

Maintaining Discipline:  
Conceptualizations towards the Understanding and Controlling  
of Classroom Behavior

Sean Lennon, Ed.D  
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Valdosta State University  
Dewar College of Education  
1500 N. Patterson Street  
Valdosta, GA 31605  
[smlennon@valdosta.edu](mailto:smlennon@valdosta.edu)  
(229) 333-5629 [office]  
(229) 740-3320 [cell]

## Introduction

The ability to keep a classroom of students organized and on task is considered by teachers and experts alike as a crucial component to student success and teacher retention. In a recent poll, classroom management was rated as one of the highest priorities for novice as well as experienced teachers (Stronge, Tucker & Hindman, 2003). However, many experts believe that classroom management is an experiential skill, not easily learned in a teacher education program. New teachers must experience trial and error before learning what works and what doesn't in a classroom (Metzer, 2002). This acknowledged gap leaves many young professionals woefully unprepared to deal with disciplinary and management issues and at potential risk for failure. Classroom climate is a powerful factor for student achievement meaning failure or difficulty in controlling the group can result in low learning achievement and assessment scores (Stronge, Tucker & Hindman, 2003). As a consequence many districts and schools cannot afford the time nor risk of allowing new teachers to learn by experience alone.

## Discipline Problems

Disciplinary issues that impact learning or classroom management are usually defined by the classroom teacher and/or school and district. This leads to a variability or inconsistency in definition, consequence and reaction, further intensifying student outbursts and behavior (Edwards, 2000). In a study by Tulley and Chui (1997) students defined five problem areas as disruption, defiance, aggression, incomplete work and miscellaneous behaviors with the first three accounting for the majority polled. This is by no means surprising as these factors are classroom wide disruptions involving a public display of negative behavior. Teachers will surely agree with the student perceptions, at least to varying degrees, as student (public) outbursts and/or disruptive behaviors is commonly cited as one of the most challenging problems in the classroom (Browers & Tomic, 2000).

Reasons or triggers for inappropriate student behaviors are varied and too convoluted to be effectively interpreted and acted upon. The scope of the problem is not always about the student, but also encompasses the class, teacher, and school with any or all of these being a catalyst for disruption (Yoon, 2002). A teacher cannot take into account many of these factors and must find realistic and successful techniques for the immediate problem. The only option available in dealing with a problem student, short of removing him from class, is to find a variability or factor that can be addressed in preventing these behaviors from manifesting in the first place (Logan, 2003). Logan (2003) classified the three domains or variables accessible to the teacher herself, the problem student and the remainder of the class. One of these would have to be modified or addressed in order to reduce management issues.

The student is the primary factor and one that change would impact most upon. The reasons for inappropriate behavior are limitless however and for the most part beyond the resources of the teacher (Counts, et al, 2005). The remainder of the class is also limited in options, as the same variability of the problem students exists just increased proportionally to the student population. The teacher is the only variability of

change in regards to the educator initiating reforms within the classroom. Both novice and experienced educators are unaware of the role they play in maintaining classroom discipline and for some, perpetuating dissonance (Spitalli, 2005). The impact of the teacher in classroom management is significant and should be considered the first manipulative or tool in addressing problems or behavior manifestations.

School and district variables can also be a factor in addressing problem classes and children. These can involve restrictive and authoritarian rules that impede children's autonomy and enthusiasm and environments where the student's self needs are not met. "Authoritarian systems that rely on heavy handed sanctions ultimately increase the level of student alienation and misbehavior and reduce possibilities for addressing problems constructively" (Edwards, 2000). School districts that rely on punitive measures and strict discipline minimize student self-actualization as well as other base human needs and can drive some to assert some form of control or action to restore the needs removed or lost (Edwards, 2000). This is human nature and not uncommon for groups of people, albeit adults more than children, to rise above repression. In a school with limited freedoms this same form of self-direction could manifest within the classroom.

### Teacher Variables

When a disruption exists teacher inexperience can increase the severity of the problem or be detrimental in resolving it. Inconsistent expectations or consequences, or the educator's own lack of communicating base rules and expectations can be a leading cause for intensifying misbehavior (Edwards, 2000). Grounded in theory more than experience new educators tend to rely on approaches ill suited to particular environments and student needs (Tulley & Chui, 1997). Researchers rated student perceptions on teacher discipline styles and effectiveness. Their data showed student preference to a confronting-contracting approach over relationship-listening and rules/reward and punishment approach. The former is most startling as:

The Relationship-Listening approach, which is grounded in the beliefs that inner feelings and outward behavior are directly linked, and that teachers should attempt to maintain a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions.

