THE ACCIDENTAL TEACHER

A Quick-Start Guide for Non-Teachers Asked to Train, Mentor, or Teach

DR HAYO REINDERS

Foreword

I first started teaching 30 years ago. In fact I was still a student myself at that time. In the mid-1990s, the internet started becoming available to the wider public. I was at the time taking a course on technology in language education, but that course had not been updated in several years and was therefore not very relevant to most students anymore. In fact, students were so dissatisfied that they lodged a complaint with the university. The head of program knew of my interest in educational technology and because I was the only one who had built his own website, decided that I should offer a number of workshops that would integrate the use of the web into language teaching activities.

I was thrilled. And absolutely terrified. I had never taught as much as a nursery rhyme and now suddenly I was expected to teach a university course! I spent the week before the first workshop reading every book and article I could find on the subject. I don't think I slept much that week at all. Of course, none of that helped. What did help was that I fell off my chair at the beginning of the workshop. Everybody laughed their heads off. That had the brilliant effect of all tension flying out the window. We then just had an enjoyable exchange of ideas and hands-on activities. That taught me several important lessons: Firstly, teaching is more about personal connections with people than anything. Secondly, check the chair before you sit down.

In the years since then, I have taught as a volunteer for refugees, as a teacher of secondary school students, as a mentor for post-docs and as a workshop facilitator for ministries of education and everything in between - in around 50 countries worldwide. I have long wanted to combine all of the lessons that I have learned both from my own experiences and from existing research into an easily accessible tool that people who are not trained as teachers can use to both better help their communities and to enhance their own

careers and, I believe, well-being. I hope you enjoy reading this book. As I read this, I can see my beautiful goat 'Supa' outside the window. I love goats, and you will find oddly placed and weirdly irrelevant references to goats throughout the book (if you can collect them all, contact me for a small prize!). It's just my idea of having a little fun. Forgive me.

If you're interested in workplace training on how to teach and support colleagues, feel free to contact me here: www.innovationinteaching.org

Hayo Reinders

Senior Professor and Director of Research, Anaheim University

New Zealand

CHAPTER 1: ACCIDENTAL TEACHING

What It Means to Teach and How It Can Benefit You and Others

Picture This: Can You Help?

Jamal stared at the email for the third time. It was short, just two lines:

"Could you run a short session on onboarding for the new hires next week? Just walk them through what you usually do with clients."

Jamal wasn't a teacher. He was a mid-level manager at a digital marketing firm. His day job involved strategy, deadlines, and client presentations - not standing in front of a room full of people explaining things. Yet here he was, tasked with "training" new employees because, apparently, he "explained things well."

He sighed, clicked 'reply,' and typed, "Sure - happy to help," even though he felt anything but confident.

Jamal's story is not unique. Every day, in offices, community centers, labs, hospitals, factories, and field sites, people find themselves unexpectedly cast in the role of teacher. It's not their job title, but it becomes part of the job.

They are accidental teachers.

You may not see yourself as a teacher. In fact, you may have actively avoided anything resembling teaching. Maybe it reminds you of dry lectures or standing in front of judgmental audiences. But if you've

ever trained a colleague, walked someone through a process, mentored a peer, coached someone new, or shared your knowledge with a group, you've already been teaching.

Teaching, in these informal and unexpected moments, plays a crucial role in how organisations learn, how cultures are sustained, and how people grow. Done well, it can boost confidence, strengthen teams, and even spark innovation. Done poorly, or ignored, it can lead to confusion, missed opportunities, and frustration on all sides.

> *"We are all teachers in some capacity, whether we recognise it or not. Every time we share what we know or help someone grow, we are teaching."*
>
> —Stephen D. Brookfield

What Does It Mean to Teach?

Teaching is often narrowly imagined as a formal process: a teacher standing at the front of a classroom, following a syllabus, delivering content to a group of learners. While this traditional view still holds relevance, especially in education systems, it represents only one part of a much broader spectrum of teaching practices. In fact, in workplace settings as much as 90% of learning is informal (De Grip, 2024), with an often-cited division being 70% informal, 20% coaching and mentoring, and only 10% formal. [You will find all the references to other works made in the text in the chapter called 'Resources'. Where I cite academic works texts, I will use appropriate referencing. If you wish to look up such sources, simply copy and paste the reference into scholar.google.com.]

