

# -Chapter 5 Classroom Management

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## B. Creating successful classrooms

Problem behaviour rarely occurs in successful language classrooms. When students are engaged, have a reasonable level of self-esteem and are experiencing success, there is no incentive for them to behave badly, disrupt lessons or create barriers between themselves and their teacher or their peers. We need, then, to examine how we can try to ensure that the classroom is a success-oriented environment.

### B1 Behavior norms

All groups- whether in education or anywhere else- have ways of behaving and quickly establish norms for this behaviour which delineate the ways things are done in the group. Eventually, of course, the norms of behaviour—if the group is big enough—can become full-blooded cultural norms that a whole society adheres to.

School and classroom groups have their own norms of behaviour, too. Some of these are stated explicitly by school (e.g. the wearing of school uniforms in some countries, no running in the corridor, etc.). Some are laid down by the school and the teacher (students have to put their hands up if they want to ask a question: they must stand up when the teacher comes into the room: at the end of the lesson students must not pack their belongings away until the teacher tells them they may): some seem to spring up from within the group itself (or are the result of years of norms adhered to by previous groups which have been picked up by current groups-e.g. The norm of mediocrity).

If groups behave according to norms which have been laid down or picked up- or informally arrived at - then it makes sense for teachers to become personally involved in the creation of norms which the group will adhere to. One way of doing this, of course, is for teachers to say what behaviour is or is not permissible (for example, turn off all mobile phones in class, no speaking while I am speaking, no eating or drinking in lessons). Whether or not the students agree with these rules, they are obliged to obey them. However, these rules (or norms of behaviour) will always be the teacher's rules rather than the student's. None of the members

of the group (except for the teacher) have had any agency in their creation. They have no ownership of these norms, but are expected to acquiesce to them.

Schools, just like any other group-based entities, need norms of behaviour if they are to function efficiently. It is worth thinking, therefore, about how we can get the students' active agreement with such norms: for if we do so, they are far more likely to adhere to them rather than feel they have been coerced into obedience. There are things we need to bear in mind in order to achieve this.

- **Norms need to be explicitly discussed:** it is not effective just to tell students to read a set of rules about what is considered to be normal and acceptable behaviour. We need to discuss the rules with a group, explaining what they mean and why they are there. We might give students a handout describing the kind of behaviour we expect from them. Perhaps we can have a poster or wall chart which lists the rules so that we can refer to it whenever necessary.

If students understand what is expected of them and why it is expected of them, they are far more likely to conform to these behavioural norms than if they just seem arbitrary and capricious.

- **Norms can be jointly negotiated:** if we really want students to “buy into” a set of rules or norms of behaviour, we will go further than just explaining them. We will actively negotiate what should go into our list with our students by creating a jointly agreed code of conduct. The code (a kind of contract between teachers and students) could include details about classroom behaviour (e.g. when someone is talking, they will be allowed to finish before they are interrupted), discuss how often homework is expected, or establish norms of learner autonomy.

When a teacher and students have divergent views about what is acceptable and what is not, we should take the student's opinion into account and try to work with them. However, ultimately we will have to be firm about what we are prepared to accept.

With low-level classes, teachers may need to hold the discussion in the students' first language. Where this is not possible -as in a multilingual class-we will need to show quickly and calmly, through example, what is expected and what is not acceptable.

Some teachers adopt a formula where teachers and students produce a chart which says “As your teacher/a learner I expect.....” “As your teacher/ a learner, I will .....’ These bind both teacher and learners to behaviours which will be mutually beneficial.

When a code of conduct has been democratically arrived at (even when based on teacher direction) -with everyone having a say and coming to an agreement- it has considerable power. We can say to students that since they agree to the code, they themselves have responsibility for maintaining it.

- **Norms need to be reviewed and revisited:** just because we have discussed a code of conduct at the beginning of a term or semester, it does not mean that our job is done. When students step outside the norms of behaviour, we need to be able to remind them of what we agree on. This will be made much easier if there is a copy of code (say on a poster or wall chart) which we can refer to.

When the group starts behaving in ways that are not especially appropriate, we will discuss the situation with the group and get their agreement to come up with new norms to cover this new situation.

## B2 How teachers can ensure successful behavior

The way we work in lessons and the interaction we have with our students make a significant contribution to the group's success and, when things are going well, to successful learning.

We have already seen that the rapport we establish with our students is crucial to effective teaching and learning. Without good rapport, creating an appropriate group atmosphere and identity is extremely difficult. But there are other things, too, which we can do to ensure a positive class atmosphere.

