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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL: THE TAMING OF THE CREW

Karen Jones

MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL

January

Smugly and defiantly, Matt sauntered into the room, ambled to a back seat and settled himself next to two characters looking as guileful as he. What, I wondered, are the counselors trying to do to me? Matt was in dire need of a bath. His hair was unkempt and his clothes were worn and torn. But nothing about him was as disarming as the insidious grin on his face.

June

Confidently and happily, Matt buoyantly entered the room, nimbly walked to a front seat and settled himself alone in preparation for participation and learning. Matt was still in dire need of a bath. His hair remained unkempt and his clothes were torn and worn. But his bedraggled, faded shirt had been exchanged for a tattered sports jacket and his insidious grin for a sincere smile of greeting and warmth.

What caused this 1975 version of a Pygmalion transition? What kept this chronically truant youngster, with a detailed and dramatic delinquency record of "D's and E's" coming to class? What initiated his pertinent participation? What prompted his answers and willingness to read orally? What drove him to stand unexpectedly before my desk between class hours to say, "Hi"? Who wrote the script and set the stage for this performance?

It was I. And yet, I wonder, what conscious and unconscious methods did I utilize to attribute to Matt's regeneration and success?

The classroom need not be a festering wound, infected with belligerence and boredom. The Matts and Marys of our school systems need not walk placidly and passively through the educational arena merely to find truancy and delinquency more satisfying to their needs than classroom attendance and participation. Viable techniques and procedures, if used sincerely, knowledgeably and consistently by a concerned classroom teacher, can result in minimized discipline infractions.

The first requisite necessary for an ideal learning situation is the establishment of a positively reinforcing and comfortable classroom atmosphere. One of the most severe limitations stifling adolescent intake and output is lack of self-esteem. The classroom teacher can best supplement a teenager's self-concept by valuing the student as a student and as a person. Each student should be seen as a reservoir of potential wealth of creativity and productivity. The student should be valued for who he/she is, what he/she is, and what he/she can become. This acceptance means the encouragement of student expression of opinion. Feeling what he/she has to say is sought and heard helps fulfill the ego needs of the young person.

Feeling important and prized, the student is more receptive to learning.

In addition to teacher appreciation, the student must feel recognized and valued by his peers. The teacher can again have a hand in this process by disallowing peer degradation. Teenagers can be intentionally and unintentionally malicious in their verbal and non-verbal feedback. A positive classroom atmosphere does not include tongue lashings and back-biting. Through firm insistence and modelled behavior, a teacher can discourage negativism and leave the air clear of hostile criticisms.

A third step toward creating a positive classroom atmosphere is through continuous emphasis of strengths. All people enjoy feeling successful. Attained accomplishments derived from success experiences and practices can only result in heightened motivation, interest and willingness to try further. Immediate, emphatic and sincere reinforcement is an example of a success experience. Something good can be found in every endeavor. Task completion in itself can be reinforced. Comments of encouragement in the margins of papers and mathematical calculation of answers correct (instead of incorrect) are additional examples of reinforcement leading to feelings of success. Handing written work back within a short period of time makes student efforts seem worthwhile. A complimentary, public statement concerning oral reading ability or supplied verbal answers encourages further voluntary participation. Human beings strive for feelings of gratification and success. If these are supplied through the actions of the classroom teacher, in the confines of a friendly, accepting, positively directed climate, there will be lesser need for students to rebelliously seek reinforcement elsewhere.

The second requirement necessary to minimize discipline infractions and maximize learning is appropriately modelled behavior. The instructor in a class setting, like any human being, can ask and expect of others only what he/she is willing to ask and expect of himself/herself. Respect is not an undeniable right of or guaranteed promise to the educator. It is obtained through the mutual respect of students. This respect includes such displayed characteristics as sensitivity to students' needs and desires, kindness and consideration of students' moods and feelings and common courtesies toward students' existence and humanness. Too often teachers, expecting the above, show rudeness and inconsideration in return. A polite request is much sooner honored than an abrupt demand. Granted permission results in future honesty and open communication. An ability to sympathize and empathize puts the teacher in a human light. And an expression of apology places the teacher at a personal arm's reach instead of blocked behind barriers of remoteness. Modelled respect and recognition of student humanness engenders the same in return.

A second behavior expected by teachers is attentive listening. Modelled behavior on the part of the facilitator would include mutual attendance to the world of the student. A realistic teacher must recognize that what is going on outside of the class and after school is often more important to the student than the subject at hand. A teacher must express interest in the world and activities of youth. This extension of the valuing process includes

the ability to listen to what is not said as well as to what is said. Observations and actions through the mind and heart give students indicators of appropriate behavior.

