11 steps to survival: from trainee to NQT

As a student I would often ponder the great unanswered questions: ‘if 42 is the answer, what is the question?’ ‘why does monosyllabic have five syllables?’ and most importantly ‘is your NQT year easier or harder than your student year?’ The jury is still out on the first two, but the answer to the last is yes.

As an NQT your timetable increases by something around 50%, the number of meetings you need to attend by about 100%, and your paperwork by about 400%. Classes, along with their reports, achievement and exam results, become your own full responsibility, and if Ofsted come a visiting you’ve got no-Supervising teacher to snatch back the class.

Equally you have a year’s teaching experience under your belt, the chance (assuming you’re changing schools) to start off with all those ‘if only I’d known that last year’ ideas in a new environment, and, best of all, the kids think that you’re a ‘proper’ teacher. You also have more freedom in what you teach, less observations to contend with, and no pesky ‘assignments’ to be doing with.

The NQT year is not easier or harder – it’s just different. What’s more, as a Citizenship teacher, it’s likely to be quite different from anyone else’s experience – mine certainly has, so maybe, hopefully, the points that I’ve gleaned from it will help you.

1. Expect the unexpected

Some teachers are able to go through their entire career without anything even mildly arresting happening to them. Others, like me, can barely get through a week without some utterly befuddling incident creeping up from behind and grabbing us by the wotsits, with the result that my union rep has a standing request in for any incident reports I write, just to keep him amused.

During this last term I had three such experiences: firstly a pupil grabbed my backside outside the dining hall on Valentine’s Day (imagine explaining that one to the Fiancée). Secondly a Year 7 with anger management issues was provoked into throwing a chair at a fellow pupil and endeavoring to beat the living heck out of him in one of my lessons, until I had to wade in and drag him off (which did at least mildly bolster my street cred). Thirdly, and most recently, a Year 11 in a ‘difficult’ group pulled a water pistol out of his underpants and shot it at a year 9 who had come into to collect my registers. He then put said pistol back in his underpants, which threatened to make confiscating it a touch tricky – in the end I had him place it on a piece of paper which I wrapped up. This top three is not even considering school-wide bizarre events (like our resident pig appearing in The Sun, the TES, and on CNN)

Naturally there is very little chance of any such things happening to you – which means if they do you might not have a very good idea of how to react. ABC – Act calm, Be quick to get your account written down, Contact your union rep.
2. Follow everything up

You may be fortunate to be a natural disciplinarian, in which case I hate you and skip to point 3. If not then as a citizenship teacher you have a special challenge, because odds are you’ll be seeing a lot of pupils not very often, without the free time to spend planning strategies that you had in your student year. You will also find, if like me you taught mostly KS3 as a student, that teaching a none exam subjects to years 10 and 11 can be very challenging indeed – you’re their chance to blow off steam.

It follows then that control is everything, and despite the smug assurances of some who find it easy, there are no universal answers and you may feel you’re spending the last 10 minutes of every lesson writing out detention. Still, keep following everything up – don’t let anyone off because you’ve given them detentions five times already and they never turn up: keep issuing them, and keep passing them on to your HoD. The system can only help if it knows about things, and if pupils do eventually decide to stop messing you about it’ll be because they know you mean it.

3. The staffroom is your friend

Figuratively – the actual room isn’t half as nice as the sixth form dayroom. Fellow staff however have been my biggest asset as an NQT, whilst as a student I didn’t know that many outside of my department. An obvious example is comparing notes on difficult pupils, both to reassure myself that it’s not just me and to get ideas for dealing with them. Besides that, fellow staff are hugely useful for finding out how things work, or who is responsible for what, for learning about different events going on, or just for having a moan to. Inside the classroom too it’s very useful to pinpoint a couple of teachers who are willing to give back-up, in the way the class teacher does when you’re a student. You often won’t actually need them, but just threatening to unleash the scary teacher from across the hall on a miscreant can get you a long way.