- **Start as we mean to go on:** students will find it extremely difficult if we only begin to insist on certain behaviour when things go wrong. If, for example, we wish to start our lessons in a calm atmosphere, then we need to do that from the very first lesson by waiting for silence before we start the activities we have planned. If we have decided that we are in charge of who sits where, then we should exercise that decision-making from the very beginning rather than asking students to accept this halfway through the term.
- **Know what we are going to do:** students are far less likely to cause problems if we give them interesting things to do. They are far less likely to feel the urge to be disruptive if they understand that we have come to the lesson with clear ideas about what these things are, rather than making it up as we go along. This does not mean that we will always slavishly follow a plan (we will discuss planning in detail in Chapter 21), but it does suggest that a well-organised period of study and activity which has been thought about before the lesson has a far greater chance of success than a chaotic ill-thought-out (and ultimately frustrating) one.
- **Plan for engagement:** students who are interested and enthusiastic do not generally exhibit problem behaviour. When we plan our classes, therefore, we need to think how we can engage students in reading or listening text before starting detailed work on it: we need to do our best to introduce topics that are relevant to our student's experience. Interest can also be generated by a teacher's performance. There is no doubt that students can be engaged by the energy and enthusiasm of their teachers.
- **Prioritise success:** one of our most important tasks is to try to make our students successful. This does not mean making things easy all the time since that can provoke boredom or, at the very least, disagreement. But at the other end of the spectrum, if things are too difficult, students become demoralised. What we will try to aim for, instead, are tasks, activities and goals which challenge individual students but for which they can have a better-than-average chance of success. Getting the level of challenge right is a major factor in effective classrooms. Our use of praise (the medals and missions that we discussed on page 138) is also a way for us to show students how successful they are.
- **Equality rules:** in any dealings with members of the group, the group has to see that we treat everyone in exactly the same way, irrespective of who they are. We should not

show obvious favouritism or appear to hold a grudge against particular students. We need to treat events in the same way each time they occur, too, so that students know exactly what is likely to happen in certain circumstances. What this means is that any student who behaves in a certain way is treated exactly the same as another student who behaves similarly in the same circumstances.

- **Praise is better than blame:** a piece of research carried out four decades ago (and often cited) suggested that when students were told off for inappropriate behavior, it had little effect. However, even 'difficult' students responded extremely positively when they were praised for appropriate behaviour (Madsen et al 1968). Praise works, in other words. Students are far more likely to avoid inappropriate behaviour if there is an obvious advantage (the teacher and the group's approval) in appropriate behaviour. However, as we saw on page 138, praise has to be offered in the right way and for good reasons if it is to be effective.

## C. Modifying problem behavior

Despite all our best efforts to create successful learning environments, things sometimes get out of hand and students start behaving in inappropriate ways. The way we react in such situations will determine not only how serious the event becomes, but will also influence the attitude of the whole group in terms of their future adherence to the group norms which they have agreed. Pushing problem behaviour is not in itself an attractive action, but turning it into future success is.

When students behave disruptively or uncooperatively, our first task is to find out what the problem is. We can then see if we can agree a solution with the student who is exhibiting the offending behaviour so that we can set a target for them to aim at-one which will ensure the success we are striving for. There are many things to bear in mind if we wish to achieve these goals.

- **Act immediately:** it is vital to act immediately when there is a problem since the longer a type of behaviour is left unchecked, the more difficult it is to deal with. Indeed, unchecked behaviour may get steadily worse so that where it could have been deflected if it had been dealt with immediately, now it is almost impossible to deal with. Immediate action sometimes means no more than stopping talking, pausing and looking at the student in question (Brown and McIntyre 1993:42). Sometimes, however, it may demand stronger action.
- **Keep calm:** in many students' eyes, teachers who have to shout to assert their authority appear to be losing control. Shouting by the teacher raises the overall level of noise in the classroom, too. We need to find some other way.

The first thing to remember is that whether we feel like it, we should never appear to be flustered. Despite the fact that students sometimes appear to be attacking our personality and threatening everything we hold dear, we need to remember, in the words of a participant at a conference in Montreal Canada in 2005, that 'it's just a job.' Somehow we have to stand back from what is happening and rather than taking it personally, we need to act calmly and carefully.

When we are trying to modify student behaviour, we need to look disruptive students in the eye, approach them, keep looking at them and speak in a measured tone. We can start by asking them questions to find out why they are behaving in the way they are. This will often be enough to defuse the situation. If more serious action is required, however, we will adopt some of the methods described below.

