

A long fifty Minutes

Practice described

I was about to experience my third Year 5 German lesson during my four week block. The class comprised equal gender numbers of: eleven ten year old boys and girls all of whom were relatively new to German. The language class was an immersion program in which only German is used. I felt confident; I had scripted my lessons well and had clear instructions. In addition, I had a well- planned and engaging lesson: what could go wrong? I thought of my classroom management plan which, in the first instance, is based on a preventive strategy where a highly engaging lesson simply 'out-compete[s] inappropriate behaviour' (Arthur, Gordon & Butterfield 2003, p.1). Somewhere in the back of my mind I had my intervention plan based on Canter's assertive discipline, in which classroom rules are drawn up and behaviour rewarded or consequences enforced. Although I had devised my plan with sincerity, Skinner's operant conditioning in which students are reduced to objects who react to external stimuli, did not sit comfortably with my humanistic pedagogy.

I began the lesson as my mentor had suggested with the students seated on the floor in a circle where we would sing the German greeting song. We greeted each other and then began counting in German from 1 – 20. It was during this activity, when some of the boys began elbowing each other; I therefore stopped the lesson and warned the boys that they would be moved if it happened again – it did, so I moved them. It was then time for the main lesson focus which was a listening lesson for which the students needed to sit at their desks. I instructed students to go to their desks without giving thought to 'with whom'. Naturally, the disruptive boys sat together. In order to evoke prior learning and scaffold the upcoming task, I needed to pre teach some vocabulary. I began holding up images of the upcoming sports and eliciting them in their German lexeme. While the majority of the students were fully engaged, the disruptive boys began their usual elbowing and talking. Once again, I stopped the lesson and moved the boys separating them. By this time, ten minutes had passed when the pre teaching vocab task should have only taken five minutes. I began to feel stressed that I would not be able to complete the listening task and achieve the lesson outcomes – nevertheless I remained calm (on the surface).

With the pre teaching of the vocabulary task over, I then instructed students to get out their work books and turn to page ten. Some students reached for their books while the majority did nothing. Something was wrong; the majority had not understood but no time to act as the disruptive boys had once again begun acting up in their new positions. I decided to deal with the boys first, although I didn't really know how, as I only had a vague memory of what my intervention was and I had to get

through the lesson. I decided to simply warn them to stop talking and get on with the lesson. By the time I got back to the simple instruction of getting the students to open their books, I had forgotten to grade my language and repeated the same instruction. Once again, blank faces. This time I grabbed the nearest student's book and pointed to the appropriate page – the gesture had worked and there was momentary progress. I then began to play the audio and the boys started chatting again. The entire audio took much longer as I had to keep pausing it in order to quieten the boys. Finally the bell sounded with the desired outcomes not achieved. On the way back to the staffroom my mentor commented: 'A long fifty minutes?' – I agreed.

Questions:

- 1) If I had gone to the lesson prepared to implement my intervention strategy based on Canter's assertive discipline, would I have achieved my outcomes?
- 2) Had I created an optimum learning environment?

Practice theorised

As Marzano (2003, p. 1) argues, 'Effective teaching and learning cannot take place in a poorly managed classroom. If students are disorderly and disrespectful, and no apparent rules and procedures guide behaviour, chaos becomes the norm. In these situations both teachers and students suffer'. Clearly, although not outright chaos, my year 5 German lesson had become chaotic enough that both students and I had suffered. The students were not able to achieve the desired outcomes for the lesson and I had been put under considerable pressure that may have been prevented had I begun the lesson with a clear intervention strategy in mind.

Practice changed

Although I still see aspects of behaviourism theory dehumanising and manipulative, I now have first hand experience in the importance of a rigorous classroom management plan. In spite of a teacher's best efforts to plan engaging lessons which hopefully out-compete inappropriate behaviour, they must have an intervention plan and be prepared to use it. I am yet to teach year 5 German since this episode but have discussed my assertive discipline plan with my mentor. We have agreed that I use an external reward system, if necessary.

References

Arthur, M, Gordon, C & Butterfield, N 2003, 'Towards an ecological model of classroom management', in *Classroom Management: Creating positive learning environments*, 2nd ed, Thomson, South Melbourne, pp. 1-12.

Mazarno, R 2003, *Classroom Mangement That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Every Teacher*, Alexandria, NSW: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, pp. ix, 10.