

Twenty-five Tips for Classroom Management

How we set up classroom experiences is crucial to the success of our programs. The ways in which we negotiate for power and control when we first meet our students and when we work with them throughout the year will have a lasting effect. If power is given slowly to the students as they come to think of the work in the classroom as their own, any power struggles within a classroom can be minimized.

Teaching and classroom management are intertwined. How we set up a classroom and then manage the people, materials, space, and technology is all part of the teaching/learning dynamic. Classroom management is not separate from teaching, but part of the same experience.

Here are 25 simple classroom management tips that I have gleaned from my teaching. Some echo important ideas presented in Chapters 1 and 2. All reflect the need to anchor three attributes in our classrooms: security, affirmation, and control. You may find several tips that are new or especially useful to you.

1. Begin with high expectations for everyone in the room. Because I enter a classroom knowing that my lesson will change as soon as I meet the students, I try to remain hopeful and exuberant. By my manner, I let students know that I have high expectations for myself and that I expect their full attention to our task.

2. Allow for spontaneity. Treat your agenda as flexible and allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Be prepared to negotiate. If the students see you as rigid and unwilling to discuss options and choices in the task before them, they sometimes shut down and get discouraged. You don't need to give away everything—but be prepared to listen to their suggestions.

3. Check how inclusive you are. Be as inclusive as possible. Check to see if you are asking for the same volunteers to answer questions or help you with work. Make sure that you look around the room and find the student whom you have not connected with in a while. Be sure to ask that person to help you.

4. Remember, it's not about you. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes, “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). Students do not set out to ruin a lesson. Sometimes, things are going on in their lives that sap them of energy just when you need it. Try not to take student responses personally.

5. Let students know your plan. Give them an overview. Let them have some choice. Show them that you know what you are doing. Letting students in on the plan and offering an array of choices is often the best way to get them on your side. As you talk about the task or the project, show your enthusiasm and display your belief in their ability to do well.

6. Keep students at the centre. Try as much as possible to work with what students are giving you. Work from where they are—with their prior knowledge, with their capacity to work together, and with their enthusiasm for certain topics and ideas.

7. Be aware of students' developmental needs. Some things are just not going to work; some tasks are beyond your students' developmental stage. Revisit some of the literature on child and adolescent development. Perhaps, the task you have set is too abstract; perhaps, the requirements need to be adjusted.

As an excellent teacher, I must not be afraid to move out of my centre, and meet the children where *they* are.

—Dorothy Heathcote

8. Make rewards intrinsic. When some students are openly rewarded for good work, others feel disappointed and incompetent. If only some students receive tangible rewards, such as candy or an invitation to the pizza lunch, resentment from others in the class will fester and lead to some kinds of dysfunction. The reward should be the work itself.

9. Limit competition. Praise the group publicly, but praise and give individuals positive reinforcement privately. I find it works best to pull people aside and tell them how wonderful their work was rather than say it publicly. The same practice applies to criticism.

10. Don't wait to have everyone's attention before you begin. I used to wait, but now I begin on time. I focus on crafting as interesting a beginning to my lesson as possible so that students are sometimes intrigued, other times surprised, and will immediately settle down to listen and work.

11. Vary your groupings. Mix up the groups as much as you can so that students have opportunities to work with everyone in the room. Make sure you do individual, partner, small-group, and large-group work.

12. Distribute materials after the directions. If students are receiving materials, they are not listening. Talk first to get everyone's attention. When you feel that students have a moderate sense of what you are asking them to do or wanting them to know, hand out the materials they will need. There is always a flurry of activity. You may not have enough handouts or the handouts may get mixed up as they go around the classroom. So, distribute after you speak, maybe before you speak—but never during.

13. Stop, look, and listen. Listen carefully all the time to see who is on task, who is involved, and who has withdrawn from the conversation. I insist that my students listen to me. This simple, basic rule should be established at the beginning of the year: "When I talk, you don't."

14. Establish signals. You can dim the lights, hit a drum, use a chant ... there are many possible signals. Having a signal that establishes silence quickly is crucial if you are going to do the kind of active, engaging work that I suggest. Ask for advice from your students about how you can make the signals work effectively.

15. Say "When I say go" James Coulter, of the Toronto District School Board, taught me a great classroom management technique, "When I say go ...?" You say the phrase and then add the appropriate direction—you may pick up your pens, get into groups, hand out the materials, talk with one another. This simple phrase allows everyone to be ready to do what he or she has to do when they need to do it. It also reinforces that the teacher is the captain of the ship and keeps everyone safe and on task.

16. Face the space—organize the classroom seating. If students have to move desks aside to gain space to be active, negotiate with them ahead of time. "I am worried about the noise that we might make when we move the furniture. I don't want to disrupt other classes. Do you think that we could lift the desks and chairs to make the least amount of noise? It would also help if we did not talk as we move about. How else might we do this quickly, with minimal disruption?"

