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Positioning First Things First

I once observed an elementary teacher leading her kids down a long hallway on their way to the cafeteria. Along the way, two of the students started talking, and the teacher turned to face the group as she walked backwards in front of them. She raised her hand with her palm facing them, and the line of students came to an abrupt halt. With both hands, she pointed back down the hallway whence they had come. The students turned and quietly walked back to her classroom. When they reached the doorway, they once again turned around and started down the hallway to the cafeteria—this time without a sound.

The teacher's body language was totally neutral. Raising her hand, stopping the students with a practiced gesture, and then pointing back down the hallway were all process—as opposed to punishment—tools. She did not yell, scold, or nag. Her face displayed absolutely no displeasure at all. She did not send someone to time-out or embarrass anyone. In fact, she never said a word during the entire scenario, but her message was clear—*we move quietly through the hallway and when we don't get it right, we practice until we do*—and they understood. In this case, perfect practice made for a perfect procedure, and it worked because this teacher had perfected the *how* of moving thirty kids down the hallway without disturbing other classes in the process.

In teaching, there is the *what* and the *how*. The *what* is the course content, and it is necessary that teachers demonstrate command of their discipline(s). The *how* is more about process (i.e., the procedures and methods that facilitate the smooth functioning of the classroom). A teacher who knows his content but fails to consider the critical role of process is much more likely to experience problems. A truly successful teacher is one who constantly reflects on the *how* because she understands the value of certainty, clarity, and consistency in an effective classroom.

In almost four decades in education, and after observing hundreds of classrooms, there is one thing I believe with utter certainty—students hate uncertainty as it relates to process. They want to know exactly where they stand at all times. Students want to know what to do when they have questions and when they need to sharpen a pencil. They need to know what to do when they enter a teacher’s classroom and what is expected when it is time to clean up from a lab. Students want to know that if the teacher promises to have test results back within three days, it will happen. They want to believe that they will be shown the same respect by their teachers that their teachers demand of them. They want to know they will get meaningful feedback as a matter of course, aimed at letting them know where they stand and highlighting what they need to do in order to get to where they are going. Good teachers approach each year with an understanding of how important procedures are in day-to-day classroom operations. Ambiguity and inconsistency inhibit the smooth flow of process in the classroom.

Students need to know with utter certainty that if they participate in class discussions, they can do so without fear of ridicule from fellow students. If they cannot do so, they will not contribute. Teachers must constantly consider how they will handle students who test the limits and break the rules. Students want to know that the rules on the wall are not there for show. I have been in classrooms where there is a long list of rules posted prominently somewhere in the room, every one of which was broken by the students (and ignored by the teachers) in the space of a very few minutes. I have seen classrooms where the teacher broke his or her own rules, thereby destroying their efficacy.

According to Emmer, Evertson, and Worsham (2003), “inefficient procedures and the absence of routines . . . can waste large amounts of time and cause students’ attention and interest to wane” (p. 17). Procedures that are both understood and followed on a daily basis contribute to the smooth running of the classroom.

The Role of Rules

Wong and Wong (2005), in *How to Be an Effective Teacher: The First Days of School*, spend three out of a total of twenty-six chapters illuminating the critical differences between rules and procedures, and the authors recommend that teachers read all three chapters in one sitting so that the distinction will be clear. Rules, according to Wong and Wong “are expectations of appropriate student behavior” (p. 143), and they distinguish between general rules (e.g., respect others) and specific rules (e.g., arrive to class on time) (p. 145).

Smith (2004) goes one step further to distinguish principles, which “are more general and often more value-laden than rules”; an example he provides is that “students have the right to learn and the teacher has the right to teach” (p. 164). Further, Smith describes rules as “what we would see in the classroom if our principles were being supported” (p. 165). To Smith, a rule that says one should not interrupt others supports the student’s right to learn and the teacher’s right to teach (p. 65). Thorson (2003), on the basis of interviews conducted with students serving detention, says rules should be few in number and should be positively and clearly worded.

One way to make certain that there are no misunderstandings about principles, rules, consequences, or procedures is to engage students in substantive discussions about their ultimate importance and their necessity in the smooth running of the classroom. Curwin (2003) suggests that involving students directly in the creation of rules for themselves and for the teacher “begins the process of developing a classroom community” (p. 81). Di Giulio (2007) emphasizes that in a successful classroom community teachers are proactive in that they “involve their students in creating the rules by providing an opportunity for them to think about, discuss, and put into action positive expectations for human behavior” (p. 20). Involving students in these critical discussions helps develop and nurture the kind of classroom climate that will pay dividends down the road.

