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Maintaining discipline in the classroom

There can be few schools in which teachers are able to take good discipline in the classroom utterly for granted. Usually, in order to establish the kinds of behaviour that are key to a good learning environment, teachers need to invest considerable time, intelligence, patience and planning. Even with such investment, for some teachers – perhaps an increasing number – maintenance of discipline is *the* concern of their working lives. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest practices which might help teachers avoid or overcome a good many difficulties in this area.

It is organised as follows:

- Part one: Basics of maintaining order – 30 key principles
- Part two: Five routines, or repeating procedures, for improving discipline
- Part three: Peer mediation; four procedures that both develop students' English and introduce a method which, through structured reflection and discussion, addresses causes of poor behaviour

Basics of maintaining order

Establishing foundations for orderly behaviour

- 1 Decide what basic kind of teacher you want to be
Cowley (2001), who questioned a large number of students, concludes that there are basically two kinds of teachers able to maintain order in a classroom: ones who are firm but fair and ones who are scary. A third kind, teachers who want to be their students' friend, were judged to be poor at controlling their classes and were not well respected. I shall assume below that you want to be a firm-but-fair teacher, not one who is frightening or who tries to curry favour and thereby loses respect.
- 2 Learn about your school's policies and rules
Most schools have school-wide rules of behaviour. These may be set out in a booklet given to every teacher and perhaps also to students when they first enrol. Or you may need to ask other teachers informally. In any case, if school-wide rules exist, think about how to make them a basis for your own class rules.
- 3 In your first lesson, make a list of rules and make them clear
Devoting part of your first lesson to rules of behaviour makes it less

likely that students will later act unacceptably out of real or feigned ignorance.

- 4 Get your students involved in framing the class rules
A good basic procedure is to write out a list of suggested rules and bring them to the class as a proposal. Go through the rules one by one inviting suggestions about additions, omissions and rewordings. Invite discussion – especially on the *reasons* for each of the rules. Note down the rules agreed on and bring the final version to the next lesson.
- 5 Take care with the wording of rules
Gathercoal (1993) points out that rules can often be more effective when they are worded rather generally. He gives the following example (p. 81). A school has a rule saying *No running inside the school*. Some students deliberately walk backwards bumping into people and say that there is no rule against it; they were not running. So a better rule would be something like *Walk safely and considerately in the school*. Besides being both clear and encompassing, this wording has the additional advantage of indicating why the rule exists – to maintain a safe environment. In any case, psychologists tell us that positive wordings, such as *Walk*, tend to be more effective than negative ones, such as *No running*.
- 6 Consider all key categories of rule
Rules are necessary to protect or maintain the following:
 - a health and safety, e.g. *Use things in ways that are safe for you and safe for others*
 - b the property of individuals and of the school, e.g. *We must respect other people's property, The only person who should take anything out of a bag is the owner of the bag*
 - c the rights of others, e.g. *Respect the beliefs and feelings of others, We must use polite language*
 - d the educational process, e.g. *We must help ourselves and others to learn, When a student 'has the floor', everyone else should be quiet and listen, When the teacher has an announcement or is explaining something, everyone should be quiet and listen.*

Typically, (a)–(c) are covered by all-school rules, leaving (d) as the category for which extra, class-specific rules are needed. However, it may be prudent additionally to consider a 'rule about rules'. For instance, if students feel they do not have to follow the rules until the bell rings or until you manage to get their attention, the onset of every lesson will be delayed. So the following may be a useful rule too: *We*

follow the class rules from the moment we begin to enter the room until we have left it after being dismissed.

7 Consider ratifying the rules

Some teachers find it helpful to draw up the final draft of their rules as a contract which they and their students formally sign. An additional option is to ask students each to (1) make a copy of the rules for their parents, (2) sign it, (3) take it home and show it to their parents and (4) bring back a note from their parents saying they have seen the signed rules.

8 Plan the consequences for violations of rules

Many educators recommend making an ordered list of consequences running from light to heavy. If a student has broken a rule, begin by imposing the lightest consequence appropriate for that violation. If the student persists in misbehaving, impose a slightly more severe consequence and so on.

One reason for adopting the ‘graded step’ method is that, in the case of most infractions, light but definite consequences work better than immediate serious penalties, which are very likely to cause resentment. Among relatively light consequences that you can impose are requiring students to say both how they have misbehaved and what they should in future do instead.

As a medium consequence you might phone a student’s parents. And/Or implement the practice of keeping parents informed as follows:

Type up and make multiple copies of a small form with these questions on it:

- 1 What did I do wrong?
- 2 Why wasn't my action acceptable?
- 3 What should I have been doing instead?
- 4 What will I do in the future?

