

Vern's Classroom Management Guide

Preface

There are many ways of maintaining a classroom. This guide explains the basic methods I have used for classroom management at the secondary level in lower socioeconomic, urban schools.

Introduction

First, I would like to say that students are people; they may be smaller people, but they are still people. As much as they might not see us as people, we can never forget that they are people, and as such, all the elements of basic psychology apply to them as well. With that said, there are two elements of psychology I use to guide the classroom management in my class.

1. The Human Brain Cannot Learn When Under Duress
2. The Human Brain Utilizes Schema and Structure to Process New Information

The human brain has to be at a certain state of calm and rest when processing and learning new information. Think of a time when you have gotten into a heated argument with a family member or romantic partner. After the argument, before you have “made-up”, I’m sure you felt angry, anxious, hurt or could not stop thinking about what you would have said to them if you had thought of it at the moment. It is hard to concentrate after these types of arguments, especially if afterwards you’ve had to go to work, attend class or spend time with your kids. In fact, if the argument was really intense, you probably had reactions from all over your body such as an upset stomach, headache, teeth grinding, shakiness or jitteriness, increased heart rate or inability to sit still.

The lack of ability to concentrate afterward is completely normal. The brain simply cannot process much new information when it is at such a state of anxiety and arousal. When your brain has gone through something like a heated argument, it is in a state of fight or flight, and can only process as much information as needed to get you through that stressful situation. Our brains shut down every task except those vital to survival, and we get put on “auto-pilot.” Our chances of learning anything new, let alone carrying out complex tasks, are slim to none.

It is because of this basic brain functioning that classroom management is so vital to our success as teachers. We must maintain order in the classroom to produce the kind of learning environment that is conducive to student brains remaining calm enough to process new information. If students are concerned about students bullying them or picking on them, the teacher screaming at them, being placed in uncomfortable situations with students they do not get along with, objects being thrown, fights breaking out or the stress of simply not understanding any of the material being presented in class, their brains shut down.

Once their brains enter shut down mode, they will not be learning anything in your class. You as a teacher must be able to control as many of the environmental variables in your classroom as possible, because one environmental variable you cannot control is the stress and anxiety they bring with them from outside of the class, particularly from their home environments.

Many of our students come to school already stressed out and anxious from things that are happening at home. Problems such as break up of family units, deportation, homelessness, food insecurity, abuse, poverty, hormones are what our students deal with on a daily basis. We have to realize that we as teachers, are asking 10-15 year old brains, to put aside thoughts of those issues every day from 8:00 to 2:30 and concentrate on whatever content we are teaching in class. It seems like a very daunting task or one of nature's cruel jokes.

The only thing we can do as teachers to help our students concentrate is by reducing their stress and anxiety when they enter our classrooms. It does not mean that your classroom becomes a lounge or a therapy center. In fact one of the best things to help the brain relax is structure and predictability. Our human brains constantly search for schema in which to fit in new information. When our brain enters an environment, and it knows what to expect from that environment, and the environment poses no immediate threats, it relaxes. Therefore the more structure and predictability our classrooms have, the calmer our students' brains become and the potential for learning increases.

So how do we maximize the structure and predictability of our classroom environments? In this guide, I am going to try to cover some of the issues I think are most important to classroom management.

Classroom Set-Up

When I set up my classroom at the beginning of each year, there are a few principles that I always follow:

1) **Be sure to establish a perimeter around your room.** It is very important, for safety reasons, that students are able to exit the classroom quickly in the event of an emergency. Do not place desks in rows or groups in such a fashion that students must wait for other classmates to move in order to exit your room. Also, if you place desks against the wall or other large furniture (such as a large bookshelf) be prepared to have your wall destroyed. Nothing is more tempting to a bored student to draw on the wall, peel paint from the wall or carve into your furniture. Even the best students participate in these behaviors (They are kids, after all!). I have only placed desks against walls when my classes were so large that I had no other choice.

However, it is also important that the teacher be able to move easily around the room and access students. An established perimeter allows you to walk around the entire group of students. I explicitly tell my students that the perimeter must be kept at all times during the class. Even when students may move the desks for group work, I tell them that they must be able to exit if an emergency happens, and that I need to be able to access each one of their groups. The perimeter allows me to access all of my students, easily pass out paper and supplies, and use proximity to control classroom situations.