The fact that students have input into the rule-creating process gives them a sense of ownership that might otherwise be lacking. This is supported in the results of a study by Brophy and Evertson (1976) in which they concluded that “more successful teachers took pains to explain both the rule itself and the reason behind it to the children” (as quoted in Marzano, 2003a, p. 16). Marzano (2003a) affirms that

research and theory, then, support the intuitive notion that well-articulated rules and procedures that are negotiated with students are a critical aspect of classroom management, affecting not only the behavior of students but also their academic achievement. (p. 17)

One very practical reason for taking time during the first week of school to explain and discuss rules is that students have several other teachers who may have slightly different rules; therefore, simply announcing what the rules are may not be sufficient. Consequences also need to be clear and well-understood. New teachers or teachers new to a building need to discover how school-wide rules and consequences will affect those developed in the classroom. Any discussion on rules and consequences must include school norms and dictates that will affect those developed in the classroom. The same may apply to procedures. Simply announcing what the procedures are is therefore not sufficient. The teacher's job is to have students practice these procedures *until they become second nature in that particular classroom*. This can take time, and teachers must be absolutely consistent in their actions regarding procedures. Teachers must be relentless in seeing to it that the procedures are both understood and followed consistently.

When teachers treat procedures as process related and not consequence laden, it can also have a positive effect on relationships by cutting down on flashpoints (e.g., the child who gets up to sharpen his pencil without asking when the procedure is to get permission) that can lead to *direct* and *negative* confrontations between teachers and students. A procedure not followed becomes simply an opportunity to reteach it to an individual student or to the class as a whole, not as an occasion for a public verbal reprimand that can result in derailing an entire lesson.

Facilitating Process

Students and teachers alike want to see classrooms run smoothly. Students appreciate not only being involved in the development of classroom rules, then, but they also want to be involved directly in their own learning throughout the school year. Students understandably prefer being actively engaged to watching teachers lecture. For a teacher, then, the question becomes, *How do I move kids from passive observers to active participants without it resulting in chaos?* Part of the

answer lies in understanding how effective procedures (process) can satisfy a student's need for certainty, clarity, and consistency. Effective procedures, as we have seen, do not simply happen. The investment is frontloaded as students are introduced to a procedure and then practice it until it becomes routine.

An example might help explain this.

Mrs. Dalrymple stands in the doorway to her seventh-grade English class greeting students, who enter the room to the song "Get Ready," by the Temptations, which is playing on Mrs. Dalrymple's CD player. Students glance at the TV monitor in the corner of the room and see a picture of a student's desk with three items displayed: a blank sheet of paper, a sharpened pencil, and a book of short stories. Each student tears a blank sheet of paper out of his or her notebook, places a sharpened pencil on the desk, and goes to the book shelf in the back of the room to get a copy of the book of short stories. With one last glance at the TV monitor to make sure they have everything, the students take their seats. Mrs. Dalrymple moves from the doorway into the room. She uses the remote in her hand to bring the volume of the music up a bit and then she stops the music abruptly. The students, who have been chatting while they collected what they will need for the lesson, stop talking and give Mrs. Dalrymple their full attention, ready to begin.

Near the end of the lesson, Mrs. Dalrymple picks up her remote and plays "I Can See Clearly Now," by Johnny Nash. She says nothing and gives no instructions, but the students see that the TV monitor now shows the bookshelf with the books in order by number. (Each book has a small, numbered sticker on the bottom of the spine.) Without being asked, the students return the books and get their desks cleaned off while listening to the music. After a minute or so, Mrs. Dalrymple raises the volume and then cuts it off, and the students once more give her their attention.

In the above example, notice that Mrs. Dalrymple never actually *said* anything, yet the students were ready to start the lesson on cue. At the end of the lesson, Mrs. Dalrymple gave no verbal instructions, yet the students were in their seats and ready to leave the classroom. Also, notice that it was a combination of an auditory cue (a specific song) and a visual cue (a picture on the TV monitor) that got the results Mrs. Dalrymple wanted. Her investment in this whole process came well in advance of the first week of school. Let's go back with her to early August, when she frontloads the

procedures that will help facilitate the smooth operation of her classroom when her students arrive.

