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From Ringmaster to Conductor

10 SIMPLE TECHNIQUES CAN TURN AN UNRULY CLASS INTO A PRODUCTIVE ONE

Students deserve teachers who are encouraging conductors of learning rather than domineering ringmasters focused on maintaining order.

By Matthew A. Kraft

A SOPHISTICATED PRIMER

We teach because we love working with students. We're dedicated to helping students gain knowledge and develop their intelligence. However, our efforts to consistently deliver high-quality instruction are undercut when we can't maintain a productive learning environment. Lack of training, anxiety, and inexperience cause many new teachers to feel overwhelmed when a group of rambunctious students doesn't cooperate. Even high-quality instruction by veteran teachers is rendered ineffective when students are disrupted, distracted, or feel threatened by their peers.

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When the classroom feels like a three-ring circus, many of us, including myself, instinctually revert to draconian classroom management tactics. We become ringmasters, monopolizing the spotlight in front of the classroom while forcing students to repeatedly perform some routine or face our disciplinary whip. We sacrifice interactive learning and student collaboration in favor of the pacifying effects of worksheets and teacher-centered instruction. Unfortunately, this ringmaster approach undercuts student engagement and exacerbates power struggles between students and teachers. Students eventually identify defiant behavior and apathy toward academics as a means of student empowerment.

Effective teaching and learning can take place only in a harmonious learning environment. Instead of a three-ring circus, imagine a classroom that resembles a symphony of learners rehearsing for a show. This teacher-as-conductor approach replaces the coercion and chaos of the circus-like classroom with the coordination and collaboration of a symphony orchestra. The teacher composes engaging lessons and uses a baton to conduct students with different strengths to work together. Students are personally motivated because they see explicit connections between the knowledge and skills they're learning and their future goals.

Educators who find themselves reverting to ringmaster techniques need new strategies. At Life Academy, a small academy for at-risk 9th-graders at Berkeley High School in California, we developed a comprehensive approach to engineering academic success, engendering personal motivation, promoting positive student interactions, and modifying inappropriate classroom behavior. We identified five classroom management techniques and five behavior management techniques that can be adopted across K-12 classrooms.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Well-established classroom procedures are the foundation of any comprehensive management system. The following five practices, used together, can help teachers develop harmonious classroom environments by reducing the causes and frequency of inappropriate student behavior.

#1. What You Teach. Without question, the most essential classroom management tool is a rigorous and relevant curriculum. Walk the halls of any school, and you'll find that it's not the strictest teacher with the most rules, but the personable teacher with the most interesting and challenging lesson plan who has the best behaved students. There's no substitute for teaching a rigorous curriculum that's relevant to students' lives and actively engages students in their own learning. However,

high expectations are effective only when there are multiple entry points to assignments and differentiated levels of support so that all students can access the challenging curriculum. When teachers fall short in this difficult duty, classroom management issues arise.

Despite common assumptions about the immature and impulsive nature of students, more often than not, they're making very calculated, rational choices to act inappropriately. Students are off-task when they don't perceive any benefit from on-task behavior. This occurs when students believe that no amount of effort will allow them to access the curriculum, when they feel there's nothing new they can learn, and when they don't perceive any connection between their goals and the learning objectives. I've found Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding by De-*

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sign (ASCD, 2005), the Buck Institute for Education's *Project Based Learning Handbook* (Winsted and Taylor, 2003), and Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound's *Core Practice Benchmarks* (www.elschools. org/publications/CorePracticeBenchmarks.pdf) to be excellent resources for designing rigorous and relevant curriculum. These guides have helped me develop my most successful units in which students are engaged in project-based learning centered on core essential questions and supported by differentiated instruction.