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If a student misbehaves, get a copy of the form and go through it with the student. Fill it in according to what the student says. (It might be prudent to get the student to sign it.) Make a copy for your records and mail the original to the student’s parents. (This idea comes from an Internet posting by Laraine Reisner at www.nea.org/helpfrom/works4me.)

A heavier consequence might be a 'detention' (i.e. staying after school), especially a detention on a Saturday. Of course, your students must know in advance what the full range of consequences is and it is very wise to inform parents too about your overall approach and about what the range of consequences is.

- 9 Remind your students of what the rules are
Periodically review the rules. It is especially important to do this during the first two weeks. Doing this *greatly* increases the likelihood that the rules will be followed in the long term.
- 10 Consider the larger context of rules
Over time, problems are likely to arise if there is a fundamental mismatch between rules set in a school and those which are accepted in the society as a whole. For instance, rules which are made up and enforced in an autocratic manner are likely to engender resentment and friction if the society as a whole is democratic. Nor is it likely that democratic rules will brilliantly succeed in a setting where it is normal for people to accept whatever rules have been set by tradition and authority.

Building on your foundation

- 1 Learn everyone's name as fast as possible
Knowing your students' names makes a world of difference, particularly if you use their names mostly when giving positive feedback, e.g. *Maarten just gave us a very useful word* or *That was well put, Rita*.
- 2 Decide who should sit where
Students find it much easier to get seated and settled promptly if you have told them in advance which seat is theirs. Fixed seating also makes it vastly easier for you to learn everyone's name. Finally, if an assigned seat is empty, you can tell immediately who is missing; this means you may not have to use up much time taking attendance. There are a few things to keep in mind when planning who to put where:
 - Mixing up boys and girls often helps improve behaviour generally.
 - It makes sense to separate students likely to carry on private conversations. (But see 'Friendship pairs', 1.1, for an alternative.)
 - The best place for potential trouble-makers is front and centre, as long as they are not all clumped together.
 - Students who dislike each other should not have to sit directly next to each other.

3 Plan varied lessons

Many 11- to 16-year olds lack the perseverance and the power of concentration which underlie an ability to finish long tasks all in one go. They tend to be restless, impatient, easily distracted and prone to boredom. Good planning can go a long way towards helping you deal with these predictable tendencies. For a start, you need more tasks for any given lesson with 11- to 16-year olds than you would if you taught older teens or adults. The tasks should be varied too – not just in topic or skill and language focus but in many other ways as well. For instance:

- Focus on different aims at different stages of the lesson.
- Students should sometimes work individually and at other times in pairs or groups.
- From time to time they should try working with new partners.
- Ask them sometimes to work at their desks and at others to stand at the board or move around the room in order, say, to carry out a series of short conversations.
- Balance quiet, study-like tasks with activities that have a game-like character.

(See Woodward (2001) for a comprehensive treatment of lesson planning.)

4 Plan transitions from one task to another

With young learners, you need to bring one task to an end and move on to another swiftly and smoothly as soon as (or better yet, before) you notice the first signs of boredom. Planning can do a lot to help you make these transitions in a confident, competent manner.

5 Give instructions clearly and efficiently

For instructions to be maximally effective they must, first of all, be clear. Also, the fewer instructions you give and the more concise these are, the easier it will be for students to notice and remember them. An added advantage of reducing the number and length of instructions you have to give over the course of a lesson is that this can give students an enhanced feeling that things are running smoothly to an overall plan, and this in turn can do a lot to help them feel more confident about having you as their teacher. ('Spatial anchoring' and 'Temporal anchoring', 1.2, offer two kinds of options for reinforcing the gist of instructions *non-verbally*.)

6 Take predictable concentration trends into account

Many students find it easiest to concentrate during the first 15 or 20 minutes of a lesson so this is often the best time for intensive review or

any particularly challenging exercise on new material. Without regular changes of pace, concentration may sag deeply around the middle of a lesson. This could be a good time for a brief spell of movement or music or other respites from sedentary brainwork. Towards the end of a lesson concentration may be trending upwards again. This is a good time to review the challenging material you covered near the beginning of the lesson.

- 7 Plan how you are going to get everyone's attention while keeping your voice at normal volume

First of all, begin most lessons with an activity that is especially likely to grab your students' attention and get them all looking in the same direction. Hold up an interesting object or photo or direct their attention to a display on your board or OHP screen that is visually interesting (e.g. a picture) or easy to take in (e.g. a short, funny text). You need as well to have a way of bringing your class back together again after any pairwork or group work or indeed after any individual work that your students are likely to do at greatly varying speeds. There are various techniques you can use to make this possible:

- Have on hand a number of noisemakers (e.g. various small bells, chimes and rattles) for use in getting everyone's attention. (If you always use the same one, students may gradually cease to pay any attention to it.)
- Give some instructions and other messages by writing them on the board (e.g. *When you finish, close your books*). Not everyone will notice these messages so, for instance, ring a small bell and, when your students look at you, point to the message.
- Turning out the lights can get a class to stop talking.
- Holding up a sign of a scowling face saying *Shhhhh!* can be effective and also create a little amusement.
- However, techniques such as the ones just mentioned work only if used sparingly. The most reliable tool is, unfortunately, the hardest to describe. Put simply, it is this. You need to be able to *look* like someone who expects students to be quiet and listen as a matter of routine.