Formal Teaching: Beyond the Classroom

Formal teaching is structured, planned, and usually recognised through some institutional framework. It follows a curriculum and is often evaluated through assessments or credentials. But formal teaching is not confined to schools or universities. It appears in a wide variety of contexts, including:

- **Apprenticeships** – A classic model of learning-by-doing under the guidance of a skilled practitioner. The apprentice gains experience incrementally, often in trades such as plumbing, carpentry, or culinary arts, but also in high-tech fields like IT or engineering.
- **Corporate Training** – Structured sessions designed to develop employee skills. These may include onboarding programs, compliance training, or professional development workshops.
- **Vocational Education and Training (VET)** – Targeted instruction aimed at preparing learners for specific occupations. VET programs often blend theoretical knowledge with hands-on practice.
- **Clinical Instruction** – Common in medicine and healthcare, this form of teaching happens through supervised, real-world experience. Students learn by observing, practicing, and receiving feedback in live settings.
- **Online Courses and MOOCs** – Digitally delivered learning experiences that can range from tightly structured university-style courses to more flexible, asynchronous modules.

What unites these formal models is their **intentionality** and **systematic design**. They are often guided by pedagogical principles, ideas about how learning happens and how teaching can

CHAPTER 2: EMERGENCY TEACHING

Your First-Aid Kit for When You Need Help Now

Picture This: Thrown in the Deep End

Alina had exactly 18 hours' notice.

Her manager, caught up in travel delays, asked if she could "just run the morning session" of the regional onboarding. "You know the material better than anyone," he said.

Sure, she thought, but knowing something isn't the same as teaching it.

By 9 a.m. the next day, she was in front of fifteen new hires, notes in hand, heart pounding, trying to look calm while wondering, Where do I even start?

If you're reading this chapter, it probably means exactly what the title suggests: you're under pressure, you've been asked to teach unexpectedly, and you don't have time to read the whole book before stepping into the role. You need practical, immediately useful advice.

This chapter is your emergency teaching survival guide.

> *"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."*
>
> — Maya Angelou

What NOT to Do

When you're unexpectedly asked to teach, your brain often kicks into survival mode. That's normal. But in the rush to do a good job, many people make the same avoidable mistakes, often because they're trying too hard. The truth is, your job is not to impress. It's simply to be helpful – a lesson I learned the hard way myself.

Here are the most common traps people fall into under pressure, and how to sidestep them.

Trying to Cover Everything

When you're nervous, it's tempting to overcompensate by cramming in every possible piece of information. The logic is understandable: more content must equal more value, right? Unfortunately, the opposite is true.

Learners don't need everything. They need something clear and useful. When you're under time pressure, stick to one or two key messages. Be ruthless about what you leave out. Ask yourself: If they only remember one thing, what should it be? Not having the advantage of reading a book like this, at the start of my career I would always prepare too much material, ending up not using much of it. I realised at some point it gave me a sense of comfort knowing that at least I wouldn't run out of things to say. But of course the flipside was that I often tried to cram in too much. It took me a long time to realise that if you run out of things to say, that's fine; it means your participants get to say more.

Talking Too Much

Inexperienced presenters often try to fill every second with talking. Silence feels risky, like you might lose the group or seem unprepared. But nonstop talking can overwhelm learners and leave no space for understanding.

Instead, try talking less, but more deliberately. Build in short pauses. Ask a question. Invite a comment. Let them think. That breathing room is where real learning happens.

Assuming You Know What They Need

Even if you're an expert on the topic, you might not be an expert on the people in front of you. Their roles, experience levels, expectations, or learning needs may be very different from what you assume.

When you don't have time for a full needs assessment, just ask:

- “What would be most useful for us to focus on today?”
- “How familiar are you with this topic already?”

Even a show of hands or a confidence scale (1–5) can help you calibrate on the fly. (See also the next chapter on confirming expectations.)

Trying to Sound Like a “Real Teacher”

You don’t need to perform or pretend. One of the biggest misconceptions is that you have to speak like a polished facilitator or emulate a teacher you once admired.

