Positive, Not Punitive, Classroom-Management Tips

This article is adapted from Larry’s new book, Self-Driven Learning: Teaching Strategies for Student Motivation.

Let’s start with a question I’ve been asked on more than one occasion.

"I know my content and like my students, but sometimes it's hard to get them under control so I can teach my lesson. What tips for classroom management can you give me?"

My general answer is that you can never have too many positive, not punitive, classroom management strategies in your toolbox.

Obviously, there are serious student transgressions, including violence, where some kind of punishment is an appropriate response. However, in many other instances, punishment may work only temporarily, may not work at all, or may only make the problem worse. Research suggests that punishment often primarily teaches the student that he or she just has to be more careful next time to avoid getting caught.

Public versus Private Relationship

Community organizers try to help people understand the difference between public and private relationships (I was an organizer for 19 years prior to becoming a teacher). Often, those in power will try to blur that division when it suits their purposes (for example, politicians kissing babies).

Here is another example: I have spent time over the years working with many organizations, including religious congregations, organizing for community improvements. The political decision makers with whom we would have to negotiate for those neighborhood changes were sometimes members of those congregations, and they would often try to privately influence pastors or congregation leaders to take a different public position. The religious leaders, in turn, would point out that when it came time to participating in public life, it was a public relationship and public dialogue -- and when it came time to a personal issue, it was a private relationship and a private dialogue. In public life, the relationship was conditional, based on negotiation and reciprocity. In private life, the relationship was often based on love and friendship. This distinction was particularly important to demonstrate in public settings.

And we carried this distinction over to how members needed to act in the context of the organization -- at our meetings, with the media, and whenever they were in the public eye.

I apply this concept in the classroom by helping students understand the difference between public behavior and private behavior. When students are in the classroom, it is
a public space with certain expectations. One small example is a student shouting out "I'm bored" or some other inappropriate comment.

One possible response to that kind of remark is a sharp admonishment from the teacher. Instead, though, what I generally do, either right then or at the next available opportunity, is to go over the student, put my arm around his or her shoulders, and have this kind of quick dialogue, with a smile:

Me: "Johnny, is it okay for you to think what you said?"
Johnny: "Yes."
Me: "Johnny, is it okay for you to tell your friends after class what you just said?"
Johnny: "Yes."
Me: "Johnny, is it okay for you to say what you just said out loud in the classroom?"
Johnny: "No."

And with both of us smiling, it's over.

I sometimes will have done it enough times with a student that when I go over, he or she will recite all of the lines. Notice that the dialogue leads with what students can do, instead of what they can't.

These kinds of inappropriate comments seem to decrease as the school year goes on, because at least some students gain a greater understanding of the differences between public and private, an understanding that should serve them well for years to come.

"What Would Be the Long-Term Effect of Doing That?"

Educator and positive classroom management consultant Marvin Marshall recommends a simple strategy of asking a disruptive student a simple question, either in the moment or afterward: "What would be the long-term effect of doing that?" As he suggests, asking can be far more effective than telling.

Alternatives to Collective Punishment

I suspect many teachers have had an experience like this:

A paper airplane, ball of paper, or pencil flies through the air, or somebody makes an obnoxious noise. The object is probably aimed at another student, and it may or may not hit the intended target. The noise is just meant to be funny.

You can tell the general area it came from, but you don't really know who the culprit is. It's frustrating because that kind of behavior does not contribute to a learning community.

What do you do?
It's not uncommon for teachers to first yell something like, "Who threw it?" No one admits to it, and then the teacher will punish the entire group.

Here's a definition of collective punishment:

Collective punishment is the punishment of a group of people as a result of the behavior of one or more other individuals or groups. The punished group may often have no direct association with the other individuals or groups, or direct control over their actions.

I'm not convinced that this behavior is one we want to model for our students.

If collective punishment is out, then what are the alternatives?

This kind of misbehavior does not happen that often in my classes, thankfully, but it certainly does occur. What I usually do is go over to the area where I suspect the noise or projectile originated and quietly explain that I don't feel respected when this kind of thing happens. And, since I feel like I show that I respect students at all times, I would hope they would want me to feel respected. I then explain that I don't know who actually did it, but that I would like each of them to commit that they will not throw something (or make a noise, etc.), and we shake on it. I tell them that I'm sure they are people of their word, and the matter is closed.

Nine times out of ten, that is the end of things, and there is no repetition.

However, if it does happen again, I go to the next step. For example, somebody in my class was occasionally making an obnoxious noise. I knew it was one of two students. I did the first step with them, and that went fine. Then, two days later, one of them made the noise again.

