

## Contingency Plans for Substitute Teachers

Marcus Lee Johnson

*(Developmental and Learning Sciences Research Center, University of Cincinnati, USA)*

**Abstract:** Though many K-12 educators will be asked to serve as substitutes at some point in their career, literature concerning practical strategies for educators to employ when they are asked to substitute is scarce. The typical substitute experience will often be guided by a lesson plan, however, there may come a time in which a substitute teacher is confronted with the scenario of having to cover a course in the absence of both the homeroom teacher and lesson plan(s). The nature and content of this paper involves descriptions of instructional strategies that substitute teachers can employ should lesson plans not be available. Additionally, short stories of how some of the strategies have been employed and brief explanations on why/how they can be effective are shared.

**Key words:** substitute teachers, lesson plans, contingency plans, substitute folder

### 1. Introduction

Whether it is today, tomorrow, or sometime in the next five years, many educators will be asked at some point to serve as a substitute teacher for a class period, half a day, several days, or perhaps even long-term. For some, substitute teaching is a full-time role and a position that contributes to a school's day-to-day functions. For others, it may be a fleeting role, one in which helps get a school out of a bind (i.e., being short handed), or one in which helps a new educator get a "foot in the door" at a school.

More often than not, the subbing experience goes off without a hitch, primarily thanks to available lesson plans and/or pre-planned folders designated for substitute teachers with lists of possible activities, rosters, and protocols for classroom procedures (i.e., collecting materials, reporting misbehaviors, etc.). There will be occasions, however, where many substitutes are likely to be thrown a curve ball. Perhaps they will be asked to sub a class outside the area of their expertise; perhaps they will face a situation where lesson plans, textbooks, or even instructional technologies are unavailable; or perhaps they are bound to sub at an unfamiliar school, with unfamiliar students. Should you ever find yourself in any of the aforementioned predicaments, here are a few contingency plans you may consider while subbing.

### 2. Finding an "Insider"

Locating a homeroom teacher's substitute folder or lesson plan, can be like "finding a needle in a hay stack". If a teacher knows they will be absent, they will often leave lesson plans on their desk. In the event that a teacher can't make it to school due to an emergency, many have prepared substitute folders located in a visible area. In rare circumstances, when neither a folder nor lesson plan is visible, feel free to ask for help. You can likely find at

---

Marcus Lee Johnson. Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Educational Studies; research areas: motivation, educational psychology.  
E-mail: [Marcus.Johnson@uc.edu](mailto:Marcus.Johnson@uc.edu).

least one “insider” [student] in every classroom, who knows where the teacher keeps their lesson plans, attendance sheets, emergency protocols, etc.

Other teachers in adjoining classrooms may also be “insiders” to seek advice from since many schools will group teachers covering similar content and similar grade-levels in close proximity to one another. If teachers at the school have strong relationships with one another, a neighboring teacher may know exactly where lesson plans are hidden. Should they come up empty, perhaps they may be willing to lend you an emergency lesson plan for the day. If students and neighboring teachers fall short as “insiders”, consider calling the school’s main offices to see if a staff member might bring you an emergency folder of generic activities/lesson plans and a printed roster. Regardless of what circumstance you find yourself in, do make an effort to arrive at the school early to locate a lesson plan; acquaint yourself with the classroom and lesson plan; or find an insider.

### **3. Self-Generated Substitute Folder**

Should you have the time to generate a substitute folder for yourself, by all means prepare one prior to entering the classroom. Substitute teaching experiences will vary, however, some basic recommendations for preparing a substitute folder includes acquiring maps of the school(s) you may find yourself serving. The maps will give you a sense of where to park, where the main offices are in relation to the classroom, where the closest restrooms are, and emergency exits. Many schools will have downloadable maps and emergency procedures available on their websites. Notepaper and pens will come in handy when taking notes on students’ attendance, behaviors, and/or reflections about your experience. In the event you believe that you could be asked to cover a class that is outside your area of expertise or grade-level, do consider having lists of diverse and age-appropriate activities. To find out what kind of activities are appropriate for the class you might enter, most states and school districts make grade-level and subject-matter standards available online. See Fleming (2010) for more on what can be expected in substitute folders.

#### **3.1 Activities Listed in My Substitute Folder**

While student teaching I generated my own substitute folder. In it, I provided a map of the school, emergency protocols, rosters, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with special needs, a calendar of events and lessons to be covered at specific periods throughout the academic year, and finally, a list of acceptable activities that aligned with my calendar. I had lists of:

(1) Students who I felt any substitute teachers could call upon for assistance in executing daily functions (i.e., collecting homework assignment), operating lab equipment, or facilitating lab safety, classroom demonstrations, and/or discussion.

(2) Videos that related to topics specified in my calendar (with directions for finding the videos; and directions on how to operate the classroom technology).

(3) Group activities, including simple and safe lab activities that did not require the use of expensive or delicate lab equipment.

(4) Discussion questions/topics that students can debate.

(5) Worksheets that students can complete and/or readings students can do silently at their own table.

