

DO YOU HAVE A DISCIPLINE PROBLEM?

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Luke Prodromou and Lindsay Clandfield look at what constitutes and what causes bad behaviour.

Discipline problems in the classroom must be one of the most common difficulties teachers face and one of the least written about. We read a multitude of articles and books on methodology and magical solutions for getting students to communicate in English, but these often ignore the preconditions for making these approaches work: the sustained attention and cooperation of the learners themselves. This article sees discipline as an issue that affects *all* classes, from young learners to adults, not just a problem that concerns overactive children or restless teenagers.

What is a discipline problem?

The working definition we have chosen for a discipline problem is this: *'any action, overt or covert, that undermines the cohesion of the class'* So let's look at the range of behaviours in class that might be considered to undermine good discipline. Which of the following are you familiar with? Which would you consider 'misbehaviour'?

- 1 arriving late
- 2 making 'cheeky' remarks
- 3 wearing earphones in class
- 4 packing up early, as if to leave
- 5 always forgetting the book or a pen
- 6 looking out of the window
- 7 giggling with a partner all the time
- 8 insisting on grammatical explanations all the time
- 9 writing on the walls

10 not volunteering to answer questions There are, no doubt, many more examples you can think of which constitute a discipline problem. Suffice to say that a discipline problem is a complex issue, and can take a number of different forms, which are not always obvious. Sometimes misbehaviour takes an **overt** form: you can't *not* notice a student who is throwing things around the room or shouting out of turn. But there are also many less obvious forms of misbehaviour which we would refer to as '**covert**'; these actions – or 'inactions' – are often disguised as normal behaviour and are frequently ignored because teachers don't view them as real discipline problems. Stop and think for a moment. Which of those examples listed above would you consider *overt*, and which *covert*? Failure to respond appropriately to *both* types of 'misbehaviour' can have serious long-term effects on the cohesion of the group.¹

What isn't a discipline problem?

Is asking to leave class early or arriving late a discipline problem? What about chewing and clicking pens? To decide in particular circumstances whether an activity (like shouting out the answers to a question) or 'inactivity' (such as not taking part in pair- or groupwork) constitutes a discipline problem, we can apply two kinds of test. Firstly, we can apply our working definition of a discipline problem: Does the student's behaviour 'undermine the cohesion of the class'? Secondly, we can ask ourselves and the learners what would happen if all members of the group engaged in that particular form of behaviour: What would happen if we all shouted out or if we

all refused to take part in group activities? Would there be any cohesion left in the group if everyone arrived late and left early? Seen in this light, discipline is an issue that affects all classes and is inseparable from the 'mega-issue', whose importance all teachers recognise: motivation. Discipline problems and their causes are so varied and elusive it is probably easier to define the absence of a discipline problem, rather than its existence: *'When you can get students' attention and keep it (for the duration of a lesson), then it is safe to say you do not have discipline problems.'* Both overt and covert forms of indiscipline are signs that students are not paying the kind of attention you would like and are, by their actions, also undermining the 'togetherness' of the group, the idea of working collectively towards common aims.

What causes misbehaviour?

Before beginning to *address* a discipline problem, it's worth looking at what causes it. Why do students misbehave? Why is it that some days they are nice and other days they are nasty? Do they do it on purpose? There are several factors that can lead to poor behaviour by students.

Here are some:

- boredom
 - lack of interest in the subject
 - being in a school situation that is conducive to misbehaviour
 - lack of motivation to learn
 - peer pressure to misbehave
 - lack of respect for the teacher
- In an investigation into misbehaviour, many students themselves couldn't answer why they behaved badly. It wasn't always a conscious decision to 'ruin a class' (although that sometimes did happen in extreme cases). To get a deeper understanding of misbehaviour, one needs to look more closely at emotional and psychological factors within the students, within teachers and within the class as a whole. The study of group dynamics shows that groups go through four stages of development: forming, transition, performing and dissolution. The transition stage (also called *storming*) involves conflict within the group and between the group and its leader (the teacher in most cases). According to group dynamics theory, this conflict is perfectly natural, and it is only after it that the group can get to the performing stage, in which all the best work is achieved. A teacher who is prepared for the transition stage with a new class will realise that it is, as Murphey and Dörnyei put it, *'a normal and positive sign of group development'*. They advise us to *'expect some rain, and mediate and negotiate the group through the storm'*. In other words, don't panic. It's unavoidable and temporary, if you are prepared for it.

