

Classroom Management That Works: Practical Solutions to Persistent Problems™

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Abstract

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This paper discusses internal and external aspects of classroom management and personal action plans for improving the ability to (a) always assume the best about students (an internal aspect) and (b) give students choices in what they do in the classroom (an external aspect). This paper also discusses five classroom management challenges experienced in the first year teaching middle school mathematics and appropriate responses to those challenges.

In this paper I discuss internal and external aspects of classroom management and personal action plans I developed for improving my ability to (a) always assume the best about my students (an internal aspect of my skill set) and (b) give students choices in what they do in the classroom (an external aspect of my skill set). In this paper I also discuss five specific classroom management challenges I experienced in my first year teaching middle school mathematics and what I believe are appropriate responses to those challenges for use in my next classroom.

1 Introduction

This paper is in fulfillment of requirements for a The Connecting Link class titled *Classroom Management That Works: Practical Solutions to Persistent Problems™* held during week 30 of 2005 and for which three graduate credits are to be awarded by Salem State College.

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2 Classroom Discipline

There are many aspects to classroom discipline and the classroom management that maintains it. Teaching curriculum content to a class can only be successful when students are motivated to learn and there is a classroom environment conducive to learning.

All parents know that two motivational tools for children are *threats* and *bribery*.

Those are *extrinsic* motivations — consequences and rewards come from the outside. Student motivation in the classroom is best, however, when it is *intrinsic* — sometimes referred to as being ‘self-motivated’ — and comes from within. Intrinsic motivation for students is an analog of internal teacher discipline discussed in section 2.1.

A smoothly running classroom will be the difference between students learning a lot and students learning a little. Classroom environment is determined by external factors set by the teacher. A classroom environment conducive to learning is an analog of external teacher discipline discussed in section 2.2.

2.1 Internal Discipline

Internal discipline for a teacher comes from an inner authority and the ability to invisibly express it to students. The word *authority* comes from *auctor* (the Latin word for *author*), which literally means ‘one who causes to grow.’ Classes accept teachers’ authority to the extent that teachers are able to be the author of what happens in their classrooms.

Examples of things that teachers can author in their classrooms include:

- ▶ a vision of an exciting year of learning;

- ▶ a safe environment — physically, emotionally, and intellectually — for students to participate, ask questions, work together, and share their work;
- ▶ a caring relationship and positive connections to every student;
- ▶ immediate productive feedback.

Teachers with authority exude leadership that comes from within. In my first year of teaching I had authority in areas like curriculum content and guiding class participation, but I was lacking in some aspects of inner authority. One thing that was difficult for me to consistently maintain is *always assuming the best of students*.

When I began teaching, like all first-year teachers, I was thrust into a classroom in front of students for whom I was expected to deliver scintillating content in a nurturing environment. That was good as far as it went, but as the year progressed there were certain students whose job (it seemed) was to get the class off task, to distract other students, and to generally do as little as possible. When this happened day after day, I found myself coming to class expecting this behavior from those students.

2.1.1 Assume the Best

When I started the year I had high expectations for every student, I believed in every student, and I thought the best of ev-

ery student. The grading policy document I sent home to families at the beginning of the school year stated (in part):

I believe in every student and I expect every student to learn mathematics.

One of the most valuable touch stones I took away from *Classroom Management That Works* is ‘think / feel / know,’ or ‘head / heart / gut.’ My interpretation of that mnemonic is that we can over-intellectualize with our rational thoughts and our emotions — and that sometimes we just have to ‘go with the gut.’ That was especially difficult for me during the school year when I was either overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions or so busy in the class that I failed to have perspective.

When I failed to assume the best of students that challenged my head and heart day after day, I lost the perspective of my gut that told me that every student wants to learn content and every student wants to learn behavior. In *Classroom Management That Works* I learned that assuming the best of every student every day is the *basis* of conscious classroom management [?], rather than something impossibly beyond my grasp.

