after my GCSEs, in sixth form, and again at university.' She couldn't wait to get started, so went straight from university to teaching college – which is frighteningly keen.



## We don't need no education

Well, not strictly true, but there are many different ways to train to be a teacher. You can take an undergraduate course at university, or if you already have a degree you can do the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which takes one year. Philippa feels it's really important to get some all-round life experience before starting teaching, and says it's something that employers really value. 'Travelling, working in a different profession, all these things mean you'll have a broader knowledge and greater life experience, which is really valuable when you're working in a school environment. I guess it makes you more versatile. I couldn't imagine being 21 years old and having to hand out detentions when only three years earlier I'd been the one in

detention!' she says. [But everyone's different: see 'Fresh blood' for the proof – **etc.**]

Every teacher trains to teach at least two key stages. You can train full time, part time or take a flexible course which allows you to train when it suits you best. Naturally, the course varies depending on whether you are training to be a primary or secondary teacher, but you should research thoroughly because colleges do vary in terms of how the course is structured.

Philippa got her PGCE at Exeter University's teacher training college. 'In my first term it was all learning about the theories of teaching, and having lectures on your specialism [in her case Biology]. Then both my second and third terms were spent on two different placements in

**'When you see a child's achieved something, it's worth the work'**

schools. With teaching you really do learn by doing.' Of course, PGCE students are not just dumped in a classroom and told to get on with it, they are overseen by a qualified teacher, who acts as a mentor, and guides, assesses and offers constructive feedback. 'You get tips on class control, how to structure a lesson properly and organise lessons. It's just great to be able to benefit from having an experienced teacher there to hold your hand.' Getting actual classroom experience can really make or break a trainee teacher. 'I remember on one of my placements thinking, this is really good, this really suits me,' says Philippa, who hasn't looked back since.

Alicia trained at St Mary's college in Twickenham. As she was training to be a primary school teacher, the structure of the course was very different. 'Firstly we all had to arrange two weeks' work experience in a local school, to observe classroom activity, get involved and just see the process in action.' Once the course started it was very much like being back at school, 'I had two 2-hour lessons in English, Maths and Science each week, and for all other subjects I had one hour-long lesson per week.'

Of course it's not just about learning the material, you also have to learn how to teach it. 'We were shown lots of videos, but they weren't really that helpful,' she says, 'once you're in the classroom you have to think on your feet, and you really learn that best from the experience you get on placements, actually in the classroom.'

Postgraduates who have finished their PGCE can complete an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) course. They must meet the standards required of a skilled teacher – demonstrating the right values and commitment, showing confidence and authority in their chosen subject, an understanding of how pupils progress – as well as skills in classroom management, planning, monitoring and assessment. They can then be awarded Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), and receive a £6,000 bursary [woohoo! Where's that chalk?]. If they teach a 'priority subject' (English, Maths, Languages, Design & Technology, IT or Science) they can also get a £4,000 'golden

**'The boys deliberately leave the microscopes out of focus so they can see down my cleavage when I'm refocusing them'**

## Some excellent teachers (and what they taught)

**Socrates (ancient Greek philosopher) –**

'There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance.'

**Mahatma Gandhi (Indian leader and pacifist) –**

'Victory attained by violence is tantamount to defeat, for it is momentary.'

**William Morris (English poet and socialist) –**

'Not on one strand are all life's jewels strung.'

**The Buddha (spiritual leader) –**

'Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intention of throwing it at someone; you are the one who gets burned.'

**Confucius (Chinese philosopher) –**

'Worry not that no one knows of you; seek to be worth knowing.'

**Yoda (Jedi Master) –**

'Do, or do not. There is no try.'

hello'. Which is nice. Also, teachers with QTS can have a 10% (sometimes more) reduction in their teaching timetable when they start, which allows time to build on teaching skills already developed.