4. So is your form

Being a Year 7 tutor has possibly been the most rewarding experience of my NQT year, as well as very useful since teaching school procedures is the best way of learning them yourself. You also get to know your form far better than anyone you teach: as Citizenship teachers who generally see classes only once a week, the lack of time to build up relationships with pupils can be a pain. Bizarrely your form can also be an excellent source of information about what’s going on in the school (it’s often a mystery to me how they know what they know), as well as giving you a pulse of the school atmosphere. When a teacher was recently killed in a car crash my form gave me an excellent picture of the likely spread of pupil reactions. Equally on the last day before Easter I switched an entire day of classes to something more laid back based on how hyped up my form was in the morning.

Your form certainly can be a pain – when they’re bickering, forgetting their sicknotes, or just too excitable to calm down for anything so mundane as the register. If, like me, you
teach them, you can also find it tricky to differentiate your nice cuddly form tutor role with the person who has to actually teach them something. However, whilst I won’t say that getting to know your form helps keep you sane (if you’re sane why are you in teaching?), but it can brighten things up immensely.

5. Observations are your friend too

Strange as it sounds NQT observations are actually quite useful. In your student year you have to plan every lesson in detail anyway, and with one or two observations a week they often end up being the same as other lessons, only more stressful. As an NQT however they can actually be quite valuable – with so many classes it’s very easy to get into a rut of relying on the same activities and ideas. Observations, because they happen 6 or 8 times in the year and count for quite a bit, force you to step back and consider what you’re doing that works, and what you’re doing that doesn’t. When you’re being observed by someone senior the consequent improvement in pupil behaviour also gives you the chance to try out new ideas and see how they work. Of course having to write out a full plan when you don’t have much time is a pain, but the lessons that I’ve taught under observation are those I’m most likely to use again next year.

An example of something different which I tried for an observation accompanies this article is attached – I was due to be observed by my HOD with a class who tend to be rather laissez faire, and had kept failing to find the time to work out how to buck them up. I did a one off lesson on the media, based on what it’s like to work on a newspaper – the lesson begins by giving pupils the impression that they have an easy task with plenty of time, before piling deadlines on in quick succession and producing a frantic but very productive atmosphere. The result – the following few weeks saw a marked improvement in enthusiasm.

6. Paperwork is not your friend, so get rid of it, fast

As a student I shared a pigeon hole at school with seven or eight others, and it rarely had much in – mostly just the occasional note from the ITT co-coordinator. When I recently got back in after two days off sick I had 14 new items in my pigeon hole to deal with (an exam timetable to check for errors / changed rooms / covers, three new IEPs to digest, a round-robin on a pupil to fill in, the results of another round robin to read, two overdue library book letters for my form, a missive from my union rep, a letter about a meeting on assessment, a circular from the Deputy Head about something, a note from the Head’s PA, a note from my department head about various matters during my time off, and a misdemeanor to follow up on one of my form). This doesn’t include things like absence notes or letters to home, since they turn up in the register.

As a student you are protected from a lot of this – your mentor passes on what you need to know, and even when you write things such as progress checks or reports the main responsibility still lies with the class teacher. A lot of it however doesn’t need much time to deal with – the issue is volume, and that makes it quite simple: if you have pupils in
detention, catch up on paperwork. If you are sat at the back of a boring meeting, catch up on paperwork. If you have a week where you have no paperwork, then work out what’s coming next week and do it early. If all else fails start on the next batch of reports particularly because, as a Citizenship teachers, you’ll have more than anyone else to write (I average one hundred per year group).

This applies particularly if, as in my first term, you’re expecting a visit from Ofsted – with only 2-3 days notice you will suddenly need ALL paperwork fully up to date. You’ll be busy enough tightening up your lessons plans and writing them all up in full*, without suddenly having to worry about entering all the SEN information in your register, bringing your mark book up to date, or organising the mess of papers on your desk to look less chaotic. But even if Ofsted aren’t expected, keeping on top of paperwork makes your life easier and not meeting deadlines is a good a way as any of irritating your colleagues.

* In the event I actually got the luckiest Ofsted possible – the inspector came in, when I had an outside speaker taking the lesson, but there you go.