This is arguably the most student-centered and humanistic...and would seem to have strong appeal to students (Tulley & Chui, 1997).

Many teacher preparedness programs center on the humanistic approach and teach that listening and the forming of bonds with students, sometimes at the sacrifice of established rules and boundaries, is a real alternative to traditional classroom management techniques. This is especially true in special education and disruptive youth programs (Lutz, 2004). This disconnection between theory and practice probably occurs when new teachers, inexperienced to disruption, rely heavily on techniques ill suited to that particular situation or student. Unfortunately for many, these techniques may be all that they know.

Another weakness or problem associated with new teachers, and in some cases experienced ones, is in over-reacting or possibly under-reacting to a situation. Many educators fail to connect with the symbiotic and fluid relationship between them and their students and react instinctively, sometimes aggressively once discord is perceived. Some

see this as an ‘attack’ on themselves and react in an inflammatory ways, sending students out for minor infractions or ranting and raving in front of the class (Spitalli, 2005). Others strive for harmony and ignore the infraction, hoping it will be an isolated incident and not a factor in the class or the lesson. Both techniques follow an inconsistent pattern of rules and consequence that can lead to student frustration and hostility (Tulley & Chui, 1998).

Ineffective techniques employed by teachers both old and new are still commonly used within many districts and classrooms. Concepts such as punishing the entire class for the actions of one or few are extremely detrimental to class culture and trust (Spitalli, 2005). Other actions such as sarcasm to belittle students, bullying or intimidation, coercion and threats tend to have an opposite effect than the outcome desired by the teacher. Though seemingly effective at the time they will lead to more intense and problematic issues later in the year. Other actions such as reducing grades and bullying are not only ineffective but illegal, though it surely continues (to some degree) in many schools and districts (Spitalli, 2005). Students themselves consider teacher responses such as threats and inaction as limited to not effective at all. In a study by Tulley and Chui (1998) it was determined that a majority of students felt most teachers’ responses to disruption as only limited effective, and then only for that singular situation and consequence. It appears that for most students their teacher actions towards disruptive behavior is only marginally effective if at all, with no long term positive effects or outcomes discerned from the children.

### Understanding the Teacher’s Role

As discussed previously teacher actions/inactions are the single greatest variable that can be addressed in classroom management. Though difficult to assuage some educators, especially those who face unruly students face to face, that it is themselves rather than the child that is responsible for disruption. Responsibility, defined within this text is the concept that only the teacher can change in order to make classroom management a reality. This does not define the educator as the actual disruption, but rather as the only variable to change thus the responsibility is on them to find the solution. Ultimately the outcome, either success or failure, will be placed on the teacher regardless, especially in regards to assessments, of which problematic students are not listed as a variable or modification towards final scores. Notwithstanding students determined to be severe emotionally disturbed (SED) who may, or may, not be excluded from testing.

A common theme or element in research towards maintaining classroom management is the creation of a positive, nurturing environment where students feel comfortable and relaxed (Stronge & Hindman, 2003). The classroom should address student needs for self-actualization and belonging and set expectations and rules clearly and immediately (Maslow, 1943). Students should feel comfortable in addressing the teacher and a strong rapport of trust and empathy should exist between the class and instructor. Regardless of class size or demographic the teacher needs to personalize the class to instill trust and rapport before instruction can take place (Carbone, 1999).

Another positive behavior trait for teachers is organization and work. The classroom and curriculum should be prepared to maximize student involvement and

minimize off task behaviors (Stronge & Hindman, 2003). The busier a student; the less likely an infraction can occur. The problem, however, is this must involve activities and learning styles students will not associate as mindless 'busy work', a task difficult for a new teacher to create and implement. The student must be engaged and must know the pattern of assignments notes and what work is due. Inconsistency in class and in preparedness leads to student and teacher frustration, increasing the likelihood of disciplinary problems (Stronge & Hindman, 2003). A solid class organization will follow consistent patterns of instruction with clear, concise rules and expectations for students and will be addressed the first day and continually throughout the semester and year (Carbone, 1999).

