Classroom Community Culture for Learning

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Only in Hollywood visions of school does classroom chaos and blatant teacher disrespect dissolve and turn to loving relations based upon mutual positive regard. Looking back at a movie such as *To Sir with Love* and continuing up to the more recent film *Freedom Writers,* we view gross mismatches of teacher-cultures of control versus the post-modern youth culture that stereotypically appears unmanageable, oppositional, and disrespectful. As these scripts go, the 30 minutes of agony teachers such as *Freedom Writers'* Erin Gruwell endure are typically followed by 90 minutes of resolution and teaching bliss. Students are transformed, and lessons are learned. Just do as Gruwell does, and you'll have students metaphorically eating out of your hand. What was so hard to understand about that?

The stereotypical script of the teacher movie and its conflict of students versus teacher makes

for a good plotline, but the reality of today's classroom is missing. Our students are not paid actors, and we, unfortunately, are not pulling in seven digits for our performances. As teacher-viewers, we're always in awe of the quick transformations the movies bring to kids who have been at war with systems more invested in forcing compliance and control than in promoting liberation and individual free expression of thought, life-style or action! The conflict for professional educators is that we are real teachers who have taught in actual schools, not virtual ones! Our problem is real. If we don't control our students properly, we're seen as loose, anti-disciplinarians, and we are jeopardizing the authority of the other teachers in our building. If we let our students "have fun" or appear to have fun, they will expect that in every class. How will other teachers view us when their students say, "Mr/s. . . . doesn't make us raise our hands if we want to comment in class"? Many traditional teachers equate rigid, regimented adherence to rules regarding turn-taking with authority. Their every move seems to communicate, "I'm in control here!" For you, the pre-service teacher, don't be fooled by Hollywood scripts. The reality of the classroom for many teachers and students is that the climax of the story is a tragedy, not a romance.

Classroom management

A term to describe discipline and classroom culture features.

Embedded in real scenarios of **classroom management** are issues related to authority, power, control, and leadership. Without question, the teacher is vested with authority as the instructional leader in the classroom. However, critical constructivists view the role of the teacher/instructional leader in a different light than is reflected by the traditional control and authority models. For critical constructivists, the emphasis is on building a classroom community culture. To show how these models differ, let us first examine some of the traditional classroom management approaches.

Traditional Models

Teacher centered

The teacher is the director of all activities in the room.

In our many years of teaching experience, we have seen the promotion of a wide array of techniques touted to promote classroom management. The major focus of these techniques is **teacher centered**; the focus is on what the teacher does to the classroom environment in order to effect the desired behavior in the students. This is a good example of technical rationality (Gallagher, 2003). These techniques may be thought to have some merit in that they can produce the desired behavior in students (Marzano, 2007), and there is clear evidence to reinforce the importance of having clear rules and expectations (Stage & Quiroz, 1997). Teachers reinforce this notion as they witness students learning to conform and to follow directions (Evertson & Neal, 2006). An emphasis on reward for compliant behavior and punishment for infractions is the general mode. As in authoritarian parenting styles, the teacher has complete authority over students. Control and domination is often the cardinal rule in many traditionally structured classrooms.

Most teachers experiment with the practices of classroom management until they find a formula that brings them success. And the winning of control is reinforced in the majority of cases. The goal from this perspective is the same regardless of your stance concerning ethics or social justice: maintaining control of the classroom. However, the moral and ethical issues under-girding the rationale for classroom control play a significant role in the professional's practice. If your reason for control is to mask poor teaching and to quell the rebelliousness spurred by boredom and the concomitant anger your students feel toward you, no classroom management system will work effectively or be justifiable in the eyes of students. Conversely, if you understand that a certain amount of order will provide an environment where you can teach and your curriculum and process are in sync with student interest and ability, that is the best classroom man-

agement system and the need to deal with student misbehavior is only rarely needed.

Although it is hard to imagine in our present time, within the real world of the public schools corporal punishment is still legal in 28 states. This antiquated form of punishing students, paddling them on their buttocks with a wooden object, is still permissible under statute of law in the majority of states. Obviously, corporal punishment should never be invoked; however, this form of punishment is mentioned to give you, the student of educational psychology, some foundational knowledge of the crude beginnings of managing student behavior. Using fear and physical domination to control behavior is not only primitive, it is psychologically and physically damaging of students. These laws are criminal, and they need to be stricken from educational statutes, as was done in Pennsylvania during the fall of 2005.