## Learning control

All this educational theory is fine, but the thing that really brings **etc.** out in a cold sweat is the idea of maintaining control in a classroom full of people inclined to disobey you. How do you manage it? Philippa's a good example of the mindset you need – a very attractive woman in her mid-20s, she teaches Biology in an all-boys school, so inevitably there will be areas she has to approach, er, delicately. 'I don't have a problem at all with teaching sex education,' she says, 'but there'll be times when, for example, the boys deliberately leave the microscopes out of focus so they can see down my cleavage when I'm refocusing them to check their work. I've learned that the best way to handle it is to do nothing. You just have a giggle to yourself, and it makes a good story down the pub later.' Damn, they do notice after all. Busted. **etc.**

# Fresh blood

What with it being the start of a new academic year and all, etc. thought it was only fair to talk to some Newly Qualified Teachers, starting out just like the rest of you. We fled the etc. lounge one sunny weekend to meet 21-year-olds Mary Hammond (teaching 9-10 year-olds) and Polly Knapton (she gets the little 5-6 year-olds) and asked them...isn't it really intimidating?

**Polly:** Yeah, it is, but you know what you're going to teach, so you can plan ahead and research everything.

**Mary:** People wonder what teachers can be doing all the time; a lot of it is planning! But you're not just put into the classroom and left on your own; you do have lots of support and a mentor. I find that teachers are quite willing to help each other out and share ideas. But that's where it differs from other jobs. You're not at your desk with your own work to do, you're responsible for kids – not money – and kids are more important...

**etc.: Isn't that responsibility frightening?**

**M:** The first time, yes, but then I just wanted to get on with it.

**P:** Actually, I feel far too young to be a teacher! But my class is younger, so when it's an 'adult' talking, they listen.

**etc.: You don't find discipline a problem?**

**P:** Not yet, although I do have some naughty boys...

**etc.: Is there a handbook for dealing with troublesome things?**

**M:** Ideally a school will have a system in place, and you'll pick up stuff from other teachers.

**P:** Some teachers I know have been doing it for years, I can't imagine the tricks they know...

**M:** But everyone does it differently.

**P: (to M)** True, but yours are older, they



Left: Mary, right: Polly

must be harder to discipline?

**M:** Yeah, but I couldn't deal with weeing, and sick and so on...

**etc.: Hmm, moving swiftly on... How have your first few days gone?**

**M:** Teaching is tiring, whatever anyone says. It's not 9-3, it's 8-6 every day.

**P:** It's harder than people think.

**etc.: Do you ever think about your impact on the kids' lives?**

**P:** I'd like to think they'd remember me. I do worry that if I've shouted at them during the day they'll go home, tell their parents, and not like me!

**M:** I've never really thought about it like that; that's scary!

**etc.: So if you're thinking about being a teacher, what should you know?**

**M:** Well, if you're a bloke, go for it: there's loads of girls on the course!

**P:** There's more involved than I expected, and it can be frustrating when lessons go wrong, or if the kids are misbehaving; you think you have no control. But when a parent tells you their child's enjoyed something, that's really nice.

**M:** When you see a child's achieved something, it's worth the work; and I've learned not to blame myself when things go wrong, because it's as much about their mood as your ability. It's an emotional job, that's why it's so tiring.

**P:** I've come home crying before, I've been so tired...

**M:** But when it goes wrong, you learn.

**etc.: OK, so how should we treat teachers?**

**M:** With respect!

**P:** It's harder than you think. Be nice to them.

**M:** They do have lives...

**You heard the ladies. So play nice.**

## ANY QUESTIONS?

Find out more about teaching from these fine people...

**Teacher Training Agency** – [www.useyourheadteach.gov.uk](http://www.useyourheadteach.gov.uk). Not the snappiest of URLs, but the site will tell you everything you need to know. If you feel like talking, try the **Teacher Information Line** on **0845 6000 991** (or **0845 6000 992** for all you Welsh speakers). Now go spread learning!