

CULTIVATING YOUR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

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“The most important action an effective teacher takes at the beginning of the year is creating a climate for learning.” – Mary Beth Blegan, former U.S. Department of Education Teacher-In-Residence.

Achieving classroom management is arguably one of the most difficult tasks that any teacher faces on a daily basis. There are many challenges that both the teacher and the students must work through in order to develop a safe and productive learning environment. These challenges often come in many forms. They may include such issues as disruptive behavior, bullying, lack of participation, lack of enthusiasm, and lack of motivation (2). Additional inherent challenges also result from the fact that “classroom management is often neglected in teacher preparation programs” (3). In other words, many new teachers are not adequately educated or trained on the topic of classroom management. Many educators do not come to the classroom with adequate preparation in this area. The methods and techniques that teachers utilize to tackle these obstacles are the tools that help to cultivate a healthy and fruitful learning environment. In this article I first explore some of the data and rationale behind the lack of Classroom Management training in teacher preparation programs. I then investigate the merits of several classroom management techniques. I assert that when these methods are employed from the beginning of the school year, consistently and frequently, they help to yield a productive, enjoyable and self-regulated autonomous classroom environment. This self-regulating classroom creates a positive learning environment where every student feels a level of responsibility to behave appropriately and to actively participate in class.

Cause for Concern: The Lack of Classroom Management Education in Teacher Preparation Programs

If classroom management is such an important part of creating *a climate for learning*, why is this topic so often overlooked or underrepresented in teacher education? “Citing a Public Agenda survey of attitudes among education professors who teach in schools of education, (Farkas & Johnson, 1997), Jean Johnson (2005) reports, ‘Only 30% of educators say that their teacher

education program places a lot of emphasis on teaching prospective teachers how to handle a rowdy classroom’” (3). Why is it that so few education professors include classroom management as a major focus within their teaching programs? Some professionals speculate that “professors of education see classroom management as a ‘bag of tricks’ to be passed along from teacher to teacher, rather than a set of research-based principles, concepts and skills that warrant serious professional study” (3).

Put simply, Classroom Management is often dismissed as a “bag of tricks” rather than viewed as a serious study relevant to the education of prospective teachers. This perception could also be supported by the fact that there is very little professional research published on the subject of Classroom Management as its own distinct discipline. In fact, “research relevant to classroom management has been conducted by persons in different disciplines, appears in a wide variety of journals, and **is often not identified as ‘classroom management’ research**” (3). Additionally, there is no national mandate (in America) that requires prospective teachers study Classroom Management. It is true that there is “a lack of national standards that would mandate preparation in the area of Classroom Management” (3). So, if many new teachers “have not been adequately prepared to meet the behavioral challenges that plague their classrooms” (5) how can educators be expected to effectively create *a climate for learning*? The ultimate long-term answer lies in legitimizing Classroom Management as a serious field of study through empirical research and genuine consideration from education professionals. The short-term answer lies in teachers taking matters into their own hands and sharing their experiences, successes, and failures with one another; To create a global community of educators who want to learn from one another about Classroom Management techniques. In the next few sections of this article, I explore the merits of several important Classroom Management techniques. It is my hope that the methods explained within this article will contribute to the abovementioned short-term goal.

Article Thesis

The success of Classroom Management techniques depends heavily upon

both the teacher’s choice of technique(s) and the timing of implementation. In order for chosen classroom management methods to yield successful results, these methods must be utilized from day one. It is my position that when applied consistently, the use of *mutually agreed-upon classroom rules* combined with *a motivational classroom points* and *reward system*, will result in a managed and arguably self-regulating classroom. This assertion comes with an acknowledgement. This acknowledgement admits that every classroom is different, and the techniques that may work well for one class, may not be ideal for another. It is ultimately up to the teacher to discern which methods, or combination of methods, work well for a particular group of students.