2.1.2 Improvement Action Plan – Internal

When asked what is good about teaching, I can answer about what I *think* about teaching (‘I am providing valuable content to students in a gatekeeper subject that will be vital to them if they want to be scientists or engineers...’) or what I *feel* about teaching (‘I am making a difference in the lives of students and giving them confidence in a popular culture that does its best to tear them down and lie to them...’), but what I *know* about teaching is that all the intellectual reasons come together to inform my gut that tells me teaching is the right thing for me to do.

The basis for my action plan is to ‘go with the gut’ and assume the best of every student every day, because that is what I felt at the beginning of the school year and anytime I was able to step back from the distracting thoughts and feelings, take a deep breath, and get some perspective on my students. My action plan is as follows:

- **Visualize** — It is routine for athletes to visualize the outcome of a competition before it starts. Visualization is sometimes called ‘guided imagery’ and it involves crating visual, kinesthetic, or auditory images of a desired outcome in one’s mind. I will visualize success for my students.

- **Personalize** — I discussed maintaining perspective with a colleague who has 30 years experience teaching elementary school. She works hard each year to be able to identify to herself something that every student in the class is the best at — whether it's asking questions about science, or lining up when leaving the room, or perhaps just being mischievous. She uses those thoughts to remember to assume the best of students during those times when that is the most difficult. She also said that, though it might take her most of the year to come up with what certain students are best at, only twice in 30 years did she fail to come up with *something* before the end of the year. I will look for at least one thing that every one of my students is the best at.
- **Response-ability** — When given a choice by circumstance or by student behavior (and in the face of overwhelming rational thoughts or emotions) I will base my responses on the assumption that my students want to learn.¹

2.2 External Discipline

External discipline for a teacher is most noticeable in the day-to-day running of the classroom. Examples of things that manifest a teacher's external discipline include:

¹This is consistent with at least two of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* [?].

- students remaining on task;
- momentum maintained in lessons, class discussions, and seat and group work;
- the level of disruptiveness;
- the level of engagement and participation;
- the degree to which students have learned *procedures*.

Teachers with smoothly running classrooms have spent significant effort teaching procedures along with content. Smith [? , p. 90] recommends *two procedures per lesson*. in *Classroom Management That Works* I learned many external techniques that contribute positively to classroom environment. An area that I was conscious of in my first year teaching and that I *thought* I had covered, but in retrospect I realize that I was not always successful at, is to give students *real* choices.

2.2.1 Give Real Choices

When I started my first year teaching I was committed to getting students involved in every phase of learning and classroom activity. My commitment was genuine and my execution was hopeful. As the year wore on, however, I learned that involving students in choices could also be a 'can of worms' that could take a lot of class time without great benefit. My inexperience led me to waffle over which choices were im-

portant and fruitful and which were superfluous.

That consequently led me to reduce the number of classroom opportunities for student choice and when I did give the students choices, they were sometimes not *real* choices. For certain lesson, classroom procedure, or safety reasons a because-I'm-the-teacher (non)-choice is OK. I learned from *Classroom Management That Works* that students *need* choices and, therefore, student choices must not be *non-choices*².

2.2.2 Improvement Action Plan – External

The basis for my action plan is to give students *real* choices every day in my classroom. My action plan is as follows:

- **Involvement** — The first aspect of student choice is having students make choices. From my point of view as the teacher, that means being conscious of, and finding the balance between, when choices are inappropriate or irrelevant and when real choice will enhance student involvement – individual choice of work, class-wide choices of sequence, choices between two equally valid outcomes, *etc.*. Once I have chosen the ap-

propriate opportunity for student choice, I must then insure that there are real and appropriate choices for students to make – that involves teaching as a procedure what each choice entails and what the expected outcomes are. Then I need a mechanism to insure that the classroom is appropriately balanced – so that there aren't too many students with any one choice and students aren't allowed to repeatedly make the same choice.