17. Make smooth transitions from one activity to another. If you have worked hard to establish a mood in the classroom by reading a story, you don't want to disrupt this mood by then getting the students into groups. A better idea is to get students into groups before you read the story. If you are worried that they won't pay attention, then insist that they sit facing only you; when the read-

ing is finished, they can easily turn to their group members or partners.

18. Work the room. Once you have set the students their task, spend time with each group listening in on what they are saying, planning, and negotiating. Initially, you might take a few minutes to let them get on with what they are supposed to do, but your job is to be there for them—not overpowering them, but making suggestions, listening for and supporting their ideas, and monitoring the group process.

19. Modulate your voice. Voice modulation is an essential part of good teaching. When we read aloud to students, we modulate our voices to make the reading interesting. The same principle applies to directions. Sometimes, to get students' attention, it works to speak really softly; other times, to emphasize the importance of what they are learning, you might use a louder, more dramatic voice. Your voice can imbue the task with significance.

20. Take time to wait. I watch my student teachers make a great effort to master this as they learn how to teach. I struggle, too, with this important classroom management skill, often moving on before I should. I must stress, however, that when I have deliberately waited for students to think and to compose their thoughts before they answer, the effort has paid off. Timing is everything in teaching—go quickly some times, more slowly at others. As you gain experience, you will get it right.

21. Chunk information. This classroom management strategy is really important. We often give students too much information at one time. If we chunk it, students can digest the bits, act on them, and wait for more directions. Here is an example: (1) Make sure that you each have a pencil or a highlighter; (2) Get into your groups from yesterday and settle around a table; (3) In a few minutes, I am going to hand out a text that I would like you to read silently; (4) I am going to distribute it now; (5) You can begin reading when you receive it; (6) When you have finished reading the selection, I would like you to underline the words and phrases that you found interesting and want to know more about; (7) In your groups, discuss the words and phrases together. Consider these questions....; (8) Appoint a spokesperson to make jot notes on what you are saying; (9) In a few minutes, we will have a group discussion. Make sure that your spokesperson can summarize your group discussion; (10) Let's begin our class discussion.

22. Go group by group by group. I have a vivid memory of watching one of my student teachers with a Grade 4 class. The students had painted magnificent snow scenes that were piled carefully in the corner of the classroom. Not having gauged the excitement of the class, the student teacher told them to pick up their paintings. The students ran to the paintings and began grabbing some and accidentally tearing others. The host teacher intervened, but my student teacher was devastated. She learned a valuable lesson, though: to go group by group.

23. Stand by your student. I am often asked, "What do you do about the kid who is deliberately sabotaging the lesson?" It seems simple, but an effective strategy that nearly always works is to stand beside the student. Often, such students are seeking attention. By standing beside them as you give instructions and looking them in the eye, you take away some of their power in the classroom. Sometimes, I put my hand on the back of their chairs, too. I have used this technique for years, having learned it from a guidance workshop attended long ago.

24. Let students talk to partners. A few years ago, I watched R. H. Thomson conduct a workshop on Shakespeare with a Grade 11 class in an auditorium in a Toronto high school. He was working with another actor demonstrating tech-

For beginning teachers, such experiences happen a lot. When planning your lesson, think these transition bits through and write notes about the best way to ensure that the lesson will run smoothly.

niques for uncovering the meaning in texts. The students were mesmerized by what he was doing and saying, but whenever he asked a question, there would be silence and embarrassment. On a break, the famous Canadian actor asked my advice for involving the students more, so I suggested my tried and true strategy—continuing to ask the questions, but having students talk to partners about the answers first. When the students have a chance to try their ideas out loud in this way, they gain more confidence about speaking in front of a group. Thomson adopted this approach, and the class became far more involved.

I also use this strategy when I have a class full of students with their hands up, all having something they want to contribute to the discussion. I stop and have the students talk to partners. They then have an opportunity to be heard and their frustration level diminishes.

25. End lessons artfully. There is never enough time to teach—but there should always be artistry to it. Beginnings should be intriguing, endings uplifting. If you work with these two ideas, you need to plan carefully and be organized. You might keep notes near you (as I do) to remind you of all of the organizational tasks that need to be done before the end of the lesson. These might include getting two volunteers to collect the response sheets, leaving 10 minutes at the end to put away the art materials and rearrange the desks for the next class and reviewing the assignment due next week and answering any questions that the students have. Get the organizational things done and leave time to reassemble the class as a group.

Take this time to build a community of learners. Give your students a collective pat on the back, nurture a vision of what lies ahead, and create excitement about what is to come. You can summarize what they have done so far, praise them for their efforts, or remind them of how they are going to apply this new learning to the next task. You could also read them a poem or a quotation that sends them on their way feeling good about themselves as learners. I do not always end my classes successfully—life in classrooms is often turbulent and filled with unexpected interruptions. I find, however, if I plan for closure that is unhurried and uplifting, the students remember what was said and we can start from there when we meet again.

Not all of these strategies will work all of the time, but they are worth implementing, especially as you get students up on their feet working with texts. As you work more and more in this way, your techniques will expand, and along with careful, but flexible planning, you will be better able to help your students make the leap into literacy.