



# Minimize the Drama!

## Refocus the Spotlight on Learning

By Mary Jane Dove

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**C**lassroom management.” It’s a phrase that gets kicked around a lot, and we seem to use it when referring to just about anything that has to do with our students

that does not go our way! To successfully manage your students and keep the drama to a minimum and the learning to a maximum, they need to believe that you care about them—inside the classroom and out of it. They won’t pay attention to you if you don’t pay attention to them.

But how on earth can you let students know that you care? And what does that have to do with classroom management? It’s rather simple: less time with discipline = more time teaching. The following are some suggestions to minimize the drama in your classes.

### Be Prepared. Really Prepared.

Be early. Be well-groomed, appropriately dressed, fed, happy and prepared to teach. Be at the door with a smile every single day. Greet students and speak to as many of them as possible. Being physically and mentally awake and ready for the day shows these students they are the most important people you have on your schedule.

Careening into the parking lot on two wheels and almost making it into the building by the bell does not indicate that you can’t wait to see your students, neither does appearing unwashed or shaggy. The students may look that way, but you

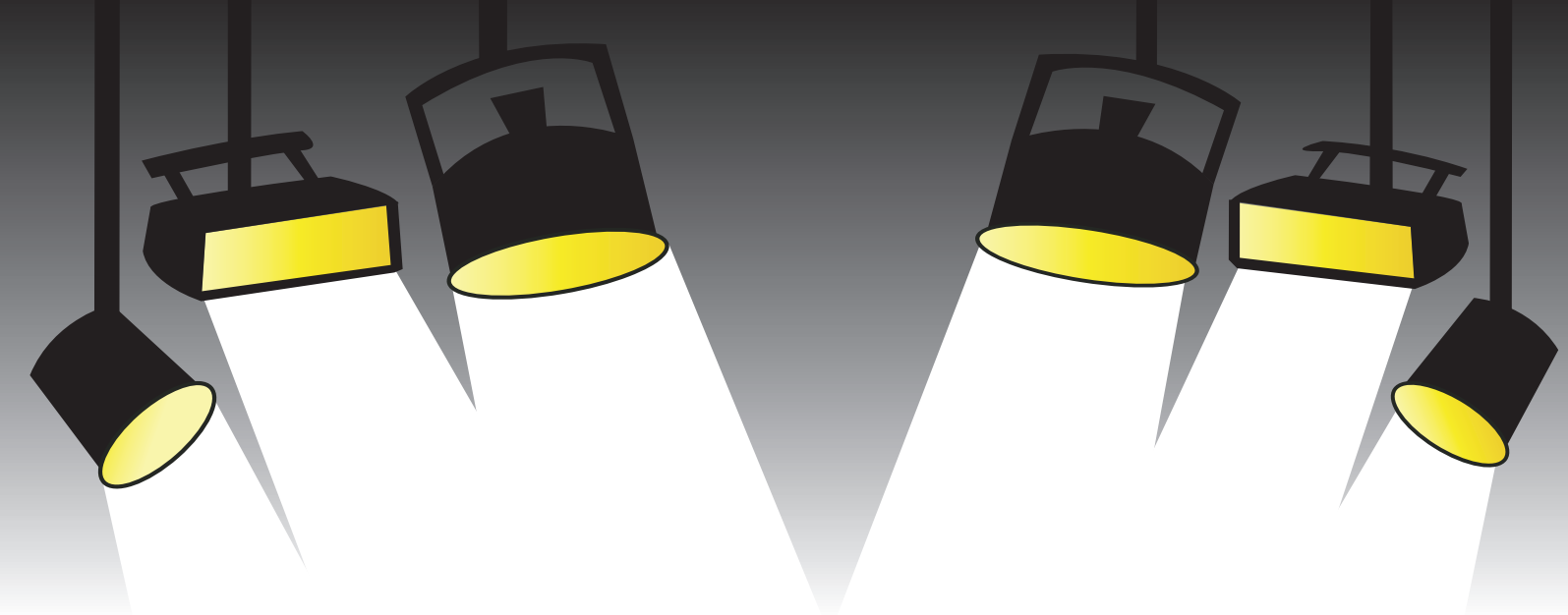
shouldn’t! Actions like these show disrespect for your students. You are sending the message that you are only at school because it’s your job.

### Get Started Quickly

Establish a routine and get on with the business of teaching and learning immediately. Don’t just assume they will remember what to do when they enter your classroom every day. Teach them what you want them to do and re-teach them often. Look at it as an opportunity for instruction, not as an exercise in frustration. If you think it is important enough to teach and re-teach the students how to get started as soon as they arrive, they will eventually receive the message.

Have the instructions and regularly planned activities posted for immediate action. Sometimes these are called bell ringers. This is an assignment that the students begin as soon as the bell rings for class to commence, an assignment that needs no verbal direction. This is a great opportunity for a quick review of yesterday’s lesson or a quick preview of today’s. At one of my schools the students read trade magazines from the classroom library upon arrival.

While students are fully involved in this preliminary activity, whatever you assign, you can carry on silently with the time-consuming administrative stuff, such as checking the roll and sending the attendance, handing back papers, checking with students on make-up work, etc.



Have all learning materials at hand and be ready to teach. It doesn't take that long to organize the day before. Use a bookmark in your text. Have your lab materials out and ready to issue. Do not wonder out loud about what to do that day, send someone to make copies or shuffle through papers and books to find your material (Breux, 2009). This is incredibly insulting to students. They have shown up to your class—hopefully, ready to learn—but you have not even planned anything worthwhile. It shows you don't really care.

