

# 25 School Mistakes I Have Made

by Alton L. Biggs

First of all, I don't want you to misunderstand me by thinking I only made mistakes. I had more than my fair share of success during my career. I wasn't aware of most successes at the time. Even after having left the classroom almost a decade ago, I still receive emails, notes and telephone calls from previous students telling me how much they gained from my classroom or how their lives were changed. Those are my successes.

However, my errors seemed immediately obvious. You need to first be aware that research by Hilda Borko and Richard Shavelson shows that teachers make an instructional decision almost once per minute. We make these decisions informed by our environments – from non-working technology to not having enough time to grade properly. Usually our students think we're quite confident with every decision we make and every direction we take. If they only knew how shaky we feel with some of our decisions, especially those made without having time to think things through, they'd be amazed!

In honor of the Texas Association of Biology Teachers' 25th birthday, I offer you 25 mistakes I wish I'd not made during my career. Hopefully you can learn from me and avoid the majority of them yourself.

**1. Important Stuff:** I originally thought biology – or whatever science course I happened to be teaching – was the most important course in the curriculum. Too often I acted on that erroneous belief. In mid-career I came to the startling conclusion that my course was *not* the most important one. Students remembered little content beyond the next test. The lesson learned is that working with colleagues across the curriculum to buttress the base (reading, writing, and arithmetic) and add humanity (integrity, work ethic, study habits, and the like) is far more important. It is the important stuff your students remember forever.

**2. Agonizing:** I can't tell you how much time I've wasted in a fog of doubt while planning a lesson. Don't. You simply don't have enough time. Circumstances – time allowed, equipment to use, student absences – will change any plan you make. Plan, but don't over-plan.

**3. Forgetting Important Events:** Family time is important. Time alone with your own children is even more important. Don't forget them. I spent way too many hours at my desk after school working on things that didn't matter nearly as much. My daughter – now nearing 40 – still hasn't forgiven me for forgetting to come to her games, open house nights, etc. To be honest, now that I've seen the effects, I haven't forgiven myself either. Let me tell you politely: It isn't worth it!

**4. Blind to the Times:** Especially near the end of my career, I often found it easy to teach blindly. I was blind to my students' daily lives, trials, and culture. Oh, it didn't happen all the time, but blindness will lead you to run your head into walls. That hurts. Find out as much as you can about your students. They will love you for it.

**5. See It Through Their Eyes:** Your classes become more interesting when you visualize the content through the eyes of students. Curriculum concepts tend to be "old hat" once you've taught a course for three or four years. Your students, however, are encountering it all for the first time. They need – no, they deserve – variety in their lessons. Show a movie clip, bring in an expert, or use their flair for humor, art, etc. to involve them in the lessons. Use dramatization, a poem or a simulation to "hook" them.

**6. Grading:** When I first began teaching I thought everything needed to be graded. I graded with equal attention to detail. This required me to spend hours and hours on things that didn't matter that much to the whole of what I wanted accomplished. A colleague finally revealed the truth to me. Not everything requires a grade – even if students, parents and principals think so. Sometimes you can just give minor daily papers a cursory glimpse to see if most students “got it” or not. If they did, you can move on. If they didn't, you need to spend a bit more time with the concept – but only if it is important enough to deserve more of your time.

**7. Making Friends:** Too often I was an island in the schoolhouse. Get a life. Share it with your colleagues who are likely to be able to help you at times. You'll find when you share problems you can find solutions so much easier. The low-key approach is most often the best.

**8. Don't Rush:** Every school alters the daily schedule occasionally. Don't fight it. I have too often rushed through the lesson I'd prepared in the time I had available. This just didn't work. Students need time – time to process the lesson, to spend on new concepts, and to make your lesson their own. There are no shortcuts to time.

**9. Who Is Important:** There was a year or two in the earliest part of my career when I failed to understand the importance of some people. The librarian, the janitor, the school secretary and the cafeteria workers are some of the most important people in your school. Invest in their names and their lives because they can make yours heavenly or hellish.

**10. Be Secure in Your Classroom:** Confidence resonates. Don't let students see the cracks in your confidence. But do share your insecurities with a trusted confidant, mentor, or colleague.

