Chapter 13
Managing the Classroom Environment

In the same way that we learn reading and mathematics and science, we learn the expectations of a classroom – what we are supposed to do while we are there. When you walk into a classroom where learning levels are high, structure is apparent. Those classrooms may be quiet places or noisy places. There may be a teacher in front of a group, several groups being active, or all students working as individuals. When you scan around, however, *all* of the students appear to be engaged. Pressley and his colleagues provide a detailed description of what the productive hum looks like.[1] This does not happen automatically; management practices matter. *Because students learn management expectations, we expect the ULM principles and rules to apply to classroom management issues just as they apply to learning content*.

Structure – Based on Goals

In most classrooms, especially in primary grade classrooms, it helps when learning activities are structured such that once a student completes one task, he automatically knows to go on to another pending task without being asked to do so. Primary grade teachers should read Pressley's important book, *Motivating Primary Grade Students*, to familiarize themselves with ways in which this can take place.[2] In these situations, teachers establish learning goals that are quite open-ended as opposed to objectives that are limited and have a well-defined finality when successfully accomplished. Students expect to move from task to task without the expectation of being told to do so. Julianne Turner similarly found that when students have a sense of autonomy or choice and are offered optimally challenging work, they are highly motivated and engaged. They can explain what they are doing and what they are supposed to be learning.[3]

We have emphasized previously the importance of setting learning goals. But goals for task completion are also necessary if students are to get assignments and activities done in a timely manner. Our experience is that a little task structure often is helpful even for graduate students. Sometimes "bring me 60 pages between two pieces of cardboard by this date" is sufficient for getting a doctoral dissertation drafted. Sometimes "bring me a chapter summarizing the results without explaining them but including all of the data and statistical tests by . . . [a certain date]" works

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better. While over emphasis on tasks or even worse performance can be problematic if it devalues learning as a goal, school is a formal setting with deadlines and requirements. These need to be accomplished and teachers need to structure goals that motivate students to stay on task.

Contingency

The world can be a cruel place. We can do things that have every expectation of turning out well but that turn out poorly. A family is killed in a freak automobile accident while evacuating from a forecasted oncoming hurricane – that never arrives.

Generally speaking, however, life has contingencies. Students who study are the ones most likely to earn good grades in most school settings. College sports teams that practice generally outperform those that don't. Bridge pairs that play together often generally outperform those that are newly partnered.

Contingencies can be very tricky. Sometimes people succeed without preparation – for example, gaining admission to a college during a year when applications fall way off. Sometimes they fail in spite of preparation, such as not being admitted when there are many applicants for each spot. (How were you to know that the prestigious college you applied to attend would already have two freshman oboe players when you chose the oboe as your instrument?)

In your classroom, contingencies are the companions to goals. You need consequences for completing or failing to complete classroom activities and assignments. You mange these consequences by setting contingencies. That's why it is very important that the contingencies be understood. For example, if those late to class are never called upon, then some will be sure to be late when they are not prepared.

No matter how much we try to emphasize mastery, it remains a difficult issue. In many situations (the least favored subject in 5th grade, the required chemistry course in college, the required institutional faculty workshop on harassment), the students are there because some rule or person or requirement stipulated that they be there. For that reason, students are likely to have a task orientation rather than a learning orientation. Recently, one of the authors was in the campus student center getting a bite to eat before teaching an evening class, when a student and her peer math tutor sat at the table behind her. The student told her tutor, "I have to pass the test. I just want to know how to get the answers to these problems. You know, I'll never use this stuff again anyway." When task orientations like this student's prevail, the teacher needs to make contingencies for rewardable task completion both clear and absolute. If no papers are to be accepted after a specified date without some official excuse lest they incur a penalty, then be certain to penalize unexcused late papers. The best teachers nearly always pass some test of reasonableness; that is, there *are* some acceptable excuses. However, the looser this becomes, the weaker are the contingencies. Rest assured, students keep count – of what happens to them, and just as importantly of what happens (or they think happens) to their classmates. Sometimes an external person offers the advice, "Oh, they never do that," and the student is shocked to learn that the advice was wrong – or dated. *Always keep in*

mind: students count contingencies; teachers manage contingencies. Consistency is your best bet.

