

## Specifying and Reinforcing Productive Student Behavior

### What is the pedagogical practice of specifying and reinforcing students' productive behavior?

The practice of specifying and reinforcing productive student behavior aims to create a classroom environment that fosters learning. As Charlotte Danielson explains in her book "Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching," this implies that the teacher has high expectations of his or her students' work and ability and holds them - rigorously and lovingly - to that standard. In classrooms where there is a culture of learning, time is maximized and both the teacher and students give their best effort. Moreover, this learning culture is based on respectful interaction between teacher and students, and among the students themselves, who do not seek to embarrass or "beat" the one who does not understand. When this culture is established in the classroom, where everyone works with enthusiasm, and where students feel ownership and pride in their learning.

To achieve productive behavior, the teacher must clearly specify work expectations, reinforce expected behaviors, and quickly and strategically redirect non-productive behavior. The goal, as Doug Lemov explains in his book "Teach Like a Champion," is to have 100% of the students ready to learn, to have 100% of the class time, and to see that everyone gives 100%. Establishing a culture of learning and a productive environment requires the expertise of the teacher who clearly describes expected behaviors, is vigilant in verifying that all students are working productively, congratulates and challenges those who give their best effort, and manages effective techniques to redirect those who do not.

In a productive environment, students clearly know what is expected of them. In these classrooms, the objective is always deep learning, and everything is done with this in mind. For example, when the teacher calls the students' attention, he/she takes care to remind them of the meaning of what they are learning, and not to drop his/her authority on the student. Also, the consequences of undesired behaviors look to make up for wasted learning time or missed learning opportunity. For example, the logical consequence of not doing work in class is to ask the student to stay and do it after class or during recess. Once again, then, the focus is always on learning and the promotion of those behaviors that can best enhance it.

## What is not Specifying and reinforcing students' productive behavior

- The goal of reinforcing productive behavior is not to maintain discipline for the sake of order, but to encourage learning. Therefore, it is important to remember that sitting quietly in the chair is not always conducive to deep learning. The teacher must be flexible enough to perceive, in each case, what behavior is appropriate to support learning.
- Along the same direction, the use of rewards makes sense only if the rewarded behavior is truly conducive to deep learning, and only if the learner clearly recognizes which behavior merited the reward.
- Redirecting non-productive behaviors should not be taken as an opportunity for the teacher to re-establish his or her authority in the classroom. The focus of the class should always be on learning, and so verbal calls for attention should be quick, strategic, and as infrequent as possible. Likewise, it is not appropriate for the teacher to enter into the authority game when he or she feels challenged by a student. Since the focus is on learning, the teacher makes sure that the calls for attention are subtle, do not ridicule the student, and do not disrupt the flow of the class.
- Specifying productive behavior is not the same as expecting all students to do exactly the same thing at the same time. Classroom management should not be transformed into military discipline. Since the focus is on learning, it is to be expected, and even desirable, that equally productive behaviors will not be identical in all students. It will be the teacher's task to recognize when one student needs to be challenged to perform more complex behaviors, and when another will require a new version of the described behavior to be equally productive.

## Teaching strategies for specifying and reinforcing students' productive behaviors

- **Clear rules:** It is advisable to start the year by setting classroom rules. With older students, the teacher can reach a consensus with them and democratically choose the rules for the class. Contracts can also be signed to establish everyone's commitment to the rules. In addition, the rules can be written down somewhere in the room. With younger children, the rules can be written in a way that makes them easy to remember (with rhyme, for example).
- **Make explicit expectations and describe them:** before starting any assignment, the teacher should describe the behavioral expectations he/she expects from the students. Make them explicit in a positive way (e.g., "During this assignment, everyone will write in silence" vs. "During this assignment, no one is allowed to talk"). The more specific the description, the easier it will be to follow the behavior. Also, the teacher should demonstrate that he/she has full

confidence that his/her students will be able to meet these expectations (e.g., it is not appropriate to say things like "This course never works in silence").