Even in states where corporal punishment is not outlawed, most school districts have sanctions against this form of punishment. However, a behavior that is more apt to be found is psychological belittling or verbal expressions of disrespect of students. The National Educators Association (NEA) has a code of ethics that pre-service teachers need to study and all teachers need to adhere to. One of the principles of ethical behavior is the commitment to students. It reads: Teachers "shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement" (http://www.nea.org/aboutnea/code.html).

Effective Learning Environments

Effective learning environments are ones that are pro-social and positively reflect a respect for both the participants and the process of education. As we have emphasized earlier in the works by Beachum and McCray and by Duncan-Andrade, harmony is achieved when there is an acceptance of the students by the teacher and mutual positive regard for the teacher by the students. Teacher leadership and authority are enhanced by the mutually respectful

culture of the classroom (Marzano, 2007). This includes both the positive and negative aspects of culture the students represent and the often gnarly and cacophonous chorus of complaints, criticisms, and commentary that attend their lives. Despite the marketing of *Teen* magazine, the experience of adolescence is not an endless series of glorious encounters with clothing and cosmetics! Adolescence is a time of tremendous growth and personal discovery. Much of this experience is dramatically portrayed within the harsh reality of teenage crisis and conflict.

The concept of positive mutual regard has been a mainstay of humanistic psychology since Carl Rogers coined the term in the early 1950s. Rogers espoused a profound belief in the power of individuals to adapt and become themselves. On valuing the worth and dignity of each person, Rogers said, "The primary point of importance . . . is the attitude held by the counselor (read: teacher) toward the worth and significance of the individual" (1951, p. 20). These words still resonate with constructivist educators. What has changed is the time and situation students and teachers must confront. Building a safe space for student learning based upon this attitude of mutual positive regard is the art of an excellent teacher.

Traditional classroom management approaches have also focused on the relationship between effective teaching practices and the lack of behavioral infractions by students. In contrast, we present the concept of **learning-centered** environments where students share in the responsibility for learning and building community in the classroom (Evertson & Neal, 2006). The major focus from this perspective, is that students construct meaning in social environments. Students are engaged in meaningful, productive activities with others, and they share authority and responsibility with teachers.

We need to be clear that in a learning-centered classroom the teacher never abdicates authority or responsibility for the class process or content;

Learning-centered

Classrooms where students are constructing meaning and knowledge.

the teacher "still manages the class in the sense of establishing the environment and creating learning opportunities for students" (Evertson & Neal, 2006, p. 11). However, in this environment the students have responsibility as well. In the day-to-day life in these classrooms, student voices are respected and taken seriously. Through the modeling of the teachers in this environment students learn respect for others, valuing of others, and a more democratic working out of problems. This is akin to what is termed authoritative style, akin to the parenting style of the same name.

Building a Classroom Culture

In a climate of respect and responsibility students are much less likely to be motivated to disrupt or misbehave. Classroom management systems often suggest that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Following the advice of author Kolencik, by accepting and effectively dealing with feelings, many behavioral infractions can be avoided.

In the development of the best classroom management system, one of the first foci the teacher will address is the rules and procedures of the classroom. Expert classroom manager, Harry Wong, thinks that training students in the procedures and rules of the classroom is the most important aspect of making an effective learning environment. Wong has made a fortune promoting his system of procedural routines and rules governing classroom behaviors. From greeting the students at the door with a handshake and a "good morning" salutation to the commencement of an immediate task for the student's engagement, every bit of the student's experience is orchestrated. Wong and Wong (1997) leave no room for fooling around! Having sold 3,000,000 copies of their book, *The First Days of School,* we'd say there is a lot of demand for a bomb-proof system.

One critique of Wong's system is that it is too regimented, and there is little room for individual deviation from the procedures or control. Students

who grow up experiencing such excessive control tend to lack individual initiative and make good followers. If the leadership is good, this may not be problematic. However, when the leaders are suspect, good followers are just as much a part of the problem.