These lists were considered alternative options a substitute teacher could employ, if my lesson plans were unavailable. Typically, my folder of “lesson plans” (organized by day and week) contained PowerPoints that students had to take notes from, and on days substitute teachers came to my classroom, they reported completing

class notes with my students. On the few occasions I was asked to sub for a class period, I brought my substitute folder with me as my default plan.

#### **4. Story Time**

If you find yourself having to substitute at the elementary grade-levels, or covering a class for an extended period of time, consider having some stories and literature available. Even if you are not covering a language arts course, and instead covering a science, history, or math curriculum, stories may still enhance your substitute experience and pedagogy. A strategy that is employed by many early childhood educators is to have children's storybooks with an educational message and building a curriculum around things that are presented in the story. To support and foster math and science content, a teacher might ask their students to "count the number of animals in the story", or say "the main character sailed across the ocean. How do you think wind is generated?" Science lab activities, historical reenactments, generating art, solving mysteries using science and math, can all be derived from the use of stories and/or literature you bring into the classroom.

This strategy of building diverse lessons around one story can be applied at any grade-level, especially if you find yourself covering a class for an extended period of time. If you are going to be working with the same students for consecutive days, reflecting on one story may help you minimize down-time. Here's why it could be effective: whenever something new is being presented to students, educators often try to stimulate students' background knowledge to connect new material to things students already know. Homeroom teachers often have the luxury of time to get to know their students' backgrounds and personal experiences; whereas substitutes are not likely to have those same opportunities. Some homeroom teachers may be adept enough to use analogies that bridge new and old materials, while others may spend time reviewing materials from past class sessions. Again, it may take time to get to know students' histories, however, a story may act as a quick and easy "common denominator". Meaning, it is something that substitutes can return to on consecutive class meetings, that students will be familiar with, and therefore less time and effort is needed to generate review sessions and analogies.

For the substitute teacher who may be asked to move between grade-levels and subjects, Gresham, Donihoo, and Cox (2007) suggest finding literature that can engage all-age levels. As suggested above, you may consider asking someone familiar with the students for help in finding suitable readings. School librarians may be excellent allies in recommending literature that can be read aloud in class, read in silence, reenacted, and/or age-appropriate.

#### **5. Review and Getting to Know Students**

If you find yourself in a position of stability (i.e., you are confident that you will be at the school for a long period of time) or believe that the school can benefit from you finding out from students what can be done to improve the school's environment, reviewing, interviewing, and/or having open discussions with students may be a viable option. This contingency plan is perhaps the most controversial of all the recommended strategies in this article, because of the potential that district or state standards will not be the main focus. Again though, you might be subbing a class without a lesson plan in the first place, so what better time to allow students to discuss pertinent social issues?

What a substitute teacher can do to "review" with students, is to simply ask students "what content has been covered in this class", "what kind of activities have enhanced your learning of the material", "what topics do you

wish could have been covered in greater detail?” This review activity allows you to understand what students have done thus far, and possibly report a semi-formal evaluation of the class, its teacher, and/or its content. Alternatively, the class period can be used to allow students to openly vent about other possible social issues taking place at the school. For example, you may find yourself with the opportunity to find out what students believe the school is missing in terms of “community building”, issues of inequality, and/or reasons for maladaptive behaviors.

Personally, I was surprised how open students at all ages were in telling me what they think needs to be improved at the school, why they might skip out on certain classes, what they do when they aren’t in school, etc. Again, this could be controversial, and perhaps unwelcome if a school administrator believes that what you find out can become negative publicity for the school. I however, felt that by getting to know students and allowing them to share their stories, I gained a sense of empowerment to be proactive in addressing issues of diversity and equality. Additional benefits of this practice of “reviewing and getting to know students” include: fostering students’ metacognition and sense of belonging. By giving students an opportunity to share their stories, students will gain a sense that their voices are being heard and that they are being respected. Adolescents especially, appreciate such opportunities, because it gives them an outlet to inform a school representative about their experiences, as well as connect with classmates who may share the same experiences. By reviewing course content and/or reflecting on classroom experiences, students will have an opportunity to reflect on what they think are adaptive strategies that help them learn best. If you subscribe to the notion that “knowledge is power”, knowing what students appreciate and like can be reported back to a homeroom teacher or school administrators who can then use the information to better tailor their instruction and practices to their students’ needs and interests.

## **6. Reverse Roles**

Arguably the most difficult of the contingency plans for substitutes to implement is reversing the roles of students and teacher. This recommendation can be difficult for even a seasoned homeroom teacher to implement because there are fears that by allowing students to take on the role of the teacher, the actual teacher could be conceding some control of the classroom. To ameliorate such fears, do know there are ways of reversing roles and simultaneously maintaining control of the classroom. What is meant by reversing roles, is giving students the opportunity to teach their peers, by way of presenting, facilitating debate, peer-tutoring (see Lawson and Trapenberg, 2007), and/or modeling demonstrations. Involving students will likely enhance student engagement and in fact, take some pressures off of the classroom instructor or substitute teacher. This strategy of reversing roles and letting students do the teaching potentially has more advantages than disadvantages. Say for example you find yourself covering a history class; you can maintain control of the class by splitting students into two different groups, designating one half to take the “pro” side of an argument, and the second half take the “con” side of an argument (i.e., should President Truman have used the atomic bomb?). The benefits: students, especially early and middle adolescence, would likely be engaged in debate activities and/or presenting responsibilities; reducing desires to engage in misbehaviors. They are more likely going to want to put their best foot forward, as to not embarrass themselves in front of their peers by having a weak performance. You as the substitute teacher may come to find that you can learn quite a bit from the students (i.e., in terms of content, what they believe constitutes a strong argument, as well as relationships students have with one another). Cognitively

speaking, students will likely process course content more deeply knowing that they will have to articulate it to peers and defend their argument/claims with legitimate evidence. Allowing students to talk critically and deeply (Barnes, 2010) will again increase students' sense that their voices are being heard and that they are respected as knowledgeable beings.