7. All the school’s a stage

By which I mean, don’t let yourself be confined to your classroom: get yourself involved in what’s going on out there. To start with this can mean joining another teachers’ activity (very few object to an extra pair of hands), or striking off on your own. I currently run the table tennis club and coach the debating team, and find it the best way to get to know pupils, especially the awkward ones, as well as being good for your stress levels and good for your career. I’ve also played football for the staff against the parents, and embarrassingly defeated though we were it gave me a way into good-natured conversation with pupils for a week afterwards.

This is also one of those times to use Citizenship to your advantage – by organising active Citizenship work such as Amnesty or Charity work, or running debate skills to develop thinking and arguing skills. Schools councils are another obvious angle here, and if you don’t have one, set one up – it’s Ofsted points for a school and brownie points for you.

8. Get out of school

Not permanently you understand, but unlike your student year there are no periodic ‘recall days’ to give you a respite from the fray and chance to reflect and develop, so you have to create your own opportunities. Fortunately as an NQT you are in the best position you’ll ever get as far as cover and money for training goes, so seize it – I’ve been on a county-wide NQT induction, a two-day course on teaching sex-ed, and a one day course on teaching politics. Next term I’m going to the Citized NQTs’ conference, and getting a days cover to go and observe in another school. The last two are both because I asked, not because my school spotted them, so being proactive clearly helps
9. Look to the future

The hierarchy of promotion can be a bit strange for Citizenship teachers since if you’re in a separate department it’s usually rather small, and if you’re part of another department then your rivals for advancement will often have better subject qualifications. However there are still plenty of opportunities for professional development – teaching sixth form Politics, Sociology or Law for example, contributing citizenship elements to schemes of work. As a Citizenship teacher, particularly if combined with PSHE you could also look to branch out into a related responsibility such as Healthy Schools, Child Protection, or Pastoral.

If none of those grab your interest then postgraduate study and exam marking are both areas worth looking into – I’ve just signed up mark for AS Politics, and to study for a postgraduate qualification working on a careers based project (Careers, Citizenship and PSHE are taught together at my school). My project sends Year 11 pupils with an interest in teaching into KS3 classes acting as teaching assistants, eventually giving them the chance to take a starter or plenary, to give them experience of what it’s actually like. You could try something similar, or something completely different – postgraduate study often involves independent small-scale research projects, and Citizenship is a ripe area for these: for example the effect of discrete Citizenship lessons on learning, or the effect on G & T students of school council involvement, or the role of debating skills in developing self-esteem, or how pupils view Citizenship – the possibilities are limitless.

10. Find your pattern, and know when to quit

The hours do go up in your NQT year, or at least mine did. I’m lucky enough to have not much marking to do, and since I teach 3 or 4 groups per year group I can repeat a good few lessons. However with 520 pupils passing through my doors a week the paperwork that I mentioned in no. 6 can get rather daunting and the major problem is there is literally no end to it – you can always prepare more for your lessons, think more about new strategies, and organise more school trips. You can personally phone the parents of every misbehaving pupil, spend hours decorating your classroom until it’s a perfect learning environment, and give detailed feedback on every piece of work until every pupil has an intricate knowledge of how to improve. You can do more and more on all of those things, provided you don’t value your health.

If you do value it then learn to separate the ‘could do’, from the ‘must do’ and ‘should do’, learn when and where you work best, and set yourself boundaries. For some it’s 8-5 and Saturdays, to leave evenings and Sundays for family. Personally I tend to go into school early and come home late but leave weekends free to relax. Of course there are exceptions – Ofsted inspections, or report time for example, but generally I do just over 50 hours a week. I don’t do my job perfectly, but I know that I put in a decent effort, and then stop.

11. Enjoy yourself
There are a lot of moments in every week when I don’t enjoy my work, perhaps more so than my student year – sometimes I have whole days when I feel like I’m banging my head against a brick wall. However, more so than my student year, there are times when I really love it – the debating team reaching a national final, successful politics exam results, a particularly good lesson. If there weren’t moments like that then I wouldn’t do this anymore, but it is true that often you have to remind yourself to enjoy it. Teaching can indeed be very trying, but if we can’t take a joke then we shouldn’t have joined.

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The Appendix
In the Appendix is the lesson referenced in point 5, used for an observation with year 8. It’s particularly useful with classes who tend to be rather over-relaxed, to show them what a frantic, purposeful atmosphere is like.