Rules need to be a part of every classroom, and the developmental needs of each grade will require slightly different interpretations of the same principles. A major theme of critical constructivism is to build respect for the diverse cultural community within each classroom and to encourage the development of social consciousness for living in a democratic society. Leadership is the gift that good teachers model for their students. In a learning-centered classroom students are considered capable and competent to assist the teacher in providing leadership and formulating classroom rules. As they mature, our students have gained experience with classroom living, and we believe they often have a very good understanding of what works and what doesn't. Teachers need to take the time to reflect on their students' beliefs about good classroom practices and to continually re-examine their own beliefs on what rules support effective practice.

Rules need to be part of the life of the classroom from the beginning of the year or semester. Establishing them early is time well spent in helping the students get acclimated to the classroom. Waiting until unhelpful instances occur takes the rules out of the community-building category and makes it appear as a kind of negative disciplinary action. The best policy is to state rules in a positive voice and to avoid negative wording. "Treat others with respect" is more effective than "no put downs." Say what you want, not what you don't want.

Consistency is an important aspect of rules becoming a support in the classroom atmosphere. Implementing rules and the reinforcing procedures require constant attention. Students figure out very quickly if the classroom rules are merely bulletin

board decorations or if they really are serious procedures needing their recognition and cooperation.

Enforcement of the rules also requires delicate negotiation. Using the authority as the teacher, consequences for rule violations need to be appropriate and never excessive. Excessive use of punishment can lead to the demise of the teacher's authority. Fairness is the rule, and understatement of power use is preferable to over-application. The over-application of punishment could be an act of hegemony; the excessive exertion of power and control over a weaker person or subject. Hegemony requires the subjugated to give the power to the person in control or the subjugator. This is not the relationship a teacher wishes to have over students. Hegemony is a misuse of power through subjugation of subordinates, and it debilitates the students' sense of personal agency and control over their own behavior.

Before doling out harsh consequences and/or punishments for misbehavior, the teacher is advised to seek alternative methods for correcting the behavior. Giving the students a chance to self-monitor their behavior is better than relying on the teacher to change the students' actions. Sometimes a cue, "What are we supposed to be doing right now?," is sufficient to redirect a student. Perhaps praising a proximal student for good behavior can stimulate reciprocal positive behavior. Telling the student in a clear voice to stop doing the misdeed and start doing the correct action is very effective. The last action to take is the consequence stage. It should be clear when consequences are meted out that every opportunity to self-correct had been attempted. We work for the successful inclusion of every student.

Dreikurs' Logical Consequences

One of our criticisms of many behavior management systems is the absurdity of their logic. Sometimes the consequences for student misbehavior reflect a lack of thoughtfulness. For example, the

Reinforcer

Any behavior or action that causes a behavior to be maintained.

consequence of smoking in school is often suspension or permanent removal such as expulsion. Smoking is (or can lead to) an addiction, and controlling one's urge to smoke often requires tremendous self-discipline. Self-discipline is not gained when one is sent home for a day or two or more. When students are away from school, they can smoke whenever they want. Behavioral psychologists would call this a positive **reinforcer**, because the suspension has the effect of supporting or continuing the behavior, not extinguishing or ending it. Reinforcers are consequences of behavior that perpetuate or support the continuance of the behavior. Teachers often confuse the meaning of this technical term of behavioral psychology. Just because we assume the act we do is a punishment for the child, for example, sending the child out of our room, the child may like to be removed, and he will continue his misbehavior when he returns to class to be reinforced yet again by being forced to leave. The test of reinforcers is to see if they cause repetition of the behavior. If the behavior is maintained or increases, it has been reinforced. Simple as this appears on the surface, the actual implementation of a behavior modification plan is complex and challenging.

Because behavioral psychology is highly clinical, training in its application is rigorous. Despite its technical difficulty, it has viable applications within some settings; for example it is often used in special education as teachers work with students who have severe mental and psychological issues such as autism, emotional and mental disabilities. Because of the highly technical nature of behavioral psychology, implementation of these techniques requires extensive training before they can be an effective tool for teachers. As a result, the techniques of behavioral psychology are better used in conjunction with cognitively based psychological principles such as the system Rudolph Dreikurs (1982) developed.