1. As she begins her preparations, Mrs. Dalrymple chooses two songs that she will use when she wants students to set up their desks for instruction or clean up after an activity or near the end of class: "Get Ready" and "I Can See Clearly Now."
2. After borrowing the school's digital camera, she takes a series of digital photos of the top of a student desk. Each picture captures a different setup (an empty desk, a desk with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper, a desk with a textbook, etc.).
3. She then hooks her classroom computer up to her TV monitor so she can display anything from the computer on the screen. She also numbers the short-story books on her bookshelf so they can be put back in the proper order by the students.
4. On the first day of class, Mrs. Dalrymple explains to the students that she will be using music as an auditory cue for certain routines. She then plays about thirty seconds of "Get Ready" and indicates that the only time they will hear that particular song is when there is something on the TV monitor that indicates how their desks should look.
5. She then plays about thirty seconds of "I Can See Clearly Now" and explains that this song will be played at the end of the class or when a general cleanup is warranted. Once again, this will be accompanied by an image on the TV monitor that will provide visual direction.
6. Mrs. Dalrymple then has the students practice setting up their desks using the songs and the images on the TV monitor. She stresses that book bags, jackets, and purses sitting on desks simply get in the way, so practicing desk setup also includes stowing everything personal under the desks and out of the way. On their second effort, she times them and then they work to improve that time.
7. On the second day of school, Mrs. Dalrymple stands in the doorway as students enter the room. With "Get Ready" playing, she observes how many of them remember the auditory and visual cues. Once again, they practice this procedure until by the end of the first week of school it has become routine.

Any teacher who has given a set of auditory directions to students knows very well that those directions may have to be repeated because someone (perhaps more than one someone) did not hear them. Mrs. Dalrymple, having done just that for years, decided to add the visual component and the musical cue, *basically taking her out of the equation*. She discovered she could now greet students as they entered, safe in the knowledge that inside the room, desks were being set up as required. The picture on the TV monitor leaves no room for uncertainty. Every desk simply needs to look like that!

She has also discovered that this saves time. Shortly after she enters the room, her students are ready to go. The *responsibility* for desk setup rests with them, not with Mrs. Dalrymple. All this is done without any intervention on her part other than raising the volume of the music before cutting it off, something that gets their attention. Once again, investing early in process pays big dividends later on.

Here is one more example of frontloading process in order to make things run smoothly down the road.

The students in Mr. McGrath's high school social studies class have just listened to a ten-minute story about one of Harriet Tubman's trips as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Mr. McGrath then asks each student to look around the room and locate his or her 3:00 partner. That done, Mr. McGrath plays an upbeat song while the students stand and pair up. He raises the volume a bit and then cuts it off, effectively getting their attention. He then says, "Talk with your partner about the story. Bring up with your partner any questions you might like to ask of me." As they begin to talk, Mr. McGrath plays another piece of music on his CD player.

While students talk, Mr. McGrath walks around and listens to the conversations and to the questions being posed. He makes a mental note of two good questions and asks those two students if they would be willing to share their questions with the entire class. Then he raises the volume of the music, cuts it off, and the students thank each other before returning to their seats. Once they are seated, he asks the two students who agreed to share to go ahead and do that. Mr. McGrath charts the questions without answering them and then asks for more. With an eventual list of six questions, he begins a general discussion of the material.

Once again, what did the teacher, Mr. McGrath, do to permit such a smooth transition from the story to the student pairing to the sharing?

1. During the first week of school, Mr. McGrath has students choose clock partners, so that each student has a permanent 12:00, 3:00, 6:00, and 9:00 partner. During that first week, he has them stand and meet with each of those partners in turn and asks them to discuss something having to do with themselves (e.g., favorite vacations, food, movies, or music). His purpose during those first few days is to get them used to talking to each other.
2. He also introduces them to the idea that music will accompany them to their partners and get them back to their seats. Music will also, he explains, be playing while they talk in order to make their conversations more private.
3. In the course of getting them used to this pair/share procedure, he has them acknowledge their partners repeatedly by thanking them before returning to their seats. He thus gets them into the habit of thanking each other *without being prompted*.
4. Finally, he explains to his students during that first week that he will try to keep any lectures or periods of “teacher talk” to no more than about ten minutes, after which they will have the opportunity to process the information with a partner or in a trio.