The third modelled behavior necessary for inducement of the same in students is that of maturity. “Why don’t you grow up?” is not only a question to be asked of students but of many teachers as well. It is required for the development of a positive classroom atmosphere free of disciplinary strife, that a teacher not succumb to student game playing. Anger does not dispel anger, emotional reaction does not squelch irrational outbursts, uncontrolled verbal attack does not suppress an irritating voice. Confidence (not egocentricity), assurance (not self-righteousness), and self-control are the ingredients of rational and reasonable reactions. When a student is feeling inadequate, disowning blame and fault-finding are directed at the “enemy.” A teacher must remain unthreatened, exhibit the above characteristics, and guide the student back to logical thinking. Modelling, of course, refers to setting an example. The classroom teacher has ample opportunity to display just what is meant by appropriate behavior and adulthood.

A *third ingredient* of a productive classroom involves the preparation and presentation of effective instruction. Learning is directly proportional to the amount of effort devoted to each year, unit and lesson plan. Haphazard, off-the-cuff teaching is usually non-directional and lacking in continuity. This type of non-planning results in confusion, frustration and minimal learning.

Well-planned instruction is structured in nature. Structure does not imply inflexibility. Rather, it implies an understandable, intelligible framework which systematically guides students from one point to the next. Transitionally and cohesively it shows relationships and draws conclusions, leading the students on a continuous, unaborted journey through the lesson, unit and year. Craving security, young people appreciate and sometimes demand structure. Too much freedom places them on shaky stairways going nowhere. They want to know where they are, where they are expected to go and how to get there. “Today you will write a paper three pages long on any subject; I haven’t decided when it is due,” is not direction. The final products (if any) will be as haphazardly and carelessly written as was the given instruction. Students, and especially the non-academic, non-reading, potentially rebellious students, look for concern and devotion in the teacher. Caring, like other emotions is contagious.

Well-planned instruction should have a sound beginning. It is very wise to begin instruction at a point of success. Book selection of free reading materials, for example, is one area where students should be allowed to read whatever they choose (within reason) even if the reading level of the book is lower than the independent reading level of the individual student. Beginning at points of enjoyment and pleasure can and will more quickly lead to progression and escalation of learning than beginning at points of failure and frustration. Secondly, introductory material should begin with that which is familiar. The unfamiliar can then gradually and un-

threateningly be approached and tackled. Plot, for example, is an easily understood characteristic of short story. A majority of students can read a story (if appropriately selected according to class reading and maturity level) and relate what has happened. Theme is a much more difficult concept. If an instructor begins with the familiar, in this case plot, theme can be conquered through effective manipulation and utilization of the plot substance. The concept of theme would appear less tasking, yet internalization of learning would result. And a third aspect of a sound instructional beginning is aiming emphasis at the concrete. What can be observed and conceptualized is much easier to grasp and understand than those learnings which are abstract and intangible. Again referring to the aspects of plot and theme, the teacher can first ask to be told what is there and then eventually ask to be told what is not there, hidden below the surface and unobservable. Well-planned instruction initiated by a tactful introduction will set the student on a directed, sequential road to learning.

But it is often difficult to decide just where to begin in the planning and presentation of material. One aid in the development of appropriate instruction is student input. High school students are most often realistic about their ability need areas. They recognize and admit to their personal learning limitations (sometimes to an extreme). They therefore can serve as resource persons in the diagnosis of classroom needs; they can lend a very supportive, helping hand in devising curriculum. This is not to say that they will precisely select every source and subject area which is exactly right for them. They can, however, identify interest and need areas, thereby supplying motivational tools with which to begin a productive program. Having a say in a democratic, attentive atmosphere again adds impetus to feelings of self-worth, while increasing cooperation and willingness to produce.

Effective instruction must be more, however, than well planned and organized. Supportive rationale and concrete objectives must be the backbone of any successful program. Students must be able to see the need, purpose and reason behind learning. The mechanics of English, particularly the rules and regulations of punctuation, have been approached negatively and reluctantly for years. The major cause of this adverse reaction is that the skills and drills involved in the learning process seem meaningless and useless. Effectual presentation can make the purpose and reason for punctuation apparent. Placing several poems on a transparency and omitting punctuation easily shows how various punctuation marks in different places can change the entire structure and thus meaning of a poem. If this concept is understood in relation to poetry, effective transfer can be made to prose, i.e. punctuation is needed in writing—its inclusion and/or omission changes the meaning of the context. With this type of concrete example and explanatory preface, students will be able to see the reason for and meaning behind learning.

There are additional ways to make learning meaningful. One such way is through independent work meeting individual needs. Setting aside time, perhaps one hour a week for independently selected and desired work is an

efficient and favorable method by which a teacher can become personally related to students on a one-to-one basis. Keeping tabs and touching base with students in formulating plans, contracting work, and following up with evaluation increases communication while involving the student in a need and/or interest area. Identifying what is important to themselves personally gives students additional reason and meaning behind their endeavors.