Outcome Expectancy

Contingencies produce an expectancy of their continued future occurrence. Actions produce outcomes and we come to expect those outcomes. That outcome can be big or small. There was a conversation between two of our children about a favored, if some what quixotic, mathematics teacher who ultimately helped both children succeed. This teacher, JB, really hated it when students twirled their pencils, end over end. Those pencils inevitably would fall to the floor, and there would be a disruption. The teacher "went ballistic" when a student was caught twirling. One evening the younger child relayed how that had happened in her math class that day. The older child said, "Oh, he hates that. I remember one day when that happened. It was scary." Yes, as teachers you do become known for your outcomes, and especially when they are contingent upon certain well-defined student actions. There were two children who never twirled their pencils in math class, however automatic that seeming inane behavior had become, because the outcome was "too scary."

But another story about the same teacher shows how things work both ways. The younger child was remarkably good at mathematics – and often found herself bored in the classroom. One day she was awakened from a catnap during class to be asked about a problem on the board, and after a moment or two she blurted out "29." JB and her classmates laughed. Several minutes later, the problem evolved to $5^2 + 2^2$. Many of her classmates turned to her and stared. Based upon just this one incident, JB never called on her in the absence of her volunteering again. If the purpose of waking students up is to make sure they are on task and "getting it," no need to wake those who most likely are getting it. Better to say, "I'll let whoever wants to sleep sleep when they get it." Still better might be creating an environment where the sleeper is expected to study independently on some math-related topic or challenge project, or perhaps work as a tutor with another student having trouble or one who had missed class time due to illness.

Classroom Deportment

Managing classrooms is a complex and difficult task, one whose scope goes far beyond this book. As with so many issues, however, the ULM position is straight forward – help students *learn* the desired actions. We point you toward an extensive set of guidelines for classroom management that are consistent with the ULM.[4]

One of us recalls when our children were young, that the older child was in with a well-behaved group of students, but the younger child at the same school was in a group well described as being "wild." A new principal arrived and systematically undertook improving the deportment in that wild class.

Deportment has become a problem in college classrooms. Students reading newspapers and chatting always were a potential issue, but these situations pale in comparison with the impact of instant messaging on cell phones. Other issues discussed today are verbal or physical threats, to students or faculty, and incidents of disputing the instructor's authority or expertise. Today, most colleges have behavior codes for classroom deportment where such things were unknown several decades ago when a "no smoking" sign was the most code that was employed.

If you want to change a classroom behavior, you need clear consequences that are contingent on students' behavior. Consequences alone will not be enough, however. You need to get the students to think about that behavior. That is, for deportment changes as with nearly everything else school based, you need to engage working memory. Students need to attend to the issue. In many cases, they need to study the issue (repetition, feedback, etc.).

Teach Expected Behaviors

Teach expected classroom actions the same way as you teach anything else. If you were teaching US states and capitals, you would have posted a map of the states with each capital shown. If you were teaching chemistry, you would have posted a periodic table. If there are management or behavioral rules for your classroom, you should have them posted – especially in grades K-12.

We'll illustrate this with two examples. Suppose you want to call attention to all students in a first grade class. We've seen this managed in several ways. One teacher toggled light switches and remained silent – until all children were silent. Those who were not silent usually were quickly admonished (verbally) by those who otherwise were. Another teacher simply held up her hand with two fingers pointing up, and soon all children were holding up their hand with those same two fingers extended.

Let's turn to the other end of the spectrum, the college classroom. Plagiarism always has been an issue in college classrooms, beginning with copying homework and extending to other aspects of required assignments. With the advent of the WWW and the emergence of for-profit companies selling "term papers," plagiarism has increased. In fact, teachers can now participate in electronic services whose intent is to detect plagiarism.[5] Decades ago, students were expected to know what plagiarism was and that it was unacceptable. Today, nearly every college has formal statements about plagiarism.[6] Further, most schools expect teachers to include formal statements about plagiarism in their course syllabi.[7] If you assign learning activities where many references are brought together and quoted, then you should provide explicit statements about how you expect those citations to be made and include examples that you would consider to be plagiarism.

Dealing with Inappropriate Behavior

As a teacher, much of what was just written in this chapter did not come as news. In fact, you might even be saying to yourself right now, "I'll bet they've never met

a kid like Xxxxx (fill in the name of your least favorite pupil)." Worse yet, some inappropriate behaviors have become automatic. That is, the students engaging in those actions really aren't thinking about them.

Haven't you ever been in a situation where you were thinking and then blurted out something you immediately regretted and wished you could take back? Sometimes we process automatically without considering how our outcome might be taken. Verbalizing your outcome may be automatic; once your thought is complete, out it comes. Yet we've all done this in a way best described as "putting our foot in our mouth." Changing an inappropriate behavior that has become automatic is very difficult.