Rudolph Dreikurs (1982) proposed that students misbehave to meet the needs of one of four mistaken goals: attention, power, revenge, or inade-

quacy. By understanding the reason for the child's misbehavior, the teacher can redirect the child to accomplish his or her real goal of being accepted and or loved by others. According to Dreikurs, if the students cannot meet their goals in a positive manner, they will revert to misbehavior to avenge or correct the denial of that acceptance.

Dreikurs and other cognitive and behavioral psychologists made a major contribution to the processes of classroom management in the discovery of the use of logical consequences. The philosophic foundation of this approach is that children need to learn how to behave appropriately, and that logical consequences can be a better teacher than the use of *aversive punishment.* Logical consequences have to do with what is happening now. Punishment deals with the past. To go back to the example of our smoker, what would be a logical consequence of smoking in school? There does not have to be one answer. The child can help to develop a relationship between what was done and what needs to happen to restore order or harmony. Possible consequences could be counseling with the school nurse on the effects of smoking. Watching a film on the relationship of smoking to disease. Joining a stop smoking group with the school counselor. Coming to a special Saturday school session where students visited the cancer ward at the hospital and visited patients to provide company.

The goal of logical consequences is to teach corrective actions. The tone of the process is collaborative, not harsh and stimulated by anger or rejection. Many students lack understanding of social conventions. They do not know the right thing to do. This is not necessarily their fault. Over the years we have witnessed many forms of student misbehavior, and depending on the developmental level of the student, each misbehavior may have a different communicative intent ranging from no message at all to a very significant act. For example, a first grader may raise a middle finger to another student in "the" gesticulation of disrespect. However, when queried by the principal about the event, the child

may not know what that gesticulation means, and the reason they committed the act was imitation of an older sibling's actions. The same behavior in a junior high student may be conducted to make a joke or just to tease another student. The communicative intent was not to express anger or rage but to take a risk and show some bravado. Last, the finger may be used by a high school student as a clear message of contempt. The message is, "I'm angry and this is what you can do!" The logical consequence for the specific behavior needs to address the communicative intent in order to be an effective agent of behavior change. The student needs to cognitively connect behavior to the consequence to learn to adjust and find a more appropriate response.

The system of logical consequences makes tremendous sense for adults, but what about the children it is supposed to affect? Education critic Alfie Kohn (1999) suggests that this process may actually make more sense to the adults than to the children. Children may just see the logical consequence as a thinly disguised punishment. They are not happy to say, "I'm sorry," when in fact they are not sorry at all. Developing compassion is not always an easy or straight-forward process. Often the hurt that killed the compassion is deeper than classroom teachers' capacity or skill to address in a brief intervention.

Critical Constructivist Model: A Culture of Mutual Enhancement

Critical constructivists base their classroom community culture on the egalitarian principles of mutual enhancement (Miller, 2003) and social justice (Kincheloe, 2005). Mutual enhancement is a feminist concept, and within critical constructivists' classrooms it means that both the teacher and the students receive benefit from the interactive processes of teaching and learning. Developed by Jean Miller of the Wellesley Center for Women, mutual enhancement does not imply that the teacher gives up any of their authority or leadership, as we said above. Rather mutual enhancement means that there is an air of equanimity and universal respect

that imbues the classroom culture. In an analogy to therapy, both the client and the therapist benefit from the interaction. Growth occurs for both individuals. In the classroom, learning and growth occur for both the students and the teacher. To differentiate between traditional forms of top-down control and domination, it is more accurate to identify critical constructivist educational leadership as creating a classroom community culture.

A classroom community culture is a set of rules and understandings that are specific to the individuals included in the group and reflective of the values and identities of the world these individuals inhabit. A perfect metaphor for understanding this issue is imbedded in the Ebonics debate. Ebonics, derived from the words "ebony" and "phonics," is a specific language of the urban African American community; it reflects members' situated experience. This language is strongly tied to identity and membership pride. The critical constructivist understands and accepts Ebonics as a communicative tool and includes these neologisms along with other attributes of the families or neighborhood within the classroom community culture. In this context, the teacher is embracing the diversity of the students and affirming the values of those individuals in a truly democratic praxis of the classroom.

