1

Managing a Win-Win Classroom

Jane Bluestein

A few weeks into my first year, I presented my students with what I believed to be a perfect lesson. I had designed a well-orchestrated environment with elaborate plans, plenty of materials to go around, color-coded direction cards, and enough stimulating activities to keep them all busy until Easter. These kids were in fifth grade, some practically in their teens; certainly they would be able to navigate the work centers under my watchful, nurturing, facilitating care. Right?

Wrong.

For starters, no one at the mural center could agree on a theme. The kids in the media corner were fighting over who would operate the projector. And all the markers for the art activity mysteriously vanished within the first minute of class. Evidently no one had ever worked with a ruler or used an encyclopedia before, and although I had explained everything inside and out, I had a steady stream of kids tugging on my sleeve asking me what they were supposed to do. I stood in amazement, watching weeks of planning and work go straight down the tubes. In the midst of the chaos, all I could think was, "But I laminated everything!"

I received two shocks that day. I had expected my creativity to carry far more weight than it actually did; instead, it was unappreciated and overwhelming. Second, I had expected the students, who seemed so mature and streetwise, to have already acquired certain responsible learning behaviors. Yet they were unable to work independently in small groups, care for materials, or make decisions about their learning. It seemed as if my expectations were actually *creating* problems. Now what?

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH EXPECTATIONS?

Most of us enter the teaching profession with all sorts of expectations—conscious and unconscious. Depending on what we believe our students can (or should) do, what we hear from other teachers, and our values and sense of our own capabilities, we construct a mental picture of a classroom that may or may not reflect the reality we encounter.

To make things more interesting, how often have we heard that children perform to the level of expectations and that teachers with high expectations end up with students who perform better than teachers with low expectations? Given this admonition, I introduced myself to my first class with a long list of my expectations: "I expect you to take care of materials" "I expect you to behave respectfully," "I expect you to put your names on your papers," "I expect you to love learning," and so on. Imagine my consternation when the students countered my pronouncements with bored looks, eyes rolled to the ceiling, and an exasperated chorus, after a few seconds' silence: "So?" This is where I first discovered that all too often, "high expectations" is a metaphor for wishful thinking. Clearly, the only person committed to my expectations was me!

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Maybe teachers with high expectations do get better results, but this experience led me to suspect that these individuals have more going for them than their expectations, and I strongly doubt that it is the expectations themselves that generate high performance. I imagine that the students' performance is more likely to be a reflection of intention, inspired by the teacher's beliefs and behaviors, than by his or her expectations. True, we won't get much out of kids we don't ultimately believe in, but believing that students can learn, achieve, or cooperate—and teaching to their capabilities and potential—is quite different from simply expecting them to perform.

One of the problems with having expectations is the lack of commitment from the person or people on whom we project our expectations. Simply expecting does not secure agreement or generate commitment to learning or cooperation, certainly not as effectively as win-win power dynamics, interactions, and relationships or opportunities to experience fun, success, belonging, discovery, or power, for example. Additionally, our expressed expectations are often at odds with our faith in our students; kids can have a pretty sharp instinct for adults who don't believe in them.

It's also easier to have an expectation than it is to actually ask for what we want—a behavior that is often discouraged in our culture despite the fact that in the absence of this skill, we often resort to far more toxic alternatives like powering, manipulation, passive-aggressiveness, or constantly being disappointed by not getting our needs met. Perhaps we can use our expectations as a means of identifying our intentions and what we would like from others. In this sense, expectations are simply starting points, great places from which to anticipate what we want to accomplish and what we'll need (or need to do) to achieve our goals. Nonetheless, I'm betting we'll get a lot farther with things like clear limits, positive incentives, encouragement, direct requests, and a belief in our students' ability to learn and grow, than with even the most reasonable and well-stated expectations.

TURNING EXPECTATIONS INTO INSTRUCTIONS

While I was wrestling with this issue of expectations, my students were visiting Mr. Grey for art twice a week. When they came back from his class, I would ask them what they

had done. Each report detailed monotonous exercises such as getting the scissors out of a box, putting the lid back on the box, putting the box back in the cabinet, sitting down with the scissors, then putting the scissors back again, and so on, over and over. For the first few days of school, the kids did nothing besides practice getting, holding, passing, using, and returning the things they'd need for art class. Period.

I asked Mr. Grey what he was up to. "Don't you have a curriculum to get through this year?"

"I sure do, and it's massive," he replied. "But if we don't do this first, we'll never get through any of it."