In the two examples above, Mrs. Dalrymple and Mr. McGrath committed to spending several days allowing students to become totally familiar with process. They understood that it is not enough to tell students how things will be—students must experience it and practice it until it becomes routine. In classroom after classroom where I observe that students are comfortable with routine and things run smoothly, teachers admit to spending a good deal of time in the first few days of school putting the process horse before the content cart.

Let’s go to elementary school for one more example.

Miss Walsingham uses part of the first day of school to get her fifth graders used to the idea that they will be up and moving much of the time in her classroom. During the course of the day, her twenty-two students stand and pair up on many occasions, always with a different person. The topics of discussion include their favorite weekend activities, their favorite meals, and vacations they would love to take. In the afternoon of that first day, each student is given a card with a topic he or she must explain in detail to a partner. Potential topics might be, What is your favorite time of day and why? or What kind of books do you enjoy reading? or What kind of television programs do you enjoy watching? The

listener's job is to summarize what his or her partner said when the answer has been completed.

During that first day, and continuing throughout the opening week of school, Miss Walsingham makes certain that students thank each other for sharing. She indicates that her expectation is that they will offer their own acknowledgment without being prompted. She also indicates that regardless of where they are sitting in the room, students will change partners frequently as they stand and share information during the course of the school year. By the end of the week, Mrs. Walsingham determines that everyone is ready for the introduction of content on the following Monday.

In each of our three examples, and regardless of grade level, the teachers have put process before content; they make certain students get used to talking, sharing, explaining, summarizing, and interacting with every child in the room. By the time subject area content is introduced into the mix, the process basics have been explained, practiced, and internalized. If time is of the essence, then time spent up front streamlining process will pay dividends later in the school year.

Introducing content prior to getting students used to the procedures can have disastrous consequences. I once observed a secondary classroom in which the teacher asked the students to turn to a partner and talk about the previous night's homework (a reading assignment). After a minute or so, the teacher intervened because the conversations were not happening. Several things became apparent to me within that painful minute:

1. The students did not have a regular partner. This first (and essential) part of the process had broken down because students were uncertain about with whom they should pair. The furniture in the room was arranged in such a way that it was difficult for students to move at all. Some students sat more or less alone around the room and could not easily find someone with whom to share.
2. Many of the students had not completed the previous night's reading assignment. Even if they found a partner, therefore, there was little to talk about related to content. This caused some embarrassment on the part of individual students and on the part of the teacher, who had apparently taken it for granted that they had done their homework and was finding out differently.

3. The teacher had obviously not spent time at the beginning of the year preparing the students for the whole idea of conducting student-to-student conversations. Not only were they unprepared in terms of content, they were in unfamiliar territory as it related to process.

Once again, when procedures (processes) become routine, classroom rules (few in number, positively stated, and clearly understood) will stand the test of time. For example, a student who has long ago adopted the *procedure* of standing with his hands at his side while listening quietly (and nonjudgmentally) to a partner in a pair-share activity has begun to master the rule concerning *respectful listening*. Absent efficient procedures, classroom rules are in jeopardy. After observing hundreds of classrooms over the years, I have come to the conclusion that *no matter how many rules are posted on the wall, the lack of effective procedural routine will undermine those rules until behavior spins out of control*. In high-performing classrooms, students know exactly what is expected of them and they do it without complaint or hesitation.

Final Thoughts

Establishing rules and procedures early in the school year, involving students in discussing and understanding the difference between the two, practicing the procedures until they become routine, and being consistent in the application of rules and consequences will help teachers avoid expensive missteps and instead keep it cheap. The course content can wait until the processes are well-established and well-understood.

For the most part, teachers make a fresh start each school year with a new group of students. The kids may be new to that classroom, but they are not new to the educational system. They are veteran students. Their expectations and all they have come to believe about school will accompany them into every new classroom. That sometimes-considerable experience includes teachers who took the time to build relationships and care about them. The students' experience may also include teachers whom the students perceived as more concerned with the content, or any number of other things, than with the students themselves. As teachers plan each summer for that fresh start in August or September, their preparation should include time to determine exactly *how to deposit heavily* in the kinds of relationship accounts that make success far more likely. Chapter 2 deals with this important aspect of building a solid foundation for learning.