- **Vicariously reinforcing expected behaviors:** the teacher reinforces expected behaviors by narrating aloud the actions of students who are following the expected behavior. This narration is especially useful when students are young. For example, the teacher says something like "I see that John is already sitting with his notebook open, ready to begin class"; or "I see that there are several students who have their hand up and are waiting their turn to answer the question."
- **Model complex behaviors:** when the expected behavior is particularly complex, it is appropriate for the teacher or a student to model it. For example, if the expected behavior is to participate critically during a debate, the teacher can give specific examples of what it means to participate critically (e.g. "I will take notes of what the counterpart says so that I will be prepared when it is my turn to respond", "I will be attentive to look for contradictions in their arguments", "I will cite my sources when I give my arguments", etc.).
- **Use role-play:** the teacher can ask a group of students to simulate the expected behavior. Then, the teacher can lead a discussion with the rest of the course to identify which actions should be done and which should not, according to the expected behavior (e.g., two students simulate how to perform an experiment in the laboratory, and the rest of the course reflects on which method should be used).
- **Use fishbowl-type activity:** one group of students simulates the expected behavior while the rest of the class sits around them, as if looking at a fishbowl. The teacher interrupts the simulation from time to time to ask the other students to describe the behaviors they see and to give feedback to their peers according to the expected behavior (e.g., students simulate how to plan a research paper, and the rest of the class reflects on the steps to carry it out).
- **Describe the "how" and not only the "what":** when assigning each task, the teacher describes not only the product he/she expects to receive, but also the expected behavior during the process. For example, a teacher who asks his/her students to write a poem should not only describe the topic and the structure it should follow, but also the style of work he/she expects from the students (e.g. "A poet who is writing is always attentive to different sources of inspiration, seeks help and feedback from other poets whose work he respects, constantly revises and corrects his first draft, does not settle for something decent but seeks excellence, works for the love of art, etc.").
- **Use systems to record productive behavior (paper or digital, such as ClassDojo):** for courses where it is more difficult to guide student behavior, reward systems can be used to reinforce instances of productive behavior. This can be done using dashboards or lists where expected behaviors are recorded and where students earn points that they can then "redeem" for desired rewards (e.g., a congratulatory phone call/text message to their parent, choosing the book to

be read next class, being recognized in front of the school, etc.). There are also digital tools for recording and rewarding expected behaviors such as ClassDojo and Kibbtz.

In his book "Teach Like a Champion," Doug Lemov describes other strategies:

- **Radar / Make the teacher's attention visible:** after giving an instruction, the teacher can stand in a corner (not at the front) of the classroom and quickly check if all students are doing what they were asked to do. It is even better if students get used to the fact that the teacher is always watching them because it makes them feel more responsibility to follow an instruction at once.
- **Describe the expected behavior as a challenge rather than a minimum expectation:** to prevent students from settling for a mediocre minimum in meeting the expected behavior, expectations should be not only clear, but also challenging. For example, instead of asking students to open the books to page 2, a teacher might ask them to open the books and identify 3 striking things about the picture on page 2. Similarly, instead of saying something like "Everyone should be writing," the teacher can say "I want to see the sheet with more than 3 paragraphs already written."
- **Redirect disruptive behavior subtly and quickly:** if possible, it is preferable not to disrupt the class and only use nonverbal language (such as gestures or glances) to get a student's attention. It is not appropriate to get the attention of a particular student because the rest of the class will tend to look at the student and see the disruptive behavior. The goal is for the disruptive behavior to receive as little attention as possible. When it becomes completely necessary to call a student's attention, it is recommended for it to be done in private, after asking the rest of the class to complete a task. If this is not possible and it is necessary to call the student's attention in public, it is best to do so quickly and always end the comment by focusing attention on another student who is behaving productively (e.g., "Juan, notebook out and get to work so you can learn a lot today. Very good, Maria, who already has her notebook and is writing"). Saying the student's name without specifying what behavior is expected of the student does not help the student.
- **Specific and positive compliments:** to reinforce productive behavior, it is helpful to be specific in praising the student and to describe what action is being praised. For example, the teacher says "Very good, Pedro, you used one of our new words and also dared to innovate in the structure of the poem", instead of simply saying "Good job on this poem, Pedro", or using sarcasm by saying "It seems you can work well when you want to".
- **Give consequences that promote learning:** To redirect disruptive behavior, the teacher assigns consequences. Consequences should be quick (redirect behavior immediately, if possible), incremental and proportional (allow room for small mistakes and small consequences), consistent (make it clear to the student that doing X always leads to consequence Y), and depersonalized (let the student know that the punishment is for his wrong action and not a

rejection of him as a person). In addition, it is advisable not to embarrass the student, if possible, and to correct him and assign him a consequence in private or by means of a whisper that only he can hear.

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## References

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