What the students need

An important psychological factor which is often referred to in research is the importance of self-esteem or feeling good about yourself. It is also common sense that if students feel bad about themselves, they are not going to want to work very hard at their English, unless we can make English a vehicle for instilling and strengthening their sense of self-esteem. The key to this process is to make students feel good about their work, however imperfect, and so, by extension, about themselves. There are a number of techniques that successful teachers use from the very beginning to help build and maintain students' self-esteem. Self-esteem is one 'need' that, once met, can help reduce a discipline problem. Abraham Maslow, a motivation theorist, lists it as part of a hierarchy of needs. In Maslow's scheme, self-esteem is one of the fundamental issues to address *before* students can be

motivated to learn. Other student needs include:

- the need to feel physically *comfortable* (the room should not be too hot or too cold; they should not feel hungry, thirsty or wish to go to the toilet!)
- the need to feel *safe*, both physically and mentally
- the need to feel they *belong* in the group
- the need to feel the activities respect where they are coming from and help them fulfil their aims as human beings

What the teacher needs

This is all very well, but we as teachers also need to build on group dynamics theory and Maslow's ideas and to come up with a more discipline-specific model to work with, in which motivation and fulfilment of needs take their place in a broader strategy for eradicating (or reducing) discipline problems, as well as setting in place This model suggests we attack the problem of discipline on a number of different levels.

1 Rules, regulations ...and rewards

The most common approach to putting a stop to 'misbehaviour', as traditionally conceived, is to impose rules and regulations. This is the 'crime and punishment' approach. The teacher or the school draws up a list of 'Dos and Don'ts' and if students violate these constraints on behaviour, sanctions are imposed. This is still a necessary item in a teacher's toolkit for escaping the frequently desperate straits into which unruly behaviour pushes many teachers, and its importance must not be underestimated. However, one can 'humanise' the way the rules and regulations are arrived at by involving the students in the process of drawing up a 'classroom contract'. A further humanistic refinement of the rules and regulations approach is to add a third 'r', to make 'rules, regulations and rewards'. This simply means that you not only take every opportunity to praise students, but also build into your rules a system of rewards to provide extrinsic motivation for students to behave better. For example:

- ending the lesson with a game or a song;
- giving a 'hint' or advice about an upcoming exam;
- giving a sweet to a student who has given a good answer (this also makes the prohibited act of eating in class a rare treat for work well done);
- gold stars for children (and why not adults?) for good work;
- certificates for younger learners, which could be sent home for parents or displayed on the wall;
- a special class reward, like a trip or excursion;
- a video that the students choose, or a trip to the computer room (both, if your school has the facilities);
- a phone call or writing home (this is usually reserved for bad behaviour in children, but can have an extremely beneficial effect if used for good behaviour).

2 Responses to misbehaviour

Building good discipline in class goes beyond rules and regulations, however humanistically conceived they may be. Teachers have a series of options on how to respond when misbehaviour occurs, if it warrants a response. Here is a checklist of possible responses (adapted from McManus):

- 1** Nip trouble in the bud by using eyes, gesture, proximity, territory invasion, touch or an invitation to contribute to the lesson.
- 2** Use the student's name, specify unwanted behaviour and clarify the target activity.
- 3** Give task-related reasons for disapproval rather than personalising the problem.

- 4 Make corrective statements short.
- 5 Avoid reciting past misdemeanours.
- 6 Avoid making unfavourable comparisons with other students.
- 7 Correct the action not the actor.
- 8 Infer approval of the individual but disapproval of the action.
- 9 Try to let natural consequences be the punishment (eg no involvement in homework-dependent activity).
- 10 Avoid mass punishment.
- 11 Stare and shift eye contact. A hard stare can be more effective than a stern rebuke.
- 12 Focus on the principal in group disruption.
- 13 Give soft, private reprimands – often better than noisy public rebuke.
- 14 Establish peace clearly and explicitly before moving on.
- 15 Prepare a strong ending to your lesson, to be adhered to after disruption.

Additionally, of course, you need sanctions, or the threat of sanctions, as part of your response. Sanctions can vary from the most minimal (a verbal reprimand or even a mere frown from the teacher) to the most draconian (expulsion from the classroom or school, achieved through the use of the institutional authority of the director or head teacher). The advantage of the 3Rs approach above is that one kind of sanction can involve withholding rewards (or postponing them). Making motivating group rewards dependent on good group behaviour will also mean that the group itself will punish misbehaviour of its members without you having to do anything.