- **Focus on the behaviour not the student:** we should take care not to humiliate an uncooperative student. It's the behaviour that matters, not the student's character. Though it may sometimes be tempting to make aggressive or deprecatory remarks, or to compare the student adversely to other people, such reactions are almost certainly counter-productive: not only are they likely to foster hostility on the part of student and/or damage their self-esteem, they may also be ineffective in managing the situation. Students can easily dismiss sarcasm as mere unpleasantness, but it is much more difficult to keep behaving in ways which the teacher is criticising sensibly and fairly.
- **Take things forward:** where a simple look or brief comment is not sufficient, we need to think carefully about how we respond. It is always better to be positive rather than negative. It is usually more effective for a teacher to say 'Let's do this, rather than Don't do that.' Taking things forward is better than stopping them, in other words. Our objective will be to move on to the next stage of an activity or to get a new response rather than focusing on the old one. In extreme cases, we may decide to change the activity in order to take the steam out of the situation and allow students to refocus. However, we should be careful not to base such decisions only on the inappropriate behaviour of one or two students.

Other ways of going forward are to reseal students, especially where two or more of them have encouraged one another. Once separated in an effective (but not humiliating) way, students often calm down and the problem behaviour dies away.

- **Talk in private:** it is appropriate to discuss a student's behaviour in private and talk about how to improve it. This is not always possible, of course, but disciplining a student in front of his or her classmates will not help that student's self-esteem at all. Ideally, we will try to deal with problem behaviour with the student after the class, or at least privately in a one-to-one situation, perhaps at the teacher's desk. If, however, we have to deal with the situation in front of the whole group, the more private we can keep it— by speaking quietly and approaching the student—the better.

George Petty suggests a three-stage approach to such conversations when dealing with teenagers. He calls the stages a 'chat', a 'word', and a 'telling off' (Petty 2004:117). In a 'chat', the teacher shows that he or she thinks the student is quite able and willing to solve the problem and that the student has the teacher's respect. When offering a 'word', the teacher is being firmer and is exerting pressure so that the students can solve their problem. But in a 'telling off', the teacher is quite clear that the behaviour is unacceptable and that it needs to change right now. And whether or not we agree with Petty's threefold division, we will all agree that we should try to deal with a problem—in the first instance – as lightly as possible before gradually becoming more serious or, finally, imposing some kind of sanction.

One way in which we can attempt to change students' behaviour is by writing to them – a general letter to each member of the class expressing a problem and asking students to reply in confidence. In this way students have a chance to make contact with us without other people listening or having to face us directly. However, this kind of correspondence takes up a lot of time, and there are dangers of over-intimacy, too. Nevertheless, the use of letters may help to break the ice where teachers have found other ways of controlling misbehavior to be unsuccessful.

Dealing with indiscipline is often a matter of 'pastoral' care, helping students to recognise the problem behavior and start to find a way towards changing it. This is far less likely to happen in class with everybody listening, than in private ongoing communication with the student outside the class.

- **Use clearly agreed sanctions:** we have already suggested that 'equality rules'. Quite apart from the need for fairness to all students, this means that students need to know what the penalties are for bad behaviour. They need to be aware that if X happens, Y will follow. There needs to be a gradual scale of action from a gentle reprimand (Petty's 'chat' - see above) to removal from a lesson and, finally, to exclusion from a school—though we will do everything we can to modify the student's behaviour so that this does not happen. Now, when X happens, the students know what to expect and they see it happening. This provides a sense of justice and a feeling of confidence in the system. What is less effective is either the teacher failing to impose a sanction that he or she has warned the group about (in which case it immediately loses its power for further occasions), or imposing far more serious than the one which the students expect (in which case they may lose respect at this arbitrary behavior).
- **Use colleagues and the institution:** it is no shame to have disruptive students in our classroom. It happened to everyone. So when there's a problem, we should consult our colleagues, asking them for guidance. When the problem is threatening to get beyond our control (for example, a pattern of disruption which continues for a series of lessons), we would be well advised to talk to coordinators, directors of studies and/or principals. They should all have considerable experience of the kind of problems being faced and will be in a position to offer the benefit of their experience/.

Whatever sector we work in (primary, secondary, tertiary, adult, state school or the private sector), we will all experience problem groups and encounter problem behaviour at some time in our teaching careers. More often than not, the problem is minor and can be easily dealt with, especially if we can refer to a previously established code of conduct, and if our responses to indiscipline are based on the principles and strategies we have outlined above. However, as we have suggested, it is far more effective to try to avoid such problems occurring by managing for success.

