Good instruction is good classroom management

Robert Slavin explains how exciting, engaging lessons can solve most problems in the classroom

WITH THE SOUND OF THE SCHOOL BELL STILL echoing in the hall, Julia Carter started her high school English class.

"Today," she began, "you will become thieves. Worse than thieves. Thieves steal only your money or your property. You—" (she looked around the class and paused for emphasis) "—will steal something far more valuable. You will steal an author's style."

During her speech, the students sat in rapt attention. Two children, Mark and Gloria, slunk in late. Mark made a funny "Oops, I'm late" face and did an exaggerated tiptoe to his desk. Ms. Carter ignored both of them, as did the class. She continued her lesson.

In Ms. Carter's class, students know that if they are late, they will miss something interesting, fun, and important. As a result, almost all of them are in class and ready to learn when the lesson starts. While Ms. Carter talked, Mark made an exaggerated show of getting out his books. He whispered to a neighboring student. Without stopping her lesson, Ms. Carter moved near Mark. He stopped whispering and paid attention.

"Today you will become Hemingway. You will steal his words, his pace, his meter, his similes, his metaphors, and put them to work in your own stories."

Ms. Carter had students review elements of Hemingway's style, which the class had studied before.

"In a moment," she said, "you're going to get your chance to become Ernest Hemingway. As usual, you'll be working in your writing response groups. Before we start, however, let's go over our rules about effective group work. Who can tell me what they are?"

The students volunteered several rules: Respect others, explain your ideas, be sure everyone participates, stand up for your opinion, keep voices low.

"All right," said Ms. Carter. "When I say begin, I'd like you to move your desks together and start planning your compositions. Ready? Begin."

The students moved their desks together smoothly and quickly and got to work. During the transition, Ms. Carter called Mark and Gloria to her desk to discuss their lateness. Gloria had a good excuse, but Mark was developing a pattern of lateness and disruptiveness. Ms. Carter asked Mark to come after school to make a plan to improve his behavior. He then returned to his group and got to work. The students worked in a controlled but excited way through the end of the lesson, thoroughly enjoying "stealing" from Hemingway. The classroom sounded like a beehive with busy, involved students sharing ideas, reading drafts to each other, and editing each other's compositions.

Creating an effective learning environment

The most effective approach to classroom management is effective instruction. Students who are participating in well-structured activities that engage their interests, who are highly motivated to learn, and who are working on tasks that are challenging yet within their capabilities, rarely pose any serious management problems. The vignette involving Ms. Carter illustrates this. She has a well-managed class—not because she behaves like a drill sergeant, but because she teaches interesting lessons, engages students' imaginations and energies, makes efficient use of time, and communicates a sense of purpose, high expectations, and contagious enthusiasm. However, even a well-managed class is sure to contain individual students who will misbehave. While Ms. Carter's focus is on preventing behavior problems, she is also ready to intervene when necessary to see that students' behaviors are within acceptable limits. For some students, a glance, physical proximity, or a hand on the shoulder is enough. For others, consequences might be necessary. Even in these cases, Ms. Carter does not let behavior issues disrupt her lesson or her students' learning activities.

There is no magic or charisma that makes a teacher an effective classroom manager. Setting up an effective learning environment is a matter of knowing a set of techniques that any teacher can learn and apply.

Effective use of time

The first focus of classroom management must be on how time for instruction and learning can be maximized.

Preventing lost time

Making good use of all classroom time is less a matter of squeezing out a few more minutes or hours of teaching each year, than of communicating to students that learning is an important business worthy of their time and effort. If a teacher finds excuses not to teach, students might think that learning is not a serious enterprise. In studying an outstanding inner-city Baltimore elementary school, a journalist described a third-grade teacher who took her class to the school library, which she found locked. She sent a student for the key, and while the class waited, the teacher whispered to her students, "Let's work on our doubles. Nine plus nine? Six plus six?" The class whispered the answers back in unison. Did a couple of minutes working on addition facts increase the students' achievement? Of course not. But it probably did help to develop a perception that school is for learning, not for marking time.

Preventing late starts

A surprising amount of instructional time is lost because the teacher does not start teaching at the beginning of the period. A crisp, on-time start to a lesson is important for setting a purposive tone to instruction. If students know that a teacher does not start promptly, they might be lackadaisical about getting to class.
Effective instruction on time. This attitude makes future on-time starts increasingly difficult. In Ms. Carter’s class, students know that if they are late, they will miss something interesting, fun, and important. As a result, almost all of them are in class and ready to learn when the lesson starts.

**Preventing interruptions**

One important cause of lost allocated time for instruction is interruptions. Interruptions may be externally imposed, such as announcements or the need to sign forms sent from the principal’s office, or they may be caused by teachers or students themselves. Interruptions not only cut directly into instruction time, but also break the momentum of the lesson, which reduces students’ attention to the task at hand.

Avoiding interruptions takes planning. For example, some teachers keep a box where students and others can put any forms, and then they deal with them while students are doing independent or group work or after the lesson is over. Anything that can be postponed until after a lesson should be postponed.

**Handling routine procedures**

Teachers should develop routines for simple classroom tasks. For example, many teachers establish a routine that students are only called to line up for lunch when the entire table (or row) is quiet and ready to go. It then takes seconds, not minutes. Exactly how tasks are done is less important than students knowing clearly what they are to do. Many teachers assign regular classroom helpers to take care of distribution and collection of papers, taking messages to the office, and other routine tasks that are annoying interruptions for teachers but that students love to do. Use student power as much as possible.

**Getting students’ attention**

Teachers need a method for getting students’ attention quickly. Many use a “zero noise signal” in which they raise their hand and teach students to raise their own hands, stop talking, and listen. They then praise the groups that comply first. Other teachers use a bell or a tambourine for the same purpose.

**Maintaining a rapid pace of instruction**

Teachers who cover a lot of content in each lesson have students who learn more. A rapid pace also contributes to students’ interest and time on task.

**Minimizing time spent on discipline**

Whenever possible, disciplinary statements or actions should not interrupt the flow of the lesson. A sharp glance, silently moving close to an offending student, or a hand signal, such as putting finger to lips to remind a student to be silent, is usually effective for the kind of minor behavior problems that teachers must constantly deal with, and they allow the lesson to proceed without interruption.

Effective classroom management is just informed common sense. Exciting, engaging lessons with real “pizzazz” solve most problems, and simple strategies for effective use of time, like those discussed in this article, add to a sense of purpose and prevent most disciplinary problems. Teachers still need to be ready to deal with more serious problems, but in a well-managed, well-taught class, these should be rare. Happy, productive, successful kids are generally well-behaved, and well-managed classes let teachers focus on content rather than discipline.


**About the author**

Robert Slavin is the director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins School of Education, a professor in the Institute for Effective Education at the University of York, and the driving force behind the Success for All Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the development, evaluation, and dissemination of research-proven reform models for preschool, elementary, middle, and high schools, especially those serving many children considered at risk.

**Further reading**