Whatever you do, do not shout.

- 8 Communicate your teaching goals

Make sure your students know what the learning aims of activities are. They are much more likely to stay on task if they know what the task is for. It is especially helpful to spend a bit of time on this when you do an activity of a *new* sort.

- 9 Create and exploit opportunities for positive acknowledgement
It is a rare student who does not need positive feedback. This can range from a pleased acknowledgement (*Yes, that's a very good example, Maite*) to outright praise (*That's a really great story! The ending is believable but also a complete surprise!*). The how, when and how much may need to vary quite a bit from student to student. A few prefer a regular flow of compliments and encouragement that the whole class can hear. Others are satisfied if it is mainly their best work that is singled out for a special note or quiet word or two. Positive feedback is particularly important in the case of students who tend to misbehave (but not of course when they are actually misbehaving). Some such students may react best to acknowledgement that you pass on to them one-to-one outside of class (e.g. *I liked your drawings today. Would you be willing to draw at the board some time?*).

In general, the most effective feedback tends both to specify what you liked and to inform the student about its usefulness. For example, *You have capitalised all the right words. This makes your writing especially easy for us to read* rather than *Good work* or *Much improved*.

- 10 Keep your students fruitfully occupied
Students who have any tendency at all to become unruly are most likely to do so if they are not on task. Make sure at all times that everyone has been assigned a useful task (or set of task options) which is within their level of competence.
- 11 Be firm, especially in the beginning
One of the easiest ways to lose control of a class is to become known as someone who is easy to talk:
- out of things such as the enforcement of rules, e.g. rules against tardiness
 - into doing or allowing things you hadn't planned to, e.g. playing another song when you had only planned to play one
- As much as you may actually incline towards flexibility about such things, you may not be in any position to do so until your ability to maintain control of a class has been demonstrated *over a period of a few months*. Then you can relax the rules now and then. All this is summed up in various versions of the old teachers' saying, *Be firm at the beginning of the year and you will thank yourself near its end*. (The version I heard first, *Never smile till Easter*, is perhaps a bit extreme!)

12 Be fair

Early and mid-teens are sometimes sensitive about issues of fairness to a degree that can be quite astonishing. In order to forestall problems in this area, take time now and then to consider whether you are evenly dividing positive feedback and attention generally. For example, during times in a lesson when you call on individual students with questions, do you spend more time relating to some students than others? There are a few things to look out for here. If you pause to ask questions while writing on the board, it may be that you generally stand at the same side of the board slightly turned towards it. This may mean that at such times you always look more at one side of your class than at the other. Or, like many teachers, you may find that your attention gravitates towards your most vocal students, or towards the ones who are best at making eye contact, or (it is possible!) towards a student you find unconsciously appealing because he or she reminds you of someone else. And beware of tendencies or impressions which cause you to divert attention *away from* particular students. For instance, it is risky to make assumptions of this sort: *Kazuo looks like he just wants to be left alone so I won't put him under any pressure*. My experience suggests that students are not so easy to figure out just from how they look and that ones who seem to have a 'don't bother me' demeanour are as likely as anyone else to feel bad if they get less attention than the rest. In fact, so easy is it to be misled by impressions or just to overlook things in this area that it is a very good idea from time to time simply to ask students one-to-one, *Do you think I am treating you fairly?*

13 Answer questions clearly and respectfully

Asking a teacher a sincere question is seen as a risk by many students. So much depends on the teacher's reaction. A reply that seems dismissive, perfunctory or unclear can have a powerful, negative effect on a student's attitude. If you do not know an answer, admit it. Try, though, to find out so you can answer in a later lesson.

14 Use the whole room

Lay claim to the whole room. Go everywhere you can as often as you can, especially (but not just) during pairwork and group work. Look at what students are writing. Speak to everyone individually *at close range* as often as is feasible given the size of your class. Once in a while be surprising; go to the back of the room and call on someone at the front, and so on. But in general, move *towards* anyone causing trouble rather than away from them. To do the latter only teaches them that

they can get rid of you by misbehaving. (For more on use of the room see p. 23.)