**11. Smile:** It's not a part of my nature to be overly joyful. I had administrators who told me to smile more. Unfortunately, it took me too long to heed their good advice. There is no rule against being nice or having fun in the classroom. Your smile can brighten a child's life in ways you won't know for years. It's true that some students make it difficult for you to like them, but you're not required to like them. You are required to teach them. It's been my observation that a kindness is more often reciprocated than not. If it isn't, what will have been lost?

**12. Forgetting to Play:** I'm naturally a serious person (see #11). Remember that all higher animals play. It is critical for them and us. You'll engage students much more easily in play than in drudgery.

**13. Who Is In Charge:** Luckily I learned this one quickly. What I found by including students in as many decisions and directions as possible is that they will usually do more than you would have originally asked or thought possible. One day a class was loud – *really loud* – and I asked, “When did I lose control of this class?” A student from the second row was quick with her response, replying, “Mr. Biggs you know very well you've never lost control of a class. You just let us have a little more leeway than any of our other teachers.” Wow! I couldn't have paid her enough for such a response. So, the trick is to let them think it's them when it's really you.

**14. Take Care of Yourself:** The year before I retired I had accumulated more than 100 “sick days” or “personal days” that should have been used during all of those times when I was ill or should have taken time for a wedding, funeral or other important life event. I was under the mistaken impression that no one could do what I did in the classroom. My last year, when I'd already decided to retire, I asked for and received permission to take a 26-day expedition to Antarctica. I saw on my return that my class went on without me. The lesson is use time for its purpose, but never abuse it.

**15. Be a Technology Fool:** My wife says she'll never forget the first time she used 2 X 2 slide transparencies in her art classroom. She amazed students with this ancient technology. Yes, it still had its use, but the students were so far ahead technologically. Students use the Internet for many things. There are a host of tools using new technology. Explore and learn to use them all – *old and new* – to your advantage.

**16. Can You Hear:** Prepare for the non-response. Students were rarely as excited as I was about worm circulatory systems or squid eyes. Always have a secondary plan to put in place to get buy-in from your students when your first question of the day results in dead silence.

**17. Remember Your Tools:** Use all the tools at your disposal. Scrape up others. Enough said.

**18. Leave It or Fix It:** It took a while until I learned to handle my students in much the same way as my own child. When a student gets in trouble you can let him stay angry, sit him in a corner, or serve up another punishment. None of those gets you very far. However, change always occurs with a restorative conference. Spend time integrating the problem student back into the classroom. Talk one on one. Bring in the offended student, if there is one. This takes time. You'll find it worth every minute.

**19. Plead Your Ignorance:** There is no shame in not knowing the answer to a question. Teach this lesson to students by modeling it for them. When you don't know, say so. Then ask how they might find out. Let them try. If the answer isn't readily available, say you'll try to find out. Make a concerted effort. If you don't find the answer, be honest and tell them. Be prepared to say exactly how you tried to find the answer – especially after you query multiple sources.

**20. Read:** The only way a person learns to read is by reading. Oral reading in class is a good thing. You can avoid embarrassing poor readers by having them read less than good ones. But every student should read, even if you or a helper has to help with every word. I don't suggest in high school that you read orally every day, but once a week for ten or fifteen minutes might be good. Require reading outside class. Remember to set the example by what you read in your free time, too.

**21. Working While Distracted:** Your concentration disintegrates if you try to watch TV or have a conversation with your spouse or child while trying to plan a lesson or grade a paper. Pick one or the other. Whatever you are doing, try to do it well by concentrating on it.

**22. Set Goals:** Don't ever try an activity or make a presentation without knowing why you're doing it. If you don't know where you're going, you're not very likely to just suddenly find yourself where you wanted to be.

**23. Dress the Part:** I know I'm old-fashioned. But I also know that I avoided many of the pitfalls of teachers who "looked like the kids" by being professionally dressed. When I retired I usually dressed better than the principal. You are not your students. It is not your job to be best buddies with them. Draw the line and keep it clear between teacher and student. You'll be glad you did.

**24. Just Stop to Ask:** During discussions, never forget to ask a follow up question like "What do you mean by that?" The best question to ask is almost always a higher level question such as "Why?"

**25. Get a Mentor:** Share with your mentor your successes and failures. Watch your colleagues teach in order to learn new strategies. Effective teachers keep learning new things – even at the end of their careers. No, especially at the end of their careers!



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