- **Reiteration** — Unless choices are made for a 'one shot deal,' students must be reminded of the choices they made and (when appropriate) be allowed to revisit those choices. That is just one aspect of 'polishing the railroad tracks' [? , p. 80] be reiterating the choices that the students have made. I was mistaken in my first year teaching in thinking that once we had agreed on a class choice and hung a sign on the wall reflecting that choice, then the matter was forever settled. *Reiterating and revisiting choices are crucial.*
- **Follow through** — Choices are not choices if they have no effect. As part of teaching the procedure embodied in the choice, students need follow through on behalf of the teacher and the other students. Whether it is codifying the choices and hanging them on the wall, or using the choices in a classroom procedure day after day, or enforcing student choice within a classroom or laboratory, I must

²A Tom Hermansen illustration [? , p. 65] has the caption, "...you can go to the principal's office **now**...or you can go to the principal's office **immediately**."

consistently remember the choices made by the students and remind the students of them. If choices are allowed to change arbitrarily or are negligently reversed by students or teachers, then students will (rightly) not believe in them.

3 Classroom Management

In section 3 I describe five classroom management situations that posed difficulties for me in my first year of teaching and that I felt ill-equipped to handle. In each situation I describe, based on what I have learned in *Classroom Management That Works*, how I will handle it next year.

As with any classroom technique (content or behavior), seeing is believing. There were many techniques I used in my first year that surprised me in their effectiveness. I am anxious to put the techniques I learned into practice to see how and when they work. Only then will I have the inner authority and confidence to be a leader in my classroom.

3.1 Soft Voice Versus Loud Voice

Yelling at the class. Every teacher has done it. Every teacher has experienced it in their own schooling. It comes from losing control of the noise level in the class

or getting angry at the class (or both!). When I yelled at my class, I was getting their attention by cutting through the noise level and I was expressing frustration with how little learning was going on. Yelling would encourage any students whose out-of-school situation or natural tendencies allowed them to yell back to escalate the situation. I always found that yelling would wrest temporary control of the class back to me, but that the effect was never lasting.

Smith describes the *firm and soft paradox* [?].

- ▶ Your voice goes down in volume.
- ▶ Your voice goes lower in tone.
- ▶ Your body squarely faces the student.

In my experience it is right to call it a paradox, because the response is the opposite of the natural tendency — to raise your voice to get the attention of the class — when dealing with disruption. This approach will not work if implemented in isolation so that your voice gets softer and lower as the class's gets louder and higher. This technique is meant to be combined with others that teach the class procedures for working together and used to preemptively address individual student behavior by simultaneously being firm in my resolve and deescalating the conflict.

I will treat students who are resistant by assuming the best of them and with the pa-

tience and firmness — including using an effective ‘no’ — to resolve the behavior before it escalates. This is very different from what I sometimes did in my class in my first year when I gave up too soon and did not deal with individual student disruptions completely or raised my voice. In either case, the results were generally disastrous.

3.2 Unpreparedness Disrupts Class

There were days in my class where it seemed that everyone came to class unprepared without books, pencils, or homework. Invariably that would lead to disruption at the beginning of class or during transitions to seat or group work — including fumbling with notebooks, walking around class to sharpen pencils, and requests to go to lockers. I was confused by this behavior, because I (and several other teachers on the middle school team) had made preparedness part of the grade and every student knew about it from the beginning of the school year. Students with organizational learning disabilities or difficult family situations would occasionally come to class with nothing and I also had to accommodate their needs.

The emphasis in *Classroom Management That Works* on teaching procedures was a revelation to me. I was not prepared for how much *teaching* has to go into proce-

dures, how much *practice* students need to master them, how much *reinforcement* they need to remember them, and how much they *want* to learn them. Understanding and acting on that reality will be a major difference for me between my first year and my next year teaching.

I can see now that students had not internalized the behavior for being prepared and that I did not treat the start of each class in a consistent manner (*e.g.* during attendance) to help them to be prepared. At the end of the school year, before and after MCAS, the class had a warm-up assignment on the overhead every day and that helped to focus class attention on getting ready. Next year I will have a more consistent start-of-class procedure to insure that every student is prepared before the lesson starts and I will spend some time every day teaching and reinforcing that procedure.