In circumstances where students fail to present and/or produce a correct answer or constructive response, peers are available to lend a hand, allowing classmates to build on each others' work to generate a response together. Failures can at times be teachable moments. Students who are asked to demonstrate how they work through math problems, will serve as models to their peers and possibly "barometers" to you, the educator. Should the student succeed, peers may gain a sense of confidence that they too can succeed at the task; thereby enhancing students' efficacy for the learning task. Should the student struggle, it may be a clue that other students may be struggling too; and the other struggling students will find comfort in knowing that they aren't alone. Additionally, after experiencing mild struggles, some students are eager to learn a more adaptive approach that you can provide.

### **6.1 A "Near-Worse-Case" Substitute Experience**

Entering a high school classroom without knowing the students or the subject matter can be a challenge for any new educator having to fill the role of a substitute teacher. Entering such a scenario without a lesson plan, available textbooks, or instructional materials may very well be unimaginable. However, that is exactly a situation I found myself in on what I was hoping to be a typical day subbing at a large public school in the Southwest. I entered the school thirty minutes prior to the beginning of the school day, picked-up the classroom key from the school's office, and was informed that I will be covering classes on Law and Debate.

Being a freshly licensed Biology teacher, Law and Debate were not topics I was familiar with. I took the keys provided to me and eagerly walked to the classroom. I entered the room. Blank walls, no television, no computers, no lesson plans, no textbooks, and only thirty empty desks. With fifteen minutes before the first bell, I had informed the school's main offices and in a few short minutes discovered that the homeroom teacher skipped town for personal reasons!

Because Law and Debate was a specialized class, there were no state or district standards to download and no alternative lesson plans from the main offices. The first students to arrive had term papers in tow and informed me that final projects were due and that they were about to finish notes on famous celebrity court cases. For me, this was a big relief because despite I knew little about law and details in celebrity court trials, I felt this was a great opportunity for students to teach me! I called the main offices and told them that I had things under control. What appeared to be a disastrous scenario, turned out to be my best substitute experience. Students took their presentations seriously when I asked them to teach me about law and present their final projects. Classmates were respectful and engaged during the presentations because I asked them to generate constructive questions and weigh the legitimacy of the presented evidence (See Choi, Land, and Turgeon, 2005, for more on peer-questioning). I too took diligent notes, and graded students' projects as they presented.

At the end of the day the principal informed me that students were requesting that I return in a more permanent role. The principal also said he was impressed at how I handled the situation. Though I had to decline a permanent position, I was frequently called upon to return to the school. The school principal has since looked to hire credentialed teachers from my alma mater in hopes that they too would employ engaging teaching strategies.

## 7. Closing Thoughts

The contingency plans shared here are meant to be alternative options for substitute teachers to employ should they find themselves in the rare circumstance of not being provided lesson plans. They all vary in degrees of controversy, appropriateness for differing age groups, and difficulty of implementation. Nonetheless, they all offer substitute teachers with strategies that can potentially improve preparation time and garner efficient, if not meaningful subbing experiences.

## Acknowledgements

With the support of the NSF's Research Experiences for Teachers (RET) Program through grant #EEC-0808696 for the project on "Sustainable Engineering for Urban Needs: Research Experiences for Middle and High School Teachers", I would like to thank Dr. Anant R. Kukreti, Professor and Director for Engineering Outreach, College of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Cincinnati for his encouragement and support of research concerning substitute teachers' professional development, especially in the area of STEM education. This paper is meant to be informative to those educators developing in their profession, finding themselves in positions to substitute teach, and willing to explore novel/alternative solutions for educating students in the face of challenging circumstances.

## References:

- Barnes D. (2010). "Why talk is important", *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 7–10.
- Choi I., Land S. M. and Turgeon A. J. (2005). "Scaffolding peer-questioning strategies to facilitate meta-cognition during online small group discussion", *Instructional Science: An International Journal of Learning and Cognition*, Vol. 33, No. 5–6, pp. 483–511.
- Fleming D. S. (2010). "Out of School, but not of class", *Strategies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 22–23.
- Gresham J., Donihoo J. and Cox T. (2007). "5 strategies to enhance your substitute teaching", *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 28–32.
- Lawson T. and Trapenberg G. (2007). "The effects of implementing a classwide peer tutoring model on social approvals and disapprovals emitted during unstructured free time", *Journal of Early and Intensive Behavior Intervention*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 471–482.