2) **If you do not want students to touch something, keep it out of reach.** Students will touch anything that you do not tell them is "off-limits." In the first weeks of school, you must clearly explain which places in your room are "teacher areas" and which are "student areas." If you do

not want a student to touch things on your desk, then declare your desk as “off-limits.” If you have multiple doors to your classroom, then identify which doors are “off-limits,” and which doors are for students to use. For younger kids, or more difficult rooms, I suggest putting up “teacher area only” or “off-limits” signs on these areas.

Also, please keep your personal items such as cell phones, purses or wallets out of reach of students. Do not leave these items on your desk. Personal items should always be stored in a locked cabinet or in your pocket. Even some of the best students steal these items and/or look through personal belongings when given the opportunity.

3) **Do not expect to teach from your desk.** You cannot manage a classroom and all that goes with it (e.g. teaching, passing out supplies, maintaining behavior, assisting students) by staying at your desk all period. Therefore, do not place your desk in the center of activity. Your desk is the place where you sit down during your prep period or before/after school and work on your lesson plans, paper work and grading. Place it out of the way so that your paperwork remains untouched. I suggest that if you need a podium or table in which to teach, have a separate podium or table at the front of the room from which to do so. It is also helpful to have your document camera and/or phone on this “teaching podium” so that it is easier to teach with minimum interruptions to your class.

4) **Post anything that students need to see everyday at the front of the room.** I suggest that in addition to the classroom rules, at the front of your room make sure you post the agenda for the day, the homework for the day and the materials students will need for the day. With these posted, it ensures a far better chance of students being prepared for your class.

Procedures, Procedures, Procedures

I cannot stress the importance of having set procedures for EVERYTHING you do in class. You cannot expect students to know how you want them to do anything in your class unless you tell them. They do not read minds. In fact, some students will even take advantage of the fact that you have not told them HOW to do something, and will proceed to do that something in the most annoying fashion possible just to see how you will react (e.g. think Bart Simpson). **If you want students to behave a certain way in your class, you must tell them how to behave or act. Then you must give them the opportunity to practice those behaviors and actions in your class.**

The following is a list of items for which you should explicitly teach and practice procedures for:

- Entering class
- Exiting class
- Cues to listen to the teacher
- Class rules
- Appropriate noise levels for different activities
- Cleaning up/putting away supplies before the bell rings
- Passing papers or supplies
- Grading papers
- Items to have present during instruction

- Moving furniture
- Individual work
- Group work
- Transitions between activities or assignments
- How to turn in homework
- How to turn in late work or absent work
- How to ask for help or ask questions
- How to ask to go to the restroom
- How to ask to use the pencil sharpener
- How to throw away trash
- What to do if you are not present/Substitute behavior
- Tardies to class
- How to listen to P.A. announcements
- Going to the library/computer lab/another classroom

I cannot tell you what procedures you should have for each one of these items as all teachers are different and have different preferences. **But remember, since each procedure needs to be learned, each procedure needs to be taught and practiced.** I create a PowerPoint presentation that covers my most basic procedures, and I show it to my classes during the first week of school. Then I make sure that during the first few weeks, my classes constantly review and practice the procedures.

Often new teachers ask me, “But Vern, what if I don’t know what my procedures are?” Since new teachers have never taught before, or have used the procedures already established by their student-teaching mentor, they may not have procedures of their own. That’s fine. Pick procedures. If you start with procedures that you don’t like, you can always change them. You announce to the students that procedures are changing and teach the new procedures. *But, please realize, that you will probably need a month of practicing the new procedures before they become fully operational among your students.* However, do not just abandon procedures because you don’t know what procedures you want. You must always start with procedures or otherwise your class will become complete chaos.

Never sacrifice classroom behavior for the sake of time. I have committed this sin several times over the years, and I have always paid dearly for it. The story goes like this...