### State the Objective

What's an objective? An objective is simply what you want the students to learn that day. I prefer part of the objective to be on the white board or somewhere all can see and can refer back to if necessary. No one should have to guess what you want them to learn.

Objectives should be measurable; therefore, there should be some means of assessing the learning. This doesn't have to be a written test. You can assess what they learned by asking questions, asking students to explain what they have learned to you or to a partner, or asking them to write a short explanation or demonstrate their skills on the lab equipment—anything that gives you a clue about what they actually learned will work.

Furthermore, do not start the day by telling them you have a lot to cover. That just sounds dreary and foreboding. Tell them *why* they are learning what they're learning today and how it will affect them in the real world. For example, in auto tech class, I remind them that they can save a lot of money if they can fix/diagnose the problem and perhaps prevent a costly visit to the mechanic. In my cosmetology class, I remind them how they would feel if a stylist cut their hair too short or colored it incorrectly. The best part? They may not exactly understand how this relates to calculating the distance of the shadow cast by the flagpole, or knowing when those two trains on the same track will collide, but they do get the message that spending a ton of money on a vehicle or having an awful haircut are to be avoided!

### Authoritative Management

I'm sure you've heard of different management styles. The two that immediately come to my mind are polar opposites: authoritarian and permissive. Authoritarian is the style teachers use when they bully their way through the day. I've had several teachers like that. I've been a teacher like that, too, and I'm not proud of it. Teachers may use the authoritarian style because they are insecure or enjoy being the boss. This management style makes students uneasy and unwilling to take a chance on excelling (Dahlgren,

Malas, Faulk, & Latimer, 2008). Not a lot of learning occurs when this is the only management style.

The permissive management style is just the opposite. Some teachers disengage, resulting in students behaving and learning as they wish. Some teachers want to befriend their students, becoming one of the gang and going with the flow. Neither option is good practice. No rules? This shows the students you really can't be bothered. No homework or hard tests? It sends home the message you don't care and mediocrity is acceptable.

So, what is the ideal management style? I like to call it the Goldilocks style, because it is *just* right. Dahlgren and Hyatt (2007) state that the authoritative management style (not to be confused with the authoritarian style) creates "an optimum environment for learning" because it allows "teachers to simultaneously express care for students and hold them accountable to learning and appropriate social behavior" (p. 41). In other words, it's an opportunity for you to care for the students while still holding them to both academic and behavioral standards.

In an authoritatively managed class, there are acceptable behaviors; fair discipline for inappropriate behaviors; and a nurturing, safe environment. Students can ask questions and discuss the topic at hand without fear of ridicule. Who wouldn't enjoy this kind of class?

How do you achieve this management style? Do some research on authoritative management style, authoritative classroom management or authoritative parenting. I found the common characteristics to be those of respect for the student (child) while setting appropriate limits and sticking with those limits. Is this hard? Not really. It does take a little effort, though. Learn students' names and something about them. Set your expectations very high for both behavior and academic achievement. Teach those expected outcomes, and reteach them (Dahlgren et al., 2008). Mete out fair, appropriate and consistent discipline if inappropriate behavior occurs. Discipline the behavior, not the child (Dahlgren et al., 2008).

### Maintain Self-Control

Of course the students are going to challenge you. Understand that it's going to happen and that you, and only you, have ultimate control over your reaction. Will it be merely conflict, or will it deteriorate into something worse? This is where you must step up and be the adult in the room.

Dahlgren and Hyatt (2007) posit that there are phrases, called *diffusers*, which can immediately address inappropriate behavior and allow you to continue teaching. Just think about a firecracker. Once the fuse is lit there are only two choices: the firecracker will explode or someone will snuff out the flame before it explodes. That someone is you. From this point on you have the amazing power and responsibility to diffuse a situation so that learning is not disrupted.

Remaining calm is the first step. I like to pretend I'm someone else, someone who is the calmest, coolest and most collected teacher I know, someone who never resorts to sarcasm or ridicule (my weakness). Take a few deep breaths before responding. Speak softly. Speak slowly and return to the lesson. Do not show that this situation upsets you at all, and do not engage or argue. Yes, it is hard to do! You must use every ounce of self-control you possess to remain calm, but doing so will be worth the effort.

If you attempt to argue, you have lost—lost control, lost the respect of the other students, and lost valuable teaching and learning time. Ka-boom!

Two popular phrases are "I understand" and "Probably so" (Dahlgren et al., 2008). When you deliver a diffuser, you are acknowledging the student and very nicely you are conveying to him that his concern is not important enough to interrupt your teaching. This is one of my favorite things to do; it's sneaky but also respectful. A very dear friend of mine enjoys the phrase "How unfortunate" when the excuses start rolling in. Try to de-fuse that firecracker and save the day.

### Refocus the Spotlight on Learning

Refocusing doesn't happen by wishing, bullying or even by sending a troublemaker to the office. It happens when you have shown the students you care about them so much that you are really and truly prepared to teach them every minute available to you. It happens when they know what they are learning, why they are learning it and that you will ask them to show you their understanding of it. It happens because your (authoritative) management style gives students a choice instead of warning, reminding and nagging. It happens because you care enough to maintain your self-control, even when they are pushing your buttons left and right.

These essentials are a great start to minimizing the drama so that you can refocus the spotlight on learning, and give yourself and the students a more satisfying and enjoyable classroom and lab atmosphere in which to learn. **Tech**

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