3.3 Refusing to Work in Groups

It was common in my class for students to work in groups. There were always some students who claimed that they could not work with one another. Though we spent time at the beginning of the school year working on norms for working together and procedures for group work, there was invariably complaining when I assigned new groups — sometimes to the point of keeping the rest of the class from working.

It was also typical that, during the first session or two, that the dysfunctional groups would have one or more students refusing to participate. Some students with learning disabilities were singled out as ‘I can’t work with him!.’

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I have learned in this course that my biggest mistake was in assuming that once we developed the norms for group work, and I taught the group-work procedure once, and the students followed the group-work procedure once, that we were finished. The group-work procedure is complicated (moving desks, collecting materials, assuming roles, following directions, working with difficult partners, *etc.*) and must be taught repeatedly — effectively polishing the railroad tracks of procedure so the train of content can run smoothly over them [? , p. 80]. I will make sure that group-work procedures are thoroughly taught.

3.4 Comments Lead to Conflict

Students — especially middle-school students — can be cruel. My school is one that values and works diligently on school culture and there is zero tolerance within that culture for bullying. Though we don’t have a formal anti-bullying program, from the principal on down to the kindergarten, words like ‘caring’ and ‘respect’ have real meaning and are constantly discussed and reinforced by teachers. *In spite* of that, adolescents can make inappropriate comments to one another in class. A big problem I had in my first year of teaching was diffusing the shouting match that could break out over inappropriate comments and their retaliations — especially when the original comments were often whispered or mumbled so as to be inaudible to me.

In *Classroom Management That Works* I learned to assume the best of students about their desire to learn, that a smoothly running classroom environment is what *students* (not just teachers) prefer, and that dealing with problems preemptively is the hallmark of an authoritative classroom leader. I believe that improving my performance in all those areas will minimize the opportunities for students to focus on one another rather than the work.

It is important to me, however, to not let such inappropriate or cruel comments

slide. One of the things I have learned from in this class is *procedure, procedure, procedure* (to paraphrase a truism from real estate). Since I believe class norms are important and if I have given students the opportunity to help choose the most important norms, then I must periodically teach them as a procedure if I expect the students to keep them internalized.

3.5 Inveterate Argumentativeness

I told the parent of one of my seventh-grade students that, if she ever needed a recommendation to law school, that she could count on me! That student took argumentativeness to a new extreme. She is extremely smart and logical and winning an argument with her was impossible. I know, because I tried. It's not that didn't have better arguments or more authority, but because I engaged in the argument at all allowed her to switch the focus to another argument before the first one was resolved, thereby prolonging the interaction and amplifying its disruption. The cycle of argumentation is one that can be made worse, if engaged in, by students with attention deficits, or emotional needs for the spotlight.

Though I thought I was practicing the 'effective no' and 'standing my ground,' I was not. There were several ways that my 'no' was not effective:

- ▶ It was not simply 'no.'
- ▶ I over-explained by engaging in argument.
- ▶ I allowed wiggle room.
- ▶ I did not effectively employ the 'broken record' technique.
- ▶ I was not patient.

Next year I will stand my ground and use an effective 'no' and I am thankful for the 'trial by fire' of argumentativeness afforded me by that student that gave me the opportunity to learn.

4 Conclusion

The Connecting Link *Classroom Management That Works* class was full of insight on how to bring leadership and authority — *in lieu* of simply management — to a classroom. The class materials (including [?], [?], and the participant manual) provided a wealth of techniques, examples, and exercises.

My teacher was effective at presenting material and guiding classroom activities and discussions. My colleagues were fun to work with, thoughtful, and (above all) helpful. They were also patient with my many first-year-teacher questions.

I will be able to bring many things I learned in *Classroom Management That Works* into

my classroom in the fall.