Possibly the greatest contributor to effective classroom management is a trait impossible to quantify and establish on a consistent basis and pattern. Many educators utilize many of the above techniques then combine them to their unique style, personality and zeal (Carbone, 1999). Teacher personality and exuberance are abstract indicators difficult to address in a teacher preparedness program, yet for many master teachers they are the most common identifiers to success. They also, are similar in scope or definition to traits of transformative leadership; a modern leadership theory based on earlier characterizations of the charismatic leader concept (Boje, 2000). Conceptually, the idea is to be the type of leader that will motivate students without utilizing threats or proactive disciplinary measures. The style or scope of this leadership depends upon the personality and charisma of the educator and what he or she potentially brings into the classroom. The teacher will incorporate certain traits identified with this style; for example student empowerment, cultural building, empathy, understanding, listening, forgiveness and confidence (Johnson, 2001).

This is not an inclusive list nor does it identify all of the potential descriptors of transformative leadership as this is dependent upon the blending of personality, pedagogy and management style of the individual educator. Conceptually there are four main factors to this technique, modified here to a classroom setting; (1) to gain student trust and respect, (2) to inspire students, (3) to challenge them and (4) to create the appropriate and nurturing environment for them to persevere and succeed (Tickle, Brownlee & Nailon, 2005). Successful incorporation of this type of leadership, or something similar to it, can reduce much of the problematic behavior associated with classroom disruption, such as student defiance and disruptive behaviors. If the student feels comfortable and respectful, of both the teacher and class, the potentiality of problems can be greatly reduced. Also of significance are the remaining students which can conceivably help monitor and control the class and of their peers, especially if they experience a kinship or bond to the teacher. By making the students feel involved and wanted they, themselves, will want to participate and be part of the process of learning and not as a detriment or barrier towards it. Conceivably it is possible for the teacher to create such an environment where disruption and outbursts are not wanted, either by the individual student or the class; an environment where students are actually eager to be involved and willing to participate.

## Putting it all together

Classroom management is a comprehensive blend of exuberance and love for teaching and students, with an established, successful curriculum consisting of high student expectations, consistency and rigor. Coupled with pedagogy is the before mentioned but difficult to ascertain teacher trait; the empathy and understanding of the students, their issues and their problems. This trait, possibly incorporated from transformative leadership or other charismatic styles, establishes a bond of collaboration and respect, both from the teacher and students, where successful communication and understanding can occur.

This communication must be genuine and truthful and can only be established through deliberate incorporation of transformative leadership or similar traits. Through this communication stream the teacher will have the ability to see, and possibly intervene as a barrier rather than a catalyst for disruptive or other inflammatory behavior(s). Only the educator has the ability to control, minimize or, unfortunately inflame classroom problems and disruptions but with proper implementation much of this can hopefully be avoided or, at least, marginalized. As incidences occur the teacher must refrain from responding in ways negative to the situation regardless of the pressure or desire to do so. This may mean taking some abuse or being the recipient of criticism or insults but it is necessary to resolve the situation at that crucial point. What is really important is to create the environment where such circumstances happen infrequently or rarely. If it does occur, especially in a classroom where empathy and understanding is the norm, the teacher has a better chance of talking things through or reducing the disruption to a minimum or non-intrusive level. The student also may be more willing to confide or discuss the problem (in private) and hopefully help establish protocols for preventing further issues. If the student enjoys and respects the teacher and class, he or she will want to stay within it and be willing to confide and work with the teacher to prevent further mishaps.

. This type of classroom management is based on a charismatic leadership style that involves the creation of a classroom environment conducive for student needs, comfort and belonging. Personality for a master teacher is paramount to create such an atmosphere while still motivating and inspiring the students to work and to excel. They allow for student exuberance and slight indiscretions by not escalating but rather steering the student back to proper behavior and achievement. They make learning fun but stand strong on expectations and high outcomes, a process many students accept and want as long as discipline remains tempered and fair (Carbone, 1999).

## Conclusion

Inexperienced and older teachers face classroom behavior problems that can impede or hinder instruction and learning. For some educators these problems are insurmountable, leading to frustration, low test scores, and in some instances quitting the profession which so badly needs them. Many of the disciplinary issues facing these teachers are sometimes exacerbated by their own actions and re-actions to students and their behaviors. By relying less on heavy handed and strict rules guiding student behavior and instead utilizing a controlled regiment of planning and instruction, and in

the creation of a warm, nurturing environment, young professionals can limit these instances and instead focus more on instruction and pedagogy. The use of transformative leadership and/or components of it can enable educators to create a classroom more conducive for positive behaviors, possibly limiting the types of disruptions and subsequent problems that affect learning. Though these lessons and techniques are mostly learned through experience a teacher can minimize the disruptions and accelerate the learning process by taking the loci of control back into the classroom and instituting an effective and conducive pattern of control and instruction; a system based on charismatic leadership, rigor and empathy where students feel part of the system instead of simply being controlled by it.

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