Mutual enhancement applies to classroom community culture as it extends to the social atmosphere within the classroom. In a classroom based upon the principles of mutual enhancement, a spirit of shared social responsibilities allows for inclusion and equality. These classrooms develop dispositions of openness to diversity and explorations of other identities. Learning activities promote mixing it up and sparking conversations about differences and similarities.

Mutual enhancement allows for the growth of one's self and promotes the acceptance of others. This is especially meaningful when the "other" is comprised of those who have been marginalized because of minority identifications and eco-

nomic disparities. Mutual enhancement dovetails with critical constructivist philosophy and practice as a further application of *social justice* initiatives. Social justice takes on many meanings in the modern schools, but among the most important is the legitimate recognition of the diversity distributed within the school. Legitimizing diversity is opposed to token, simplistic cinquo do mayo trivializations. One-day food festivals are not examples of socially just pedagogy (Banks, 2006). Valid programs to promote social justice in the classroom and on the campus provide ubiquitous benefit to the school community. Social justice in school means many important things to groups intimate with experiences of oppression and persecution. For example, Gay/lesbian/bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) youth experience horrific persecution in the public school (Gray, 2004). Although the vast majority of today's students on public school and college campuses have gained the knowledge to radically reduce racist attitudes and behavior, we continue to witness overt forms of anti-gay behaviors in and across campuses. Continuing efforts to build a culture of complete acceptance of all diversity is the goal of social justice educators.

Of utmost concern to critical constructivist educators is the implementation of policies to promote social justice in both the classroom and in the community. Working to promote social justice in your classroom is negated within a school where the conversation of social justice gets no air time. When school administrators ignore disproportionate numbers of suspension or expulsion among specific targeted groups, their actions may reflect **institutionalized racism**. Against a backdrop of bigotry, the efforts you make in your classroom will work to expose the larger problems, but they may not come close to meeting your needs to achieve a socially just culture for your students.

The entire school must buy in to promoting socially just education and social culture. We are convinced that if proper attention to issues of

Institutionalized racism

Rules, laws or actions that unfairly affect a specific population.

social justice were in place at Littleton, Colorado's Columbine High School, the persecution of two students (whom we refuse to recognize by name) would not have been allowed nor would it have escalated to their hate-based killing of faculty and students. On dynamic, rapidly changing campuses across this country, critical constructivist educators are continually taking the pulse of their student body and reinventing their responses to revolutionize the process (Kincheloe, 2005).

Rules to Live by . . .

Certainly rules and procedures are a natural part of any group experience, and the classroom is no different as a social group. Rules and procedures need to mirror the philosophies of mutual enhancement and social justice. With any system of rules, those responsible for the rule adoption must support the goals of the governing system. There must be buy-in by all the members of the community. These rules are not just window-dressing or pseudo symbols of our beliefs. The rules exemplify our core beliefs, and what could be considered the culture's **Tao**.

Tao

An Eastern philosophy characterized by values of acceptance and awareness.

The best rule systems are the simplest to learn; however, they may not be the easiest to implement. In our classroom, we choose just two rules. The first is a "Respect" rule. This means that everyone is treated with respect within the classroom, and no one is devalued for any reason. This is in concert with the concept of mutual enhancement. In a respect-governed classroom, there is no hegemony or subjugation of anyone. The goals of gaining knowledge and learning pro-social behaviors are clearly evident.

Implementing the respect rule requires significant reconceptualizing of social relations for many students. Coming from homes and neighborhoods where "doing the dozens" is the game: yo mama. Leaving this put-down interaction out of the classroom needs to be viewed as positive and additive, not negative or rejecting. Although this may seem to contradict the acceptance of community culture,

that is too reductive an explanation. The dozens is a game to build strength and test resolve. Putting someone down with clever word play continues until the loser reveals vulnerability and exposes emotion. The goal is stay strong: don't give in or show hurt.