You would expect us to always say the same thing about poor behavior – get the student to think about it. If you want it changed, it needs to get into working memory. But it's not at all simple. For example, it is clear that when dealing with one student in a classroom, you also end up dealing with all of the others as well. Whatever is done in public is done for all to learn from. What you do changes all other contingencies and all outcome expectancies. Maybe throwing a temper tantrum in a pre-calculus mathematics class is effective. Classes like that attract students who are there to learn the material. As already noted regarding JB, these brief tantrums can be both effective and memorable. In a different class with different students, maybe that approach would be downright foolish. Perhaps a student who is not succeeding in a different class might choose to twirl a pencil just to bring about an eruption – to control the teacher, so to speak. Worse, suppose the student who was getting everything decides to twirl a pencil instead of napping when bored and brings on an eruption; then what do you do? Following the guideline "Treat others the way that you want to be treated" is more effective than "Treat them the way that they treat you."

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

For those children for whom behavioral issues have become chronic, the ULM proposes to address the problem in a manner similar to that of experts engaging in deliberate practice. Once a behavior has become automatic, to change that behavior requires that the behavior somehow be brought into working memory making it susceptible to modification. When one examines the numerous cognitive-behavioral approaches to "behavior modification," that's precisely what they try to bring about. Essentially, each one of the approaches involves finding some way to pull an inappropriate behavior into working memory and think about it. Years ago, one of the authors taught in a preschool where the classroom had the "thinking chair" – a seat where students who made incorrect behavioral choices would sit to rethink and come up with more appropriate alternatives. They had to articulate the alternative and tell why it was a better choice. One colleague called it "the naughty chair." This can be very difficult to do with bad classroom behaviors since they can play out without any conscious thought on the part of the perpetrator. In these cases, the strategies that seem to work involve tying the inappropriate behavior to a consequence that forces the behavior into working memory.

Perhaps the best example of behavior modification following the principles of the ULM comes from the Achievement Place Model[8] (AKA Family – Teacher Model; Boy's Town Model). The Achievement Place Model has been used successfully in a variety of settings including adolescent group homes and schools. It has been shown to be effective in almost 800 trials.[9] The Achievement Place Model uses a "token economy" where students are reinforced and punished by earning or losing points which are traded for tangible rewards or privileges to motivate behavior change. But Achievement Place anchors this motivation within a "teaching interaction" that draws on principles fully compatible with the ULM.

The teaching interaction is as follows:

Get the students' attention.
Remove points (to motivate sustaining attention to what follows).
Describe the problem behavior the student was doing (focus student attention on their behavior).
Have the student do the correct behavior (focused practice with guidance).
Reward the student by giving points (sustain motivation for practice).
Have the student repeat the behavior one or more times followed each time by giving points (motivate deliberate practice).

The teaching interaction is successful because it doesn't just punish for wrong behavior, it provides learning opportunities to acquire appropriate behaviors. We would argue that it is effective because it implements exactly the principles of the ULM.

While the desired outcomes of improving expert performance and changing an inappropriate behavior may at first seem poles apart, the reality is that much of each requires the same mental process – engagement in working memory – for the same reason; automated processes don't normally get into working memory where we can alter them. One of the things a psychological therapy often includes is maintaining a diary in which someone tries to record the circumstances and feelings of an untoward behavior. Perhaps, when a student has a problem area in which the teacher sees that problem coming on, having the teacher ask the student to make a diary entry could help. There would need to be some sort of sign for the teacher to make to initiate this, rather than just speaking to the student in a way that all present can hear.

We stress this one idea. As much as you may try to promise yourself that you will screen your speech for its social acceptability, an output – especially one that was automatic in coming – might just unleash itself inappropriately. The harder it is to come up with your response, the more likely the response is to "escape" because the less likely it will be that your working memory has held on to the "think before you speak" instruction. In accord with the ULM, *to modify an automatic behavior, the first thing we need to do is to somehow bring it into working memory*. If you are a habitual blurter who frequently suffers from foot-in-mouth disease, learning to control yourself will be difficult. The ULM explains why *it is much easier to learn a new habit than to break an old one.* It has to do with thinking

about something rather than processing it automatically. When dealing with hard-core behavior that is inappropriate, getting the perpetrators to *think* about it at the time that their sensory inputs are most likely to initiate an automatic sequence that accompanies those inputs is the teacher's challenge.

Notes

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