A third technique to give purpose to learning is through its creative application and relation to the world of the teenager. If material is left in black print on a white page, it is understandable that students often fail to value and appreciate what is read. If reading material is dramatized, even the oldest classics can become relevant and applicable. Conflict in love has transcended generations, making the struggles of Romeo and Juliet quite like those of Mark and Lisa in the next room. And if the facilitator finds it difficult to manipulate the classics, there is an abundance of current adolescent fiction on hand. The mean is irrelevant, the goal is the concern. If the teenager can see the relationships between the classroom and classroom activities and the world in which he lives, integration of learning will occur.

In addition to pertinent subject matter, introduction to usable and practical knowledge will heighten motivation and increase learning. The writing of a business letter becomes a much more palatable task if it is written for a real-life and functional purpose. Letters can be written to send for information or applications or to express concern or complaint. A mailed letter results in tangible returns. To write a letter just because the teacher said so, means nothing. Vocabulary is another area where a practical approach is beneficial. It is much more logical to assign words which can and will be incorporated into a speaking and perhaps writing vocabulary, than to assign words of such length and difficulty that immediate and temporary memory span lasts for the duration of the quiz and that is all. Similarly, writing skills can be practiced efficiently on applications, driver's license forms, and order blanks. Placing practical and usable emphasis behind instruction not only adds meaning but also better prepares the student for the world he/she is to enter. Meaningful, purposeful, pertinent instruction requires inclusion of long and short range goals and objectives which hit at the heart of the student and his/her world.

Once plans have been prepared, supported by sound rationale, presentation of material can occur. And here again, special care must be taken to make learning profitable. Prior to actual presentation, it is necessary to identify several standard and unique delivery systems. Once systems have been identified, experimentation ensues until the teacher has selected the most effective approach for each individual concerned. Learning and delivery systems include such aspects as seat arrangement, oral and written tasks, hands-on activities, lecture and discussion, small and large group work and so on. What works best for each individual should be incorporated into the classroom structure. This calls for flexibility, creativity and spontaneity on the part of the teacher. But if each student

can meet with success within his/her own private realm and method of learning, he/she will be better equipped to venture into other territory.

Presentation also includes preparing the students for learning. Monday is a good day to state the weekly plan. Follow up reminders of assignments and expectations are also important. Summarizing activities and knowledges covered the previous day(s) maintains unity and cohesiveness in instruction. These simple, non-time consuming reminders ready the students for involvement and learning.

Directional steps can also be given in preparation and anticipation of individual lessons. Students should always be directed, through the use of introductory remarks, as to the relevance and purpose of the next assignment. Questions and guidelines should alert students to reading expectations. Guiding students to look for answers to concrete questions enhances comprehension. Follow-up discussion and application of learning assures internalization. Most importantly, students should be actively involved in the learning process. Active involvement does not mean busy-work but rather purposefully directed preliminary and follow-up presentation. Well-planned and presented instruction, based on sound rationale, is a major tool toward classroom control and productivity.

Implementation and maintenance of control and classroom standards is the fourth required measure necessary for maximized learning and minimized discipline problems. The emphasis in a healthy classroom environment is on prevention rather than on retribution. The teacher must begin early to maintain control by setting high standards and by making expectations known. Students need and request direction concerning behavioral requirements as much as they do concerning academic requirements. They wish to know where they stand and what they can and cannot do. They respond positively to consistency in demands and follow-through. If they are aware of consequences and if they observe justice being done, they will willingly abide by the rules or willingly accept the stated punishments. Students speak out against chaotic classroom climates, see the maintenance of discipline as the role of the teacher, and respect fair and consistent enforcement of regulations.

The teacher must be alert to the total classroom situation. It is necessary that minor offenses be overlooked or minimally emphasized. Too often teachers over-react to disruptive behavior. This emphatic response is the exact reinforcement the attention-seeking, manipulative student needs to repeat his/her actions and perhaps establish a pattern of chronic misbehavior. Frenzied and frantic gyrations on the part of the teacher are open invitations for interruptive behaviors. An accepting and mature sense of humor (not drinking-buddy, back-slapping leniency), a firm and controlling eye and a steadied and lowered voice, on the other hand, are three key elements to effective discipline.

If and when disorderly or inappropriate conduct does occur, private sessions of complaint and punishment must be conducted. Public defamation of character (although sometimes effective) does little for establishing a positive atmosphere and building self-concept. Open

communication and controlled anger, better attained after a time lapse, can turn a disciplinary involvement into a learning situation. Through mature handling of a sensitive teenager, the exhibited behavior can be examined, discussed, and modified, leaving a functioning relationship between student and teacher to build upon in the future. Teenagers, if treated as adults, most frequently respond accordingly.

The transition of Matt was seemingly miraculous. But this type of miracle resulted from a concentrated effort to establish a positive classroom atmosphere, to model appropriate behavior, to provide effective instruction, and to maintain classroom control. As a result of determined striving, miracles like Matt can and will happen each year. The classroom can be as inviting as the local hangout or street corner. The secondary school teacher can make it so. The task is prodigious; the reward is monumental.