#2. Nonnegotiable Rules. Teachers often face behavior management problems because they choose too many rules to enforce and they don't clearly differentiate between classroom values and nonnegotiable rules. Unlike normative classroom values that are best created as a community, nonnegotiable rules are clear and specific rules that should be chosen unilaterally by the teacher. While teachers should work daily to uphold such positive community values as mutual respect, in difficult times pointing to a few simple and unambiguous rules is helpful. Prioritize the two or three most essential rules for maintaining an acceptable classroom environment and ensure that they're specific and clear. For example, I have two fundamental classroom rules: Don't interrupt the speaker and don't use inappropriate language. Establishing, practicing, and enforcing a few, focused, nonnegotiable rules helps to engineer a classroom environment that's conducive to learning.
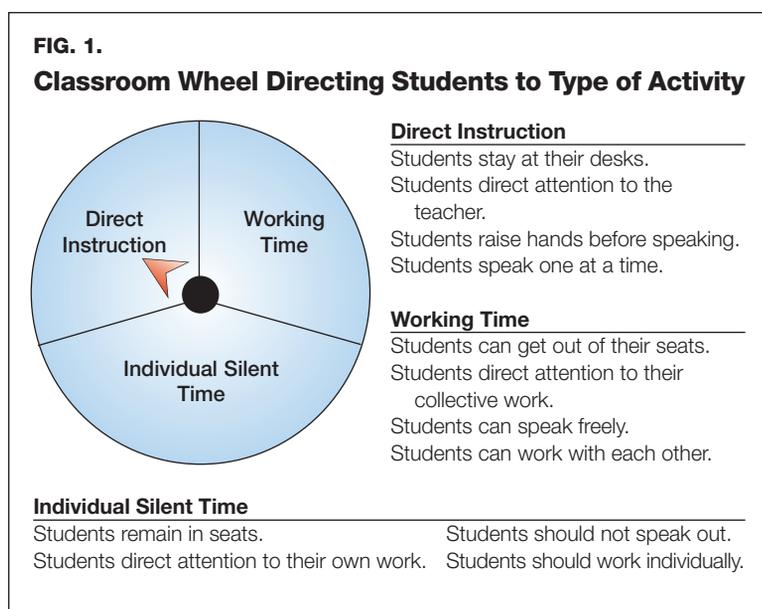
#3. Clear Expectations. By the time students begin middle school, they're expected to successfully navigate diverse and sometimes conflicting expecta-

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tions of five or more classes. Students might be rewarded for interjecting ideas during history class while they're reprimanded in math for speaking without being called on. They may be encouraged to get out of their seats in art class while they're prohibited from leaving their seats in English. Effectively communicating classroom procedures for each activity can greatly reduce the number of disruptions that arise from appropriate classroom behavior that occurs at inappropriate times.

Almost every type of classroom activity falls within three categories: direct instruction, working time, and individual silent time. Before beginning any lesson, I direct students' attention to the wheel depicted in Figure 1 and place the arrow on the type of classroom expectations that the next activity requires.

FIG. 1.

Classroom Wheel Directing Students to Type of Activity

Direct Instruction
Students stay at their desks.
Students direct attention to the
  teacher.
Students raise hands before speaking.
Students speak one at a time.

Working Time
Students can get out of their seats.
Students direct attention to their
  collective work.
Students can speak freely.
Students can work with each other.

Individual Silent Time
Students remain in seats.   Students should not speak out.
Students direct attention to their own work. Students should work individually.

This helps students clearly understand where they should be, where to direct their attention, how to participate, and with whom they can work.

#4. Managing Transitions. Disruptive behavior and conflicts frequently occur during the transitional moments in a classroom when time is unstructured and the teacher's attention shifts to setting up the next activity. The common practice of beginning class with a timed warm-up question helps keep students on task during the first few minutes of class. A simple warm-up that requires students to demonstrate understanding of the previous day's material works well. In my class, I ask students to write an original sentence using the vocabulary word from the previous day.

Assigning student jobs also makes transitions smoother and reduces down time. Student volunteers should do all of the classroom tasks, such as collecting work, passing out materials, moving desks, and erasing the board. This not only makes

teaching less stressful, it also allows teachers to better monitor the class, it gives physical tasks to active students, and it fosters students' sense of ownership over the classroom. Finally, a daily closing procedure is fundamental to maintaining student discipline. Begin cleaning up with at least five minutes left in the period to allow time to address the class before the bell. After all students are quietly seated, I use a closing statement in which I briefly reflect on how the day went and preview what's to come. Once this routine is well established, which might require several days of keeping students late, students will begin to monitor each other because they're always eager to be dismissed.

#5. Getting Attention. One of the simplest but most commonly cited frustrations among teachers is that they can't get their classes to quiet down. Being able to quickly get attention and quiet a class is an essential part of good classroom management. I've found three techniques to be effective. The first is to ask for students' attention and then wait. All too often, teachers pressed for time shout above the classroom noise for students' attention until they finally get it. By repeatedly shouting over students, teachers undermine their own expectation that students will quiet down when first asked. Instead, wait while students realize that fewer people are talking and begin to quiet each other down. If it continues to take an inappropriate amount of time, keep the class for as long as it took them to quiet down. Another effective method is to use a zero-noise device such as a rain stick or chimes, which provide both a visual and auditory signal to students. Last, if things get out of control, don't be afraid to raise your voice and shout with a serious tone. If you rarely shout, this is extremely effective because it startles students. But be careful not to abuse it, or it loses its impact.