In a way the opposite is true. Learners respond to authenticity. Speak in your own voice. Use everyday language. Share examples

from your real work. Your job isn't to play a role but to explain clearly and connect honestly.

Over-Designing Slides or Handouts

When in doubt, people often default to creating a slide deck. That's not necessarily wrong, but it's easy to go overboard. You can spend hours tweaking fonts, adding animations, or overloading slides with text you then feel compelled to read.

If you do use slides, keep them visual and minimal. One idea per slide. Big, readable text. A simple outline is often more effective than a polished presentation. Your words are what learners will remember, not your deck.

Freezing When Something Goes Wrong

Tech fails. Links don't open. A question stumps you (yes, I once had someone literally ask me when I would get to the 'good bits' midway during my presentation!). These things happen even to seasoned trainers. What matters is how you respond.

Instead of apologising excessively or panicking, try this:

- "Let's pivot to a simpler version."
- "That didn't work, so let me explain it another way."
- "I'm not sure, but I'll find out and follow up."

Staying calm models flexibility, something that and learners appreciate more than perfection.

Believing You Have to Know Everything

Perhaps the biggest source of panic is the belief that someone will ask a question you can't answer. It's bound to happen. And it's fine.

There is no shame in saying:

- "That's a great question. I don't know, but I'll check and get back to you."

It shows humility, respect, and professionalism, not weakness. No one expects you to be a walking textbook. They just want useful guidance.

The Bottom Line

You're not here to teach everything, sound perfect, or never falter. You're here to help people understand something that matters. Clearly, calmly, and honestly.

Avoiding these common traps will make your session smoother, more engaging, and less stressful for everyone involved, including you.

How to Prepare Even When You Have Almost No Time

Being asked to teach at short notice can feel like being thrown on stage without a script. But even a few minutes of focused preparation can make a huge difference. Your goal isn't to build a perfect lesson but to create a clear, helpful experience for your learners. Here's how.

Make a Tiny Plan

You don't need a full lesson plan. In fact, trying to build one will likely just increase your stress. Instead, take five minutes to map out a simple structure like this:

- **Goal:** What's the one thing I want people to walk away with?
- **Start:** How will I open and set the tone?
- **Middle:** What 2–3 points or steps will I walk through?

- **End:** How will I wrap up and invite questions?

This mini-plan anchors you. It helps you prioritise and reduces the risk of rambling or rushing.

Try This

You can use the sample prompt below to help you generate ideas for the session. Just edit the appropriate parts below, and don't hesitate to follow up with revisions and adjustments to optimise the results.

“You will help create a quick training session outline based on the following inputs:

<topic>{$TOPIC}</topic>

<audience>{$AUDIENCE}</audience>

<time>{$TIME}</time>

First, analyse the topic and audience to determine an appropriate depth and style. Write your analysis in <thinking> tags.

Then create an outline for the training session. Your outline must include:

1. A single clear learning objective (what participants should know or be able to do after the session)
2. 2-3 key points that directly support that objective
3. One interactive activity that can be completed in 5-10 minutes
4. A rough time breakdown showing how the TIME will be used

Format your response using these sections and tags:

<analysis>

Your thoughts on appropriate depth and style based on topic and audience

</analysis>

<outline>

Learning Objective:

[Single sentence starting with "By the end of this session, participants will..."]

Key Points:

5. [First key point]
6. [Second key point]
7. [Optional third key point if time permits]

Interactive Activity:

- Name: [Brief descriptive name]
- Duration: [Time needed, maximum 10 minutes]
- Description: [2-3 sentences explaining the activity]
- Purpose: [How this activity reinforces the learning objective]

Time Breakdown:

- Introduction: [X minutes]
- Key Point 1: [X minutes]
- Key Point 2: [X minutes]
- [Key Point 3: [X minutes]] (if included)
- Interactive Activity: [X minutes]

- Wrap-up: [X minutes]

Total: [Should match TIME input]

</outline>

Keep all content focused and concise given the limited time available. Ensure the interactive activity is simple enough to explain and execute quickly while still being meaningful.