3 Classroom management

The way we handle time and space in the classroom can have a powerful impact on students' behaviour. The staging and pacing of classroom activities, an intuition for when it is time to move on to another activity, the use of the classroom space, the arrangement of desks (or how we move within a fixed arrangement of desks), whether we sit or stand, whether we face the students or turn our backs on them, the way we use eye contact and so on – all of these factors can have a subtle but powerful effect on the cohesion of a group of students. They can help us get attention *and* keep it; they can help us keep up the pace and keep down the noise. It is natural that students have a centrifugal or 'switching off' tendency, and it is useful to be aware of some of the danger points where this often happens and to learn how to nip such tendencies in the bud. Students may switch off when:

- 1 someone else is answering comprehension questions;
- 2 someone else suggests words to fill blanks;
- 3 another group is giving feedback or presenting a dialogue;
- 4 they have answered *their* question and the teacher then goes on to ask questions in a predictable sequence round the room;
- 5 a question or task is too easy or too difficult.

Checking and cross-checking

There are a number of simple ways in which we can respond to 'switching off' in order to keep students involved. One technique is to 'cross-check' around the room, going from student to student in unpredictable ways and going back to students who have already answered *their* question. Nominating or using students' names plays a useful role here in activating involvement, in contrast to letting students just put their hands up. A vivid metaphor for this crosschecking process is the way the ball is kept moving and is passed from player to player in football. So if you want to stop students

from switching off during routine comprehension checking or discussion, keep the ball moving! Check and cross-check around the room.

Body, eyes and voice

Another more subtle aspect of classroom management which can have either positive or negative effects on the attention of a group is the use of body language, eye contact and voice. Students may 'switch off' when we turn our backs to them in whole or in part; when we make little eye contact with them or adopt a tone of voice that says *'what we are doing is dull or unimportant'* or *'I don't really expect you to know the answer to this question'* and so on. Compare these two comments: *'He was a small man with a high-pitched rasping voice. I found it difficult to keep awake in his lessons because of the monotonous drone of his voice. I was forced to do nothing but listen to his voice.'* Student, 18, Greece

'He used the right intonation, by raising and lowering his voice appropriately, and in this way he gave his lessons a colour, a special tone, a kind of personality.'

Student, 19, Spain The remedy to switching off because of these factors is to use your body, eyes and voice to *include* rather than *exclude* the maximum number of students. We could sum this up as: 'stand inclusively', 'look inclusively' and 'speak inclusively'. To use another metaphor, your body language, eyes and voice should throw an invisible net around the room to capture the attention of all the students and not just some of them.

Classroom layout

The way the desks are arranged can also have a powerful effect on group dynamics. This has been written on extensively in communication methodology. Suffice to say that one can imagine the difference between having students sitting in straight lines (the 'you're-in-the-army-now' or 'now we- are-going-to-have-a-test' formation) and having students sitting in a semicircle (the 'we're-all-in-it-together' formation).

Unfortunately, many classes have immovable desks and the teacher is stuck with one fixed formation: usually a row of straight lines where students look mostly at the back of other people's heads – not a good thing for building cohesion, rapport or interaction! What can you do when faced with inflexible furniture? One response is to ask yourself: if the furniture *can't* move, what else *can* move? Answer: the teacher, the learners, the material (eg slips of paper), eye contact and the way students are asked to interact with each other.

Working with desks that are screwed to the floor

- 1** Move around the space in a dynamic way.
- 2** Use the space in an unusual way; surprise them!
- 3** Think vertically and horizontally, up/down, side-to-side, crouch, kneel, sit, stand, focus attention on different parts of the room.
- 4** Make words, sentences, messages and paper move round the space.
- 5** Get only some of the students to move around for mingling activities; have the others act as 'anchors'.

Each teacher will have their own way of dealing, or not dealing, with a discipline problem. There are many variables, such as age, environment and cultural background. Some classes have discipline problems because they have not gelled properly. And as every teacher knows, there are always some days when nothing goes right. In this article we have looked at what constitutes a discipline problem and

what causes one. Being armed with this knowledge is a good first step to dealing with discipline issues. We have approached discipline on the traditional level of rules and regulations, or the question of what students are allowed to do, what they are obliged to do and what the official sanctions are for failing to abide by these rules. We have also looked at classroom management and the effect this can have on student behaviour. Once we have addressed these 'needs', we can begin to build on them. Discipline-friendly techniques, motivation and rapport, attitude and presence (RAP) are the next stages in our pyramid – stages which we will turn to in our next article. 1 In our opinion, examples 1, 3, 7 and 9 are overt forms of misbehaviour, while 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10 are covert forms of misbehaviour.

McManus, M *Troublesome Behaviour in the Classroom* (2nd ed) Routledge 1995

Murphey, T and Dörnyei, Z *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom* CUP 2005

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