Effective curriculum design, clear classroom rules and expectations, and smooth transitions will create a more manageable classroom environment. With these structures and procedures in place, teachers will face fewer disruptions and be better prepared to deal with inappropriate student behavior.

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Clear, consistent, and individualized behavior management techniques are an essential element for creating a positive and safe classroom learning environment. When disruptions occur, the teacher must diffuse the situation, discern the root cause behind the disruption, and enforce consequences while working to eliminate the factors that caused the inappropriate behavior. Fundamentally, all behavior is a form of communication. Students are often unable to communicate or are uncomfortable expressing their feelings, so they act out. Five techniques will

aid teachers in addressing, interpreting, and preventing individual student behavior problems.

#1. Behavior Modification Systems. The cornerstone of any classroom management system is an established behavior modification system. This system, no matter what form it takes, should clearly communicate to students when their behavior is inappropriate.

I use a citizenship grade system. If a student uses profanity, socializes during individual silent time, or talks over someone, I will lower his or her citizenship grade according to the severity of the instance. This avoids lengthy arguments and heated confrontations because it quickly and clearly communicates the inappropriateness of the student's behavior. Each day, the grades are reset to A's, and students begin with a clean slate. I then factor the students' average citizenship grade into their overall grades. Formalized behavior management systems provide an equitable structure to address most types of individual student discipline problems while being flexible enough to allow for teacher discretion.

#2. Avoiding Public Confrontations. Students will go to great lengths to avoid being embarrassed in front of their peers. When students are publicly reprimanded, they often feel disrespected and respond by drawing teachers into arguments to bolster their image.

The best way to avoid being drawn into dead-end arguments is to reprimand students in ways that aren't public affronts to their image. Hand motions and facial expressions are subtle ways to communicate to an off-task student. Rephrasing such statements as "Get back to work" as sincere offers of help — "Do you need anything to get started?" — will be less embarrassing to students while communicating the same message. Sometimes, simply walking by students' desks or sitting down next to them is enough to refocus their attention. Short notes or quiet comments during transitional moments also keep issues private. If none of these methods are effective, then turn to the behavior modification system to communicate with students without engaging in public arguments.

#3. Private Conversations. Inevitably, some students will challenge teachers. When this happens, always tell the student that you're willing to discuss the issue privately. Students looking to argue for argument's sake will often drop the issue. If a student continues to press the issue, then send him or her to the back of the room or outside the class. Give the student a few minutes to calm down, then start the class on the next activity before having the private conversation.

Once in private, first listen to the student. A short lecture to start the conversation will stifle any chance of a productive two-way dialogue aimed at identifying the cause of the behavior. Make sure the student understands why he or she was reprimanded, and then discuss ways to avoid the incident from happening in the future. In more serious situations, require the student to sign a contract or write a letter before they can enter the classroom again.

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#4. Overcome the Discipline Myth. Creating a positive classroom environment means dispelling the common student perception that teachers love to get students in trouble. Classes become unmanageable when students and teachers become engaged in a power struggle. In this paradigm, the unrulier the class is, the more power the students have. Convince students that you hate disciplining and are willing to ignore the behavior modification system if they're able to check their own behavior and work productively. Remind students daily that you're a teacher because you want to help them achieve their goals, not because you want to police them in the classroom. In my classroom, I use the saying, "check yourselves so I don't have to."

#5. Communicating About Moods. Open communication between students and teachers about how we're feeling can prevent easily avoidable conflicts from arising. Teachers should set an example by telling students when we're tired or frustrated. Encourage students to give a heads-up when they're feeling sad, angry, or noncommunicative. When students learn to communicate about their moods, they're offering precious information that teachers can use to prevent conflicts. Allowing an irritated student to work individually instead of in a group or to skip a turn at reading aloud is far better than forcing them into a situation that will likely cause them to act out.

A well-structured classroom learning environment with a clear and equitable behavior management system is a fundamental prerequisite for supporting the academic success of at-risk youth. No amount of dedication, lesson planning, or content knowledge is sufficient to compensate for ineffective classroom and behavior management techniques that result in discordant learning environments.

Students deserve teachers who are encouraging conductors of learning rather than domineering ringmasters focused on maintaining order. The classroom and behavior management strategies outlined here will help teachers with challenging classrooms to have the confidence and skills to put down whips and pick up batons. **K**