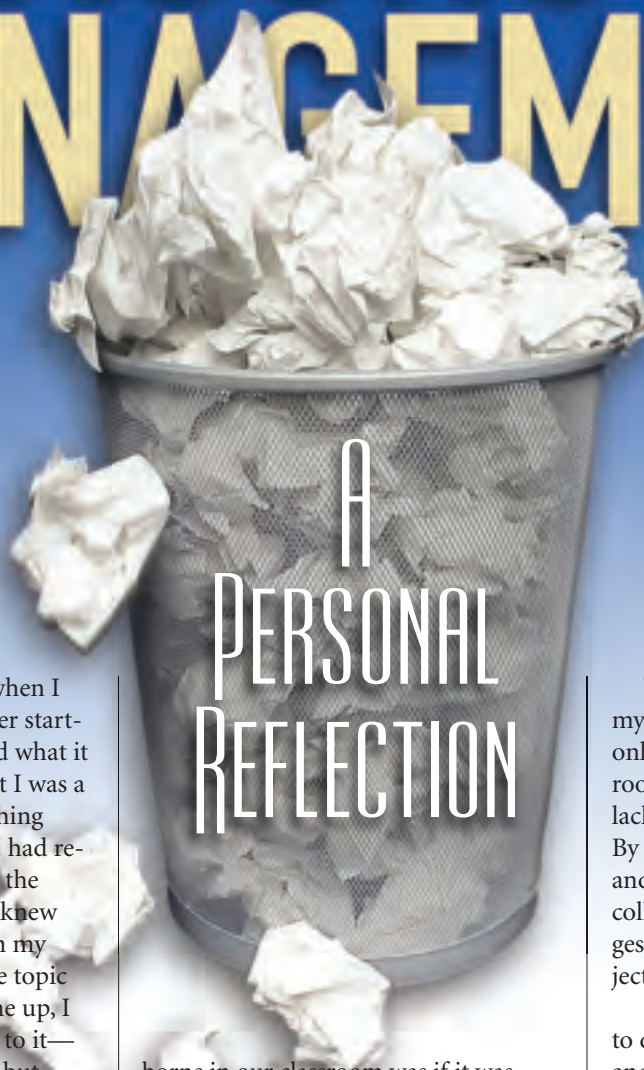


CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT



A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Thirty-some years ago, when I was a very young teacher starting out, I was sure I had what it takes to teach. I felt that I was a “natural” and that teaching high school English was a gift I had received. I had the passion; I had the preparation. I liked kids, and I knew what I wanted to accomplish in my classroom. Back then, when the topic of classroom management came up, I didn’t really devote much time to it—even though I had the nagging but fleeting notion that I really did have something to learn in that area, that things really could be going better in my classroom, that I really needed to figure out some strategies that would work for me—and my students.

Midway through my first year of teaching, I decided that I had to do something about all the wadded-up paper flying through the air in my 11th-grade classroom. I lit on a pretty good idea—I explained to my students that the only reason paper needed to be air-

borne in our classroom was if it was being deposited in the wastebasket. We established the policy that if any flying paper did not make it to the wastebasket, the person last touching it would find his (yes, I mean *his*) class participation grade reduced by five points for each occurrence. My students decided this policy was one they could live with. On some days, not one piece of paper flew through the air. But on other days, we had spectacular displays of paper-launching high-jinks that pushed many a (male) student’s grade toward the lower end of the grading scale.

While everyone had a lot of fun in my English classes, I realized that I had only an inkling of an effective classroom-management plan, and that I lacked the commitment to create one. By this time, I had gained the attention and sympathy of some of my teaching colleagues, and my principal even suggested I attend a seminar on the subject.

I soon discovered that I had needed to develop my own management plan and style. I had yet to figure out how to get adolescents—*all* of them—in a required English class them to move through the curriculum with a minimum of silliness, commotion, and obstruction.

Theory and Practice

Some years later, actually in the very first class of my doctoral study, the lecturer asked a question about teaching writing: Does your theory match your practice; and, conversely, does your

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practice match your theory? I'd like to apply that query to establishing a personal classroom-management plan. Have we as teachers developed plans that capitalize on what we know about young people? Do our classroom-management strategies grow out of our knowledge and research-based theory about children's physical and intellectual development? Does our understanding of kids' needs, capacities, and interests inform our plans for keeping order and decorum in the classroom?

Theory and practice have to build on each other. An effective classroom-management scheme has to grow from what teachers know—about their students and about themselves. If I discover that my students are better able to process their understanding of the lesson by asking questions, I need to include Q-and-A time in the day's lesson plan. And, from experience, I've learned that I need to think about what kind of activities will be required for each of my day's classes and try to alternate the high-impact, extra-teacher-energy-required lessons for one class with more easygoing, low-impact lessons for the other class(es).

Having said that, I know there will always be new things to learn about how to effectively manage a room full of young people. I read widely in the literature, and I observe my colleagues' expectations and strategies. I know teachers who think there should be very little talking going on in a classroom, and others who are completely at home with pandemonium.

Some classrooms are models of precision, with orderly rows of desks and every word exactly aligned on the bulletin boards, while other classrooms are composed of swirls and eddies of classroom furniture, seemingly arranged by the Mad Hatter during an earthquake. Their bulletin boards feature garish colors and words in modern fonts stapled on at odd angles. I love to go into elementary classrooms filled with model castles, word walls, hamster cages, tomato seedlings, and desks pushed together. I also love to see secondary school classrooms filled with colorful posters, student artwork,

shelves of bright, new books (not ragged, beige books donated to Community Services), display cases full of starfish and bird nests—these pique my curiosity and speak to me of the excitement of learning. The classroom environment is often an overlooked element in establishing one's personal classroom-management plan.