1. The Learning Contract: Creating a Classroom Code of Conduct

On the first day of class it is beneficial to the goal of classroom management for the teacher and students to agree upon a set of Classroom Rules. “Howard Miller, Associate Professor of Education at Lincoln University (Jefferson City Missouri) suggests some steps that teachers can take at the beginning of the year to promote effective Classroom Management” (7). The first of these is to develop a set of written expectations for the classroom. The second is to emphasize consistency of enforcement (7). It is extremely important to take some classtime at the beginning of the year “to focus on classroom expectations and policies” (1). Most students want to know what to expect in the classroom. “Student misbehavior is often due to unclear expectations, not bad intentions. Most students want to do the right thing but they need to know the expectations and rules of your class first. To do this you need rules, consequences, and incentives” (6). In my classes I have worked together with my

students to agree upon the following Classroom Rules: 1) *Always wear your name tag* 2) *Raise your hand if you need the teacher’s attention (do not shout)* 3) *Always be respectful to your classmates and your teachers* 4) *Keep the noise level low* 5) *Always try your best* 6) *Have fun* 7) *Respond to “verbal attention-getters.”* When I need my students’ attention or they need to quiet down I or my teaching Counterpart will use a “verbal attention-getter.” I will loudly say “Listen up, listen up!” The students are expected to respond in unison, “What’s up, what’s up? Shhhh!” and be ready to listen. When setting these ground rules it is very important to always look for student input. Make sure the students have a say in the creation of their classroom rules. It is their class, after all. “If in one of the first classes you establish class rules as a group, you typically have more buy-in and better participation” (8). In other words, if the classroom rules are established as a group between students and teacher(s) it is more likely that students will want to follow these rules. Once the teacher and students understand and have agreed upon the rules, it is helpful to have the students write the rules down in their notebook, then sign and date them like a contract. The teacher should then sign and date each contract, as well. The set of rules on the whiteboard has now transformed into a written agreement between the teacher(s) and students. As a teacher you may now refer back to this contract for the rest of the year whenever a student is tempted to break one of the rules. The use of this code of conduct sets the expectations for classroom behavior, participation, and attitude for the entire year. These rules must be enforced consistently and often to be effective (7).

2. The Backbone of Your Classroom Management: The Classroom Points System

The classroom points system is the principal method of enforcement for your Classroom Code of Conduct. It provides a means of both motivation and discipline, reward and consequence. In my classes I have a semester-long Class Points Competition. Each day that the students in the classroom are cooperative, active, creative, respectful, and enthusiastic, they *earn* points for their entire class. If the students fail to behave appropriately, actively participate, or generally follow the rules as agreed-upon in the Code of Conduct, the entire class *loses* points. “Your points program should establish consistent patterns between student choices and outcomes. It should include a mix of rewards and consequences, with an overall balance that is heavier on positivity and reinforcement. Make sure to explain *why* points are earned and lost (refer back to your Classroom Code of Conduct), give feedback to students often and fairly, and make the system part of your classroom vocabulary and routines” (6). In my classes, we have agreed that the class with the most points at the end of the semester will be rewarded with a Class Party in December. The long term motivation could be whatever you and your class agree upon, it does not have to be a party. Figure out what would motivate *your* students. My students happen to be very competitive with one another, so I decided that a class-wide competition would motivate them most effectively. This points system dictates that *each* student must cooperate and participate every day so as to accumulate points for their class. It is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that every student participates. This is why my students are required to wear name tags during each class. It is my responsibility to know every student’s name so that I can

monitor those who tend to be less active in class.