I asked them both to come outside with me, and I explained that I was disappointed that one of them was not keeping their word. I knew that one was trustworthy, but I didn't know which one. So I said that I couldn't trust the word of either of them and didn't like feeling that way. I suggested that the person who was making the noise might want to think about how his or her actions were now affecting the other student. Then, I gave them a few minutes to talk about it privately (I left the door open and asked them to stay in front of it so I could observe their actions, but not overhear what they said).

We didn't hear that obnoxious noise again.

So in other words, the second step, when necessary, is to ask students to consider the impact their actions have on others, and ask them to try to work out problems among themselves. In my teaching career, this has almost always resulted in stopping the inappropriate behavior and, I hope, students gaining some added maturity.
Of course, one of the most common situations where the specter of collective punishment is raised is after a difficult time with a substitute teacher. One preventative strategy is the use of something like the Attitude and Behavior With A Substitute Teacher grading rubric. Early in the year, the teacher shows the simple rubric to students and explains that a substitute will use it with them. Five minutes prior to the end of class with the sub, he or she will distribute the rubrics, and students will write down their names and grade themselves. The sub will then go around, give what grade he or she believes the student has earned, and collect the sheets (this process means the sub does not have to worry about remembering individual names and can base the evaluation on student faces).

This can be a very effective strategy to reduce teacher temptation to inflict collective punishment on a class, enhance the likelihood of a class with a sub being somewhat productive, and dramatically reduce stress for the sub.

After a class has shown that it understands and respects the expected behavior, a teacher can experiment with not using the grading rubric and explaining to students that he or she trusts that they will act appropriately.

In Part Two of this excerpt, I’ll offer additional positive classroom management strategies. In the meantime, please share your own in the comments section below.

Part II

More Positive, Not Punitive, Classroom-Management Tips

This article is adapted from Larry's new book, Self-Driven Learning: Teaching Strategies for Student Motivation.

In the previous excerpt from this book, I shared some specific strategies for positive classroom management. Here are a few more.

Reminder of Moral Values

Behavioral economist Dan Ariely found in one experiment that if people are reminded of their moral values, they are far less likely to cheat. In his study, they were reminded of the Ten Commandments.

A variation of this study can be applied if a teacher knows that a substitute will be coming the next day. In less than a minute, a teacher can remind students of the expected behavior, say that he or she would like to be able to trust them, and ask students to raise their hands if they'll commit to the expected behavior. Similar exercises could be used before going to a school assembly or a computer lab.

In my experience, I have always found a clear difference in student behavior between when I do this kind of reminder and when I do not.
Light Touches

*Studies* have shown that a supportive touch on the shoulder can result in a student being twice as likely to volunteer in class than if he or she did not receive that touch. Library users who are touched rate the library more favorably, and people dining at restaurants who are casually touched by waiters or waitresses feel more positively about their experience and leave higher tips. And numerous *other studies* suggest that touch can have additional positive cognitive effects.

Further studies have shown that a light touch on the upper arm can increase compliance substantially, and two light touches can increase it even more.

Of course, teachers have to be careful using this tactic, but a quick shoulder touch should be doable for many.

Choice and Ownership

People are more motivated when they have *more control* over their environment. In an *experiment* documented by Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, which has since been repeated many times, half the participants in a lottery were given random numbers. The other half were given pieces of paper and could write whatever numbers they wished. Researchers then offered to purchase the tickets. They found that they had to pay those who wrote their own numbers five times what they had to pay those who were given numbers. In other words, experiments have found that having the ability to choose for ourselves makes us five times more committed to -- and invested in -- the outcome than if someone else chooses for us.

A different and very recent study reemphasizes the importance of choice in the classroom for most students. *Researchers* found that power and choice were interchangeable, since both deal with the issue of control; having more of one could compensate for having less of the other.

There are many things we can do in the classroom to help our students feel like they have power -- for example, involving them in decisions on issues like seating or even room arrangement. But those efforts can appear tiny in situations where students are immigrants whose parents moved them to a new country or come from low-income families and feel they have little power to confront multiple economic and social challenges.

However, in addition to our possibly feeble efforts to help engage students in feeling powerful, we can certainly emphasize offering choices -- the kinds of homework they have to do, the types of presentations they can organize, the essay topics they can respond to, and so on.
The payoff can be students who are happier and more open to learning and to accepting challenges -- not to mention an easier classroom-management situation for the teacher.

Another recent study seconded this endorsement of choice. Students in Texas were given the choice of two homework assignments covering the same material. The researcher wrote: "When students were given choices, they reported feeling more interested in their homework, felt more confident about their homework and they scored higher on their unit tests."

You can never have too many positive classroom management strategies in your "back pocket." Feel free to share your own in the comments section below.

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