We agree with the goal of building strength. However, the strength needs to flow from positive, collaborative contributions, not competitive and destructive gaming. The point of the dozens is to stand up to the hegemony of stereotypic representations of poverty, racism, and other put downs. We contribute that the paradox of refuting the process by handing double doses of disrespect to one's classmate or schoolmate may reveal a validation of those derogatory remarks when the loser succumbs to the pain. As Jeff Duncan-Andrade argues about Hip-Hop culture in "Best Friend/Worst Enemy," elements of the anger and alienation youth experience can be used a positive force and deliver energy to transform the rage into something Freire would call love.

Another rule of our classroom is confidentiality; everything that is said in the classroom is potentially sensitive and personal information, and what is said in the classroom needs to stay in the classroom. Therefore, if a personal conversation is going on and a student mentions her parent's divorce (perhaps as it relates to the plot of a novel or theme of a poem), that student does not need to fear that the entire school will be discussing her personal life after school. This rule is hard to monitor, but it pays big dividends for supporting the development of trust within the classroom. Students know when they are being talked about, and they resent gossip just as much as any adult. Protecting confidentiality is a cornerstone of respecting the individual and his or her privileged information.

Reducing Hate Crimes and Violence in the School and Community

We live in the most violent society in the industrialized world. Since 9/11, there have been over 100,000 murders committed in America (Herbert, 2007).

Sadly, Americans are so inured by the violence that news of such outrageous violence is more often met with resignation and denial than more appropriate emotions like repulsion. Violence is ubiquitously enmeshed in our culture's movies, television, and entertainments (paint ball, smack-downs, and gang initiations). Movies such as *Really Bad Things* and *Pulp Fiction* make parodies of the violence through grotesque overuse, but these "jokes" are more reflective of the malaise in our culture than they are successful strokes of sarcasm. Cornel West (1995) accurately sums this up saying, "Post-modern culture is more and more a market culture dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness" (p. 559).

None of American violence is spared on our children. Schools are often sites of violence, and this is too common news.

> Violence in America is too frequently appearing in schoolyards. . . . According to a Justice Department report on juvenile justice and delinquency, "American kids are the most violent. Teenagers have 'alarmingly high' rates of violence compared with those of youths in other nations, a comparison that also holds for adult crime rates. An American teenager is ten times more likely to commit murder than a Canadian teenager" (Hinds, 2000, p. 3) (Goodman, 2004, p. 5)

The first job of the critical constructivist educator is to create a culture where students are safe to learn. Accomplishing this feat is the single most critical aspect of the school community, and we do not want to imply that this is anything shy of huge. Making a safe school is a long-term project, and it requires the buy-in of all of the community's citizens. Everyone must not only see the value in maintaining safety and decorum but the need to commit to the daily maintenance of the values that can support harmony.

One of our favorite slogans from the sixties admonished, "If you want peace, then support justice!" The values of social justice undergird safe schools. Critical constructivist schools are organizations that fairly represent all of the constituents of

the community. Staff represent the student body in cultural identity and shared understandings. Realia and other school artifacts demonstrate the contributions of students, staff, and parents. As you walk through these schools, you will see yourself represented in the people and things in evidence.

Safety is also protected by participation. The engagement of all of the members of the community in the preservation of the community values speaks louder than words. Walking the talk of critical constructivism is accomplished by participating in active conversations about racism, class, and sexual identities. From "Teaching Tolerance" to others of the myriad social justice initiatives available through the National Association of Multicultural Educators (N.A.M.E. org), the Southern Poverty Law Center (teachingtolerance.org), or the Tolerance Museum, there are many ways to revive the movement to provide social justice programs in your school.

Creating a classroom community culture with affirming values can diminish the need for safety and discipline concerns. However, teaching will always require vigilance and the need to courageously respond to the demands of challenging situations. Prevention and intervention programs, police and metal detectors, dogs and security cameras will remain in many of our schools, but these things cannot replace the courage it takes to personally confront violent acts and other criminal behaviors. Teachers practice their profession within real communities, and as we work to build a new world, we still confront violent vestiges of our dark side. By applying critical constructivist social justice praxis, we are moving toward a harmonious and idealized reinvention of ourselves. Following Freire (1970), "To teach is to be a prisoner of hope" (p. 91). The teacher in each of us hopes that you are excited to take up this challenge to reinvent our schools and the communities they serve.

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