A big test is coming up. A performance is coming up. The deadline for the school paper is nearing. And your students came into class like bats out of hell, with no materials--talking, laughing, carrying on, seemingly oblivious to the deadline that has been hanging over your head and making you lose sleep at night. You are so ticked off at their behavior, but you have to little time to cover the last material, that you just start class, but no one learns anything. You can’t get any of them to settle down; you get angry with them. By the end of class, their assignments are not finished; you are about ready to scream (if you haven’t already), and a day was wasted. They are no more prepared today than they were yesterday.

Just take the time to stop the class, review the procedures and practice the procedure until the

students get it right. The principal might look at you funny for making the students enter your class three times the day before a benchmark test, but at least after the students calm down, they will get to do some of their assignment. Had you not stopped to reteach your procedures, your students would not have gotten any of their assignments' done. **It is always more important to maintain classroom order over teaching content. You cannot effectively teach content without classroom order.**

Never let students talk over you. Listening to you speak is the ultimate form of respect from a student to a teacher. Since you are the teacher, obviously anything you say must be important. You will not be able to teach any of your procedures, rules, directions, or content unless the students are quiet when you have to say something. Make sure in the first weeks of school that you DO NOT TALK unless it is quiet. Practice this using your cues for attention until your students get it right.

Classroom Seating and Grouping

This section contains my perspective on how to create seating charts and conduct groups in your classes. My views and methods may differ from my colleagues, but I truly feel that after a year in my class, my students are able to work individually and in a variety of groups.

It is very important to always have seating charts. Seating charts allow you to take attendance easily, keep students under control, mark important information for each student (e.g. medical problem, Special Ed.) and make your class manageable for a substitute. You should make extra copies of your seating chart and keep them in a folder for your sub in case of an emergency. I create an electronic copy of a blank seating chart on my computer (usually using MS Word or excel) that I can print out as needed whenever I need to make a new seating chart or groups.

On the first day or two of school, I let my students sit wherever they want when they enter my classroom. If I have desks, I make sure that the desks are seated individually, usually in rows. In these two days, I try to get a feeling for those students who should sit by me, and pairs of students who should not sit by each other. Around the third day of school, I make a seating chart for all of my classes. I pass out a notecard to each student when they enter the room on the second or third day. On the front of the notecard they must write their first and last name. On the back of the notecard, they must write and complete these sentences:

- I like to sit _____ because _____.
(front, middle, back, side)
- I cannot sit by _____.
- I like to work with _____.

After I collect the cards, I now know what students must sit in the front to see or hear, which students do not get along, and what pairs of buddies I have in class. Then I can use that knowledge to make a pretty effective seating chart right in the beginning of the school year. When I make a seating chart, I tell the students that I give first priority to students who cannot

see or hear and must be placed in the front of the room. Then I make sure that no students are seated directly by any student they listed in the “I cannot sit by” prompt.

It is very important that you do not sit students by those they list as “I cannot sit by.” *Please do not move a student by someone they “cannot sit by” as a punishment.* You have to realize that, especially for older kids, they have often been with their classmates since kindergarten. By the time they reach high school, you might sit them next to a student who is their ex-boyfriend or girlfriend, a student whom they have fought with or a student who has bullied them. You cannot expect your students to stay relaxed enough to learn in your class if you purposely sit them next to a student that makes them extremely uncomfortable.

I keep these notecards throughout the year in a plastic bag for each period in my teaching podium. Besides keeping these to use for seating charts, I now have a set of non-volunteer cards that I can pull out during instruction to check for understanding.

I always start off my seating individually, and in rows, if I have desks. At the beginning of school, students must learn the rules and procedures in my class. *Students have difficulty focusing when placed in groups right away, especially before you have taught them any of the procedures for group work in your class.*

In my classes, I usually leave the desks individually placed in rows for the year. That way, when the students come into class, I can easily give them the directions and procedures that I need to communicate. Then when I have given the directions and procedures that they will need for the next activity, I allow them to move into partners or groups to complete their activity. At the end of the period, I refocus them by having them move back into their original seat, and we can clean up as necessary.

This method works for me because I think it most closely mirrors what happens in the workforce, and it prepares the students for career readiness. In many private sector jobs, you have your desk or cubicle and your own role within your department, but you work together with many other people to accomplish your job.