The Classroom Environment

Where we do *what* we do must be considered. Does our knowledge about multiple intelligences affect the way we construct the classroom environment? If my classroom is stimulating and creative, will my students be more likely to

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learn with open minds and hearts? If the classroom is organized and tidy, will students be more inclined to embrace these attributes and behave accordingly? These considerations form a piece of the classroom-management puzzle.

And believe it or not, *how* we fill our classrooms' space with students is crucial. Yes, I'm talking about seating charts. Knowing *who* is supposed to be *where* is crucial to the management plan that I've developed over the years. Of course, there are different strategies: (1) arrange students alphabetically by last (or first) name; (2) separate students who are likely to talk with each

other; (3) combine students with varying abilities and backgrounds in small groups; and (4) seat students according to their grades, which I don't recommend (even though it was a character-building experience for me during my freshman year of academy).

Room arrangement and placement of students is a lot like choreographing a dance. It is an effective method of management that allows you, as teacher, to bring out the best (or minimize the worst) in your students' personality and temperament combinations. As a way to manage students' learning behavior, the seating arrangement creates innumerable possibilities for small-group work as well as peer-to-peer learning. And I like to think it underscores a student's sense of belonging. At any rate, I find a seating chart that arranges students so that they learn well goes a long way toward helping me manage my classroom. Revising the chart every three to four weeks ensures that students get to work with a variety of people.

Classroom Procedures

Although the classroom environment is important, well-thought-out classroom *procedures* are even more vital in establishing a successful classroom-management plan. The best elementary classrooms capitalize on procedure. Elementary teachers know that humans are creatures of habit and that reinforcing patterns of behavior can make a day go smoothly. Teachers who have established a method to get their students' attention—whether it is clapping hands, raising a hand, or ringing a small bell—are on the way to ensuring that learning occurs because the students know what's expected of them and do not fritter away precious time.

But classroom procedures have to be taught. You cannot expect your students to intuit your intentions; you have to embed the procedures in the lesson. For example, before physical education class, you tell your third-graders to line up and not to talk in the hallway on the way to the gym. However, they start to chatter loudly before they've taken seven or eight steps down the hallway, and you're

getting ugly glares from the other teachers as you pass their classrooms. This is a *teachable moment*—an opportunity to illustrate what you mean when you say, “No talking in the hallway on the way to the gym.” You shepherd the third-graders back to the classroom, reminding them what *no talking* means, and try again. You may have to send them back to the classroom a couple more times; but you are thereby teaching an important lesson in obedience and decorum. You have taught them that you mean what you say and say what you mean. Further, you are teaching procedure, which is what makes a classroom-management plan work effectively.

Students typically respond positively to routine procedures once these strategies have been established. Generally, they like to know what is expected of them, and when things will happen. Many teachers—especially at the junior high and senior high level—find that the start of each class period is a crucial time for setting up a learning environment.

When students enter the classroom, these teachers have a procedure in place that transitions students directly into learning mode. Some teachers call this method *bell work* (because it’s work that starts when the bell rings) or *board work* (because a short assignment is written on the board). Which-ever approach works for you, I’d encourage you to consider this valuable procedure to get your students immediately engaged in the day’s class work.

This short bell work or board work assignment can introduce the day’s lesson, or it can be a standing activity, the same every day. If your geography lesson is going to cover waterways in North America, you might ask your students to describe in writing what they think it would be like to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel, or to draw and color a picture of a lake their family has visited in the past year. The point of this assignment is to get your students settled down and thinking about the upcoming lesson. Even if they’re not yet immersed in the lesson, it’s a way to move them affectively (and *effectively*) in that direction.

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A bell work procedure that I used when I taught high school English was a brief journal writing sprint. The students knew that during each period, they had 10 minutes to write a full page in their journals on any topic they chose. (I would often write a topic on the chalkboard to get them started.) They knew that each day they had to fill up *every* line of their journal page, or they would not get the five points allotted for that assignment. The every-line-in-10-minutes rule was what required the most “teaching.” But the repetition of day after day failing to settle down and thereby losing points finally sank in with them, and eventually nearly every student was able to complete this task, which transitioned smoothly into the topic for that day.

Action Plans

Another element of a classroom-management plan involves assembling a backlog of activities to use as a *sponge* to soak up extra time. Every teacher has had the odd 15 minutes of time at the end of a class presentation or project when he or she needed some activity to stimulate the students’ interest and redirect their energy. Over the years, as I have tried to fine-tune my own classroom-management plan, I have collected a number of sponge activities to fill the time gaps and prevent my students from having too much unstructured time that results in silliness and general commotion, which can undo any learning they have acquired in the class that day.

Giving my most dedicated students an extra 10 or 15 minutes to read independently works well; however, those students are the exception. More often, I find that having a reserve of word games and puzzles copied and ready to hand out provides me with an activity that easily fits into a short period of time and supplements the daily lesson plan. Social studies, math, and science teachers can create similar activities that reinforce vocabulary in their subjects, as well as other short content-specific activities.

Establishing one’s own classroom-management plan depends on coordinating and balancing many tasks, and may occur over a number of years. Every such management plan is an evolving dynamic. What seems to come easily for some teachers may require more time and many more classroom experiences to solidify for another. But the key concept here is *plan* (as both a noun and a verb). To have the noun, you have to activate the verb.

By considering classroom environment and procedure—along with our own expectations of ourselves and our students—we teachers can articulate a plan of action that makes classroom management a natural and pleasing element in our school day. ☞



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