The points system is the primary motivating factor that leads to a pattern of students who self-regulate and self-correct inappropriate classroom behavior. If the teacher identifies a Classroom Rule that is being broken and informs the entire class that if the rule-breaking behavior is not corrected, the *entire* class will lose points, students often take it upon themselves to chastise and correct the rule-breakers. This is an example of consequence. It is an incentive to follow classroom rules. However, as mentioned above, a Points System is *more effective when the focus is heavier on positivity and reinforcement, rather than negative consequences*. In other words, it is important to put more emphasis on how to *earn* class points, rather than how to *lose* class points. An example of positive reinforcement is my method for encouraging student participation. As a teacher I sometimes have problems with student participation in my class. When I ask for a volunteer to read a passage aloud or to present their work to the class, I am often met with terrified blank stares. This is where my positive points system comes into play. When I announce to the class that they will earn a certain number of points if a student volunteers in the next 5 seconds, almost immediately students encourage one another to participate. It usually does not take more than five seconds before a volunteer arises. This is especially helpful when encouraging quieter, typically less active students to participate. This system of reward and consequence often leads to students taking control of their own classroom, encouraging peer participation, and self-correcting inappropriate behavior. This pattern of self-regulation often follows any discussion about earning or losing class points. This system leads to a degree of *autonomy* in the classroom. A teacher who creates a classroom

environment supportive of *autonomy* “encourages students to use social comparison... in an attempt to solve problems... and encourages students to consider the various elements of the problem and arrive at a solution *themselves*. These teachers are, in effect, socializing students to be independent and *self-regulating*” (3). Creating autonomy in the classroom helps students to feel responsible for the success of their own learning environment. “Studies of self-regulation, student self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation suggest that students’ sense of having control in the classroom – of having and making choices – is associated with positive student outcomes, such as engagement and learning” (3). Giving students the opportunity to self-regulate often contributes to a positive, active, and engaged learning environment.

3. The Safety Net: Positive Reinforcement & The Immediate Reward System

As explained above, the Class Points System can be used as a disciplinary method, however, it should primarily be used as a method of reward and motivation. The prospect of the class winning the points competition and the promise of a party at the end of the semester presents an effective long-term motivation for students to behave and to participate. However, there are many students and classes who often have a hard time grasping the concept of a long-term goal (such as a reward at the end of the semester). Many students are more motivated by immediate positive reinforcement. Therefore, I propose that it is more effective to offer **both** long-term and short-term motivation for your students. I will refer to short-term motivation as immediate positive reinforcement. This type of motivation may take on many different forms. One form is “a tangible object such as a sticker” (3) or prize that will help to motivate students *at that*

moment. Another form is “a social gesture such as positive acknowledgement or words of praise” (3). I will often offer stickers or food items as positive reinforcement motivators in my classroom. I also consistently offer praise and personal student attention when I observe a behavior that is particularly worthy of a reward. This praise may come in the form of a written note to the student, verbal praise in class, or even physical praise such as a high five. This form of motivation has proved to be incredibly effective. “The effective use of positive reinforcement in classroom management has been well established across a variety of student ages and ability levels, a number of academic and social skill areas, and in a variety of settings... Among the more prominent and effective applications of reinforcement in classrooms is the use of teacher attention, or praise, to increase students’ positive academic and social behavior... ‘The systematic application of praise and attention may be the most powerful motivational and classroom management tool available to teachers’ ” (3). The use of tangible prizes and social gestures as short-term positive reinforcement motivators helps act as a classroom management safety net, designed to catch the students who may not be motivated by the long-term Points System.

Conclusions

The above-mentioned methods of classroom management are just several in a list of many tools that teachers may use when trying to cultivate a productive and enjoyable learning environment. Of course, all classrooms are different, just as all teachers and students are different. Some classes will respond well to certain methods, and not to others. It is the teacher’s responsibility to determine which tools work best for their classroom. Although the above-mentioned methods are important methods to try in the

classroom, and often lead to the creation of a self-regulating autonomous learning environment, they may not be exactly what *your* classroom needs. It is important to remember that many new teachers come to the classroom without comprehensive training or study in the field of effective Classroom Management. This is why it is vital that teachers continue to share experiences with one another, establishing “best practices” and sharing success stories regarding Classroom Management. It is my hope that the techniques and methods explored above will contribute to this “best practices” sharing among teachers, so that all educators may enjoy the benefits of a well cultivated, healthy, supportive, engaged, and self-regulating learning environment.

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