- 15 Try to learn about how you come across to your students
Reflect on your verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Teachers sometimes have unconscious habits that distract or irritate their students – and teenagers can be very intolerant of these! Perhaps ask a close colleague to sit in on a lesson or two and afterwards tell you if they have noticed anything. Or video yourself once in a while. Even a sound recording can be helpful (and unobtrusive to make). I, for instance, had 23 years of teaching behind me before a couple of other teachers brought it to my attention that I have spells of saying *Uhh* with irritating frequency.
- 16 Avoid sarcasm
Teachers who use sarcasm tend to ruin all hope of working constructively with any student they turn it on. If a truant has finally come to class, a comment like *Oh, look who's finally decided to come to class!* is only likely to breed resentment and encourage further truancy. Rather, react in a way that has some chance of making the student easier rather than harder to deal with in future – something like, for instance, a cheery *Hello, Kim!*
- 17 Be punctual yourself and expect punctuality from your students
Hopefully, your school has rules about lateness and procedures for dealing with infractions. Whether or not it does, there are a few other measures you can take on your own to encourage students to come on time:
- The most important thing of all is to start teaching at the very beginning of the lesson period. It only encourages students to come late if you delay the onset of a lesson while latecomers get settled down. The first minutes of a lesson are those during which students are generally most alert. These minutes should not be wasted by you or anyone else!
 - When presenting your seating plan to the class, tell them that habitual latecomers will be moved to the front of the class. If latecomers stop coming late, consider moving them to some part of the class they might like better – but make it clear to them that renewed tardiness will get them moved right back to the front of the class.
 - Take attendance in such a way that students who are late see you making a note of their tardiness.
 - Insist latecomers stay a minute or two after class and explain to you why they were late. Keep a record of latecomers' explanations;

perhaps ask the latecomers themselves to write time of arrival and reason into a 'late-book'.

- When a latecomer arrives, immediately call him or her to the front of the class to do some such prominent job as write some of your boardwork for you. (But *never* openly describe this as punishment since you do not want to discourage these students from coming to class at all!) My experience is that few inveterate latecomers like to find themselves in the spotlight like this as soon as they walk into the room.

18 Keep your temper at all costs

Do not take things too personally. When teenagers are rude to you or about you, it is most likely because you represent authority in general. Besides, few people have a perfect understanding of the norms of civility by the time they are 15 or 16, let alone 11. When a student has said something that is out of order or things seem to be about to get tense for any reason, it may be best to make a humorous remark, to change the subject or move on to a new activity. If you do feel you have to comment directly on unacceptable behaviour, try to bear in mind that negatively worded commands can trigger automatic negative denials (e.g. TEACHER: *Please don't talk while I am.* STUDENT: *I wasn't talking!*) unlike a positively worded equivalent (e.g. TEACHER: *Please pay attention so you can do the next activity.* STUDENT: *I was.* TEACHER: *Good then.*).

19 If you get into confrontations, provide students with face-saving solutions

- Offer them at least one solution which is not only satisfactory to you but which is one they can accept without loss of face. This is especially vital if other students are watching and listening.
- Talk in terms of unacceptable *behaviour*; make every effort to avoid making students feel, or giving them a chance to claim, that you are telling them off because you just do not like them as a person. Otherwise, the student may feel (as some appear all too willing to feel or to claim) that it does not matter much how they behave – they are going to get into trouble anyway.
- Focus on the future. Do not get involved in seeking to establish exactly what did or did not happen yesterday or a few minutes ago. Try to find ways to make things happen better in the future. Wordings such as the following might be useful: *OK, next time let's . . .* or *How can we avoid this problem next time?*
- Zealously avoid getting drawn into any heated exchanges with individual students in front of the whole class. If need be, have

private talks with anyone who is really upset or wildly unreasonable, in the corridor during class or somewhere private after class. In the latter case, do not put the meeting off for too long or you may lose credibility.

20 Involve the parents

In cases of repeated and/or serious misbehaviour, you *must* attempt to get the support, or at least the understanding, of the parents. Success comes most easily here if:

- you make contact with all parents as soon as a course begins (or even before) and do what you can to keep parents informed about how their children are participating as the course goes along
- you report instances of *good* behaviour too

Routines for improving discipline

The following five procedures are ones which teachers can make a part of *every lesson* to help create an orderly learning environment.

1.1 Jobs for friendship pairs and very useful persons

Age	7 and up
Level	Any

These two routines both involve deputising particular students to carry out specific support functions in the classroom.

Friendship pairs

Students – particularly girls – are likely to have a friend in the same class who they will want to sit next to. These pairs of friends may wear similar clothes and exhibit various other kinds of bonding behaviour. Accept and capitalise on these ‘friendship pairs’ (provided the students behave when together) by assigning particular responsibilities to them. For example, each pair can be responsible for a different one of the following tasks:

- cleaning the board
- putting dictionaries and coursebooks back on shelves
- clearing up litter
- checking bulletin boards to make sure things are up-to-date
- writing five test questions on the day’s vocabulary (to be put to classmates at the beginning of the next lesson)
- transforming certain bits of boardwork into posters for display on a wall