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| Fair and Effective Classroom DisciplineApril 14, 2016 | Volume **11** | Issue **15**[**Table of Contents**](http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol11/1115-toc.aspx) | [Share](http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&pubid=ra-4e206563102c8b65)| |

**Proven Techniques for Managing an Active Classroom**

*Anne Vilen*

On a recent learning walk, a team of middle school teachers and I followed the same group of 7th grade students through three different classes. One of the biggest surprises for our team was that in a few cases, a student who was engaged and on task in one class was tuned out or even disruptive in another. In our debrief, we asked two questions:

* How did the teachers we observed create conditions that prompted students to act so differently?
* Can we identify the "management" moves that invite students to make wise choices and manage themselves as members of a meaningful learning community?

Our conclusions, based on observations during the course of an ordinary school day, lend themselves to techniques any teacher can use to buttress best behavior in the classroom.

**Create Classroom Norms that Tell Students What's Expected**

In the classrooms we observed where all students were productively engaged, teachers had norms for "how we learn together" posted on their walls—and they referred to them frequently and in a variety of ways. One classroom's norms began with "I am visible and valuable." When a student walked in with his hood pulled down over his eyes, the teacher stood next to his desk and asked him quietly, "Are you visible right now?" The student pulled his hood back. Then, before moving on, the teacher smiled at him and remarked, "Now I can see you, and I know you'll have something valuable to say in our discussion today." The student actually smiled back!

We never saw more than five norms listed, and they were always phrased positively. The teacher I just described explained that when she and her students began talking about norms, the first thing students mentioned was "no hats!" When they discussed why the school had a no-hat rule, the group came up with the phrase "visible and valuable" to get at the *spirit* of the school conduct code. Like this one, norms are descriptions of what teachers and students want their learning environment to look like and sound like. As the accompanying video shows, when students co-create their classroom norms, they feel ownership over both the language and the priorities.

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| [Creating Class Norms: Management in the Active Classroom](https://vimeo.com/124448656) from [EL Education](https://vimeo.com/elschools) on [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/). Produced by David Grant. |

**Give Directions Clearly and Concisely**

In classrooms where students were on task and moving purposefully, our learning-walk team noticed the clarity of teachers' directions. One teacher we observed asked students to get up and move to the table assigned on their task card "quickly, smoothly, and without talking." Students got up fast, immediately started chattering, and meandered to their new tables. One student dropped his notebook. Another headed to the pencil sharpener. A third stopped in the middle of the room to have a conversation with a girl about something that happened at lunch.

Immediately aware of the chaos, the teacher called out "freeze" in an even voice. Then, with eyebrows raised, he made a backward circle in the air with one finger, signaling for students to return to their desks for a do-over. Once students were seated again in their original seats, he asked one student, "What were my directions?" It took three students before someone included the phrase, "without talking." "Without talking," the teacher repeated slowly. "Try again."

This time—just three minutes since the original hubbub broke out—students moved quickly, smoothly, and without talking to their new tables, where they immediately began reading and annotating the short texts that awaited them. The time this teacher took to "reset" the norm of following directions accurately would pay off almost immediately in more focused learning. As we left the room, we heard the teacher give the next set of directions: "12 minutes on the clock, and then we'll discuss."

What this teacher knew was that clear directions prevent misbehavior by providing a doorway into the learning, rather than a doorway out of the classroom. To meet the challenges of new and more rigorous standards without tuning or acting out, students need appropriate scaffolding. As the video below shows, breaking a task down into small, timed chunks—with clear directions for what students should do and sound like during each chunk—gives students a sense of competence.

[Giving Clear Directions: Management in the Active Classroom](https://vimeo.com/124447992) from [EL Education](https://vimeo.com/elschools) on [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/). Produced by David Grant.

**Use Protocols to Guide Students in Complex Tasks**

When the directions involve more than the logistics of getting into groups, gathering materials, or the first steps of tackling a graphic organizer, then a written and practiced protocol will hold students accountable for the collaborative work that sometimes results in off-task or challenging behavior. Active protocols that require students to use evidence and be accountable for their own thinking prevent misbehavior by engaging all students simultaneously at their own level. Three examples of multistep protocols that support student success and responsibility are the [Chalk Talk](https://vimeo.com/101254151), [Take a Stand](https://vimeo.com/101559969), and the[Interactive Word Wall](https://vimeo.com/84900192).

**Maintain Positive Relationships with Practiced Responses**

Norms, clear directions, and structures to guide active learning go a long way toward creating a positive culture in the classroom. In our learning walk, we also heard teachers address students who struggled to manage their own emotions or actions. In many cases, their calm tone and deliberate choice of words prompted students to slow down, reflect, or change course.

Just as students want to feel that they can succeed in school, they also want to feel that they belong and that they can be trusted to make wise choices. Sometimes unwise choices—bullying another student or defying a teacher's request—are a child's or adolescent's misguided way of demanding, "Show me you care!" Teachers who care distinguish between students as people and students' actions. Rather than getting angry at the student, the teacher responds to the *action* and helps the child solve the problem behavior. In the following video, you'll see several teachers give clear, calm assistance to students who are at a loss for how to channel their emotions.

[Problem Solving and Consequences for Poor Choices: Management in the Active Classroom](https://vimeo.com/124448651) from [EL Education](https://vimeo.com/elschools) on [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/). Produced by David Grant.

Most important, teachers need to know that anyone can learn how to respond more effectively to angry, belligerent, or emotional outbursts. A great first step is to role-play and practice phrases that offer students acceptable choices and name expectations for community behavior without labels or empty threats. In fact, the teachers we observed who were effective mediators of difficult behavior had a repertoire of responses to redirect students' behavior. Here are a few snippets we heard during our learning walk:

* "You'll want to collect all of your things in the next 60 seconds before you line up to leave the room for lunch."
* "It looks like you're moving toward a choice we can't accept in this classroom. Have you considered instead …?"
* "When you show me that you're ready to work with your group by getting out your work from yesterday and bringing your voice down, then you can come back to the table."

**Find Models that Help You Improve**

Perhaps what teachers need most to improve their classroom management skills are models and tools. Often the best model of all is a master teacher. A team learning walk, particularly one that shadows familiar students through a variety of classes, is a powerful opportunity for teachers to learn with and from each other. Online and print resources, such as the book *Management in the Active Classroom*(Berger, Strasser, and Woodfin, 2015), are another option. The book includes all of the videos described here, as well as typical scenarios and possible solutions for a variety of settings and grade levels. The full suite of open-source videos in *Management and the Active Classroom* is freely available [here](https://vimeo.com/channels/managementactiveclass).



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