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Calm the classroom storm

LONG READS

[Dr Bill Rogers \(/authors/dr-bill-rogers\)](#)

25 August 2014

A beginning teacher sees her Year 7 class line up – haphazardly – outside room 17. She has been told there are some challenges with this class – she knows this all too well.

As they line up, several boys at the back of the line are play punching or low level strangling, several students have hats on, and many are fiddling with their smartphones.

She's at the door, waiting. She doesn't wait long. She cues them to settle, lifting the voice – *relaxedly* she says, 'Settle down everyone.'

She pauses, and repeats. They start to settle. She cues the boys at the back, 'Troy, Dean, Mohammed ... playtime's over.'

Her brief *tactical* pausing helps focus their attention on what she has said.

'We're just mucking around Miss!'

She repeats: 'Playtime's over. Remember where we're going.'

She takes her eyes off them as she refocuses her attention to the rest of the class to 'lead' them in. She gives a brief reminder to all: 'Hats off, phones away, chewy in the bin on the way in. Thanks.'

This hasn't taken long. She knows that 60 to 70 per cent of the students will settle and refocus and cooperate in this transition between social time and classroom time, so that when she needs to cue the more disruptive students, the 60 to 70 per cent give her that moral authority to lead as she does.

She has been brief, positive, respectful and expectant in her leadership language and manner. *She has a plan.*

This transition between social and classroom time is crucial. She knows that if she just lets the students come in noisily, pushing, shoving, and with their hats on, it will have a significant effect on the establishment phase of the lesson itself.

She is aware that when engaged in any corrective cueing (discipline) she uses language that connects to expected behaviour, and that her tone and manner is respectfully, and confidently, calm. This 'calmness' is not some bland anodyne holding in of emotion; there is a sense of self-control, expectation and respectful confidence in her manner.

As they file in, she smiles. While standing at the classroom door, she greets and directs them to their seats. She had previously developed a seating plan (with her year-level colleagues) which has been placed on a wall chart. The plan is not based on friendship patterns.

She stands at the front, centre, of the classroom, waiting for their initial (if noisy) settling in to their seats. There's a fair bit of social chatter.

She cues the class as she scans the eyes of her students, 'Settling down everyone.'

She pauses for take-up and communicates a sense of calm, clear expectation. She repeats the whole-class cue adding, 'Eyes and ears this way.' She pauses – again – for take-up, adding 'thanks'. This is more expectational than 'please'.

She does not say, '*Would you* please face the front and listen ...?' or, '*Can you* please be quiet?' It is not a request. She is giving a confident, reasonable, whole-class direction.

She has a plan.

Most of the class are now 'settled'. Several students are still chatting. She says, 'Several students are chatting – it's whole-class teaching time.'

She briefly *describes* the distracting behaviour. She doesn't say, for example, 'Why are people still chatting? Weren't you listening?' She uses descriptive cues to briefly raise behaviour awareness.

She pauses – briefly – for take-up.

All this has not taken long. Jack and Mohammed are noisily fiddling with the window blind's cord. She doesn't ask 'Why?' or the even more pointless, 'Are you being silly with the window blinds?'

Instead, she briefly *describes* and *directs* to the expected behaviour: 'Jack, Mohammed, you're fiddling with the window blinds.'

This descriptive cue is then followed by a directional cue: 'Leave the blinds and [face] this way thanks.'

She doesn't say, 'Don't fiddle with the window blinds.' This would only tell the students what she *doesn't* want. When she gives behaviour directions or reminders she focuses (where possible) on the fair – expected – behaviour.

She is aware that any short corrective discipline cue is a social transaction. It has an effect, not just on the distracting and disruptive student, but on all - a fact highlighted in the 2011 Bill Rogers book *You know the fair rule*.

She refocuses her attention to the whole class again, giving the boys take-up-time (as she takes her eyes off them). They lean back, sigh, raise their eyes to the ceiling, but leave the blinds. She tactically ignores these secondary behaviours.

The class is basically settled now - it hasn't taken long. She rescans the eyes of her class, and senses that they have returned to the calm state they were in prior to social time.

Initiating and sustaining whole-class attention

The ability to *initiate and sustain whole-class attention and focus* is a crucial feature of any classroom activity. If we are unable to lead a focused beginning with students, it will be increasingly difficult for there to be any meaningful teaching and learning in the lesson.

In the case of the above scenario, the early career teacher is:

- Conscious of *cueing for calmness* by what she says, as well as how she says it. She is also aware of using a respectfully confident tone;
- Is particularly aware of her corrective language; *descriptive cues, directions and reminders to desired and expected behaviours*. For example: 'Do' rather than easy use of 'don't', 'Looking this way and listening, thanks,' rather than 'Don't talk while I'm teaching';
- She consciously – and *tactically* – ignores sibilant sighs, sotto-voce mutterings, and minimal eye contact. She keeps the focus of her behaviour language directed to the *primary* behaviour without over-servicing those 'secondary behaviours'.

It is after all this that she says ‘Good morning.’ She does not rush into a class greeting or talk *over* or *through* their chatting or kinaesthetic restlessness in those first minutes. Nor does she talk over, or through students who are calling out. In fact, she doesn’t give the class a greeting *until* they’re settled.

During whole class teaching time several students call out. She tactically pauses and says, ‘Several students are calling out; remember our class rule. Thanks.’ This incorporates a brief *descriptive cue* and a *rule reminder*.

When giving any rule reminder she uses inclusive language such as ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’ and ‘everyone’. She also doesn’t say ‘all’, instead ‘several students’. She is always aware of the residually cooperative 60 to 70 per cent of students. She expects hands up, one at a time, without finger clicking or calling out.

When students chat (while she is talking or a student is contributing to class discussion) she will – again – pause to cue the distracting students. She will not ask the students why they are talking. She will briefly *describe and direct*.

Before she cues the distracting chatterers, she positively cues the rest of the class. They have after all, had to put up with distracting chatterers.

‘Excuse me everyone,’ Turning to face the distracting students she says, ‘Lisa, Paula, you’re chatting. This is whole class teaching time.’

This describes their behaviour. They frown, sigh, indulgently slouch, and raise their eyes. She *tactically* ignores these features of their behaviour.

She briefly focuses on the primary behaviour and issue at this point. She adds a brief direction, ‘Facing this way, thanks.’ She finishes with thanks and takes her eyes off them, giving them take-up-time as she re-engages the whole-class discussion.

Again, this brief corrective cue has been positive, respectful, behaviourally focused. *She has a plan*.

References

Rogers, B. (2011). *You know the fair rule: strategies for positive and effective behaviour management and discipline in schools*. Australian Council for Educational Research: Melbourne

- To read part 2 of this series by Dr Bill Rogers click on the link: **[Make an easy transition into on-task learning time \(http://teacher.acer.edu.au/article/make-an-easy-transition-into-on-task-learning-time\)](http://teacher.acer.edu.au/article/make-an-easy-transition-into-on-task-learning-time)**.
- To read the final part of this series click on the link: **[How to follow up with disruptive students \(http://teacher.acer.edu.au/teacher/article/how-to-follow-up-with-disruptive-students-beyond-class-time\)](http://teacher.acer.edu.au/teacher/article/how-to-follow-up-with-disruptive-students-beyond-class-time)**.

Do Australian teachers agree that they lose a lot of time due to disruptive behaviour? Find out in this **[Teacher infographic \(http://teacher.acer.edu.au/article/classroom-discipline-in-australia\)](http://teacher.acer.edu.au/article/classroom-discipline-in-australia)**.