Students must be able to communicate with each other when working on a majority of assignments. Rare is the occupation that a person can accomplish his or her job without talking to others. Even computer programmers and engineers, two of the most commonly reputed solitary occupations, must collaborate with each other at times. You cannot expect students to work in your class by themselves everyday, all period long. For one, they do not always have the skills to do this, and secondly, how else will they learn to work with others?

When I talk to many new teachers (and a few veteran teachers with poor classroom control) they often do not want to use groups in their classes because they lose classroom control. I see that most of the time, these teachers fail to teach their students the procedures they want students to use while being in groups. As I said in the procedures section, if you fail to tell your students how they should act while in groups, some students will do what you want, and others will not.

So I teach grouping and grouping procedures gradually. Obviously, at first, I teach students how I want them to behave and act individually. Then my next step is how I want them to work together with a partner. I may select a partner for them (This can be done the night before by looking at their note cards, and then you can ensure everyone has a partner and/or they will not be with someone they cannot deal with.) and have a list of partners that can be put under the document camera, or I may allow them to select their own. I make sure that I explain the procedures of choosing a partner, moving the furniture, completing the assignment, and listening to me once they are in groups. Before they return to their individual seats, I make sure that they know the procedures for moving back and cleaning up.

After partners, my next step is going through my same procedures for groups of three or four and maybe larger groups for test review or class games. (However, make sure that your classes can smoothly transition into partners before you start using larger groups. Do not give them more than they can handle.) Again, you can group students the day before by using notecards or allow student choice. If you take the time to teach procedures for each type of group and assignment, by Winter Break, you should be able to have students move easily into different types of groups pretty effortlessly.

Troubleshooting for Grouping:

- **My students move into groups, but I have groups sitting next to each other that goof around.** Do not be afraid to disband student groups or ask groups to move away from each other. If the problem only exists when students are allowed to choose their own groups, you can have a “Ban List” where certain students are banned from working with each other. You can also print out a blank seating chart, and plan the day before where you would like each group to sit.
- **I have students who forget their group members and/or assignment.** This can happen when students choose their own partners for an assignment that takes several days. Under the document camera, make a list of the student groups or partners, and next to it, record the type of assignment or project they are working on.
- **I want my students to talk to a variety of people in a short amount of time.** I suggest using appointment clocks to facilitate rotations. I have attached an appointment clock on the last page if you need to use it.
- **I want my students to collaborate, but other reasons (e.g. short time, shared classroom) prevent us from moving.** It is important to teach students how to collaborate with those who sit around them in their individual seating assignments. Explain to students how they can ask their neighbors for help and how they can help their neighbor (not giving their neighbor their paper to copy). Show students what kinds of questions are appropriate to ask. You can also try a “One, two, teacher is three” activity where they must ask two neighbors if they have a question or need help before they ask the teacher.

- **Larger groups get out of control and/or some students do not participate.** Assign group roles such as time-keeper, behavior manager, drawer, writer, supply manager, etc. to each member of a large group so that each person has a portion of the assignment to work on. You can also require that each group member turn in their own assignment or worksheet—even though they are allowed to work together. At the end of the group assignment, you can also ask each group member to anonymously evaluate the members of their group. If two or more group members report that a student did nothing, that student can receive a lower grade.
- **Groups copy other groups' assignments.** Make sure that you tell students that as soon as their group is done, they must turn in their assignment to you. Any group work found on another group's desk will count as zeros for both groups.

Further Reading

This classroom management guide is not the final authority on all things classroom management. I suggest this further reading throughout the year as you work through your first years of teaching.

- *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook--What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing.* (2007). Perry, Bruce and Szalavitz, Maria. ISBN 0465056539
- *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered.* (2011). Perry, Bruce and Szalavitz, Maria. ISBN 0061656798
- *Conscious Classroom Management: Unlocking the Secrets of Great Teaching.* (2004). Smith, Rick. ISBN 0979635500

Appointment Clock

*Keep a copy of your appointment clock in your folder at ALL TIMES!!!

12:00

Name: _____

Name: _____

9:00

3:00

Name: _____

Name: _____

6:00