"You mean to tell me that these kids don't know how to get paint jars out of a storage closet?"

"Some do, sure. But most don't. Or at least they don't think about it on their own. This way, there are no questions later about where things go or how I expect them to be used."

There was that word again. "Don't you expect them to know this stuff?"

"It doesn't matter. I can expect all day long and never get what I want. Expecting kids to clean calligraphy pens and put them back in the boxes doesn't teach them how to do it. I still have to show them."

It was true. Few teachers placed higher demands on the kids than Mr. Grey. But it was neither these demands nor Mr. Grey's expectations that turned his classroom into an exciting and productive place. While he may have started with a mental picture of busy, capable, independent, and responsible students—and a great deal of faith in their ability to rise to the challenges he'd present to them—he did not leave their behavior to chance or forge ahead on a set of assumptions about what these kids should know. If Mr. Grey expected success from his students, he certainly gave them the training necessary to fulfill his objectives.[1]

YOU WANT ME TO DO *WHAT?*

Sometimes, little misunderstandings can turn into bigger problems. When success is elusive, whether because of unclear directions, lack of prerequisite skills, or absence of self-management capabilities, chaos and discipline problems are sure to follow. I was observing a new teacher during the first day of school as she announced to her kindergarten class that it was time to get in line. A few students stopped and stared; the others started running around the room. In the mayhem, I wondered if "Get in Line" was some strange new game until one five year-old came up and asked the teacher, "What's a line?"

We know that our students need clear instructions to succeed at the tasks we set before them, but what could be more clear than "Get in line"? As that new teacher quickly found out, instructions are clear only if the students understand them. The request to "Get in line" assumes that they know what a line is, where it starts and ends, which way to face, whether it is single- or double-file, and all other conditions regarding talking, touching, and what, if anything, they need to take with them when they get in line. She may as well have given the directions in another language. Imagine the confusion possible with more complex assignments.

Instructions are clear only if the students understand them.

Lack of clarity is a common problem in giving directions. For the student, not knowing what to do becomes a source of confusion, helplessness, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy. (I once saw an entire class of first graders break down in tears when the

teacher innocently announced that they could go home as soon as they "pick up the floor." Another teacher told me that she could barely get her kids to come in out of the rain and mud after telling them they had to "scrape off their feet" first.) Poorly communicated instructions also build teacher dependence, waste time, and often result in reactive or negative feedback from teachers. We can avoid these pitfalls by getting very clear, in our own minds, about what we want, and then breaking down the directions step by step and using language the students are not likely to misconstrue, especially the first time we ask them to do something. It can also help to walk the students through each step of the directions, particularly those involved with routines, the use of equipment or materials, or movement, to increase the likelihood of their success. Remember, if it's important to us, it's worth the time to think through our goals, state our instructions in ways that reduce ambiguity and vagueness, and increase the odds of our kids' success with however much practice they need.

INCREASING SUCCESS

When one of my eighth graders interpreted my instructions to "behave yourself in the media center" to mean that he shouldn't smoke in there, it dawned on me that sometimes our kids create very different pictures in their minds from the directions they receive than the images we try to convey with our instructions or requests. To promote clarity, let's be careful about the adjectives we use. We know what we mean by *good* handwriting, *exciting* characters, *thorough* research, and *clear* presentation. Do they? Do we let them know, before their work ends up on our desks, the particular skills we will evaluate? Telling them what we're looking for, or grading for, helps focus students' efforts and promote success.

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Students are bombarded with verbal instructions from teachers and other adults, as well as written instructions from books, the board, and assignments. It's no wonder that they often tune us out. But even when they are focused and engaged, we don't always give directions in a way that makes sense to their nervous systems. We will almost always have a wide variety of learning styles among the students in our classes or groups, and providing instructions in more than one way can help ensure wider success, even with the simplest instructions. This is especially true when introducing more complex tasks or new routines.

For example, instructing a group to do "the first ten problems on Page 86 and any five problems on Page 93" might be fine for our auditory learners (if they are really listening), but other students will have greater success with some additional cues. Writing the directions on the board, in a folder, or on a task card can serve as a reminder and a learning aid for these students. Written instructions also free us to move on to other tasks. Once we've given our instructions in oral and written form, the students have recourse to something besides bothering the teacher with questions about "what page?" or "which problems?" When possible, using codes (like colors or symbols), cues, or illustrations with written directions encourages independence, even among poor readers or very young students. If sequence is important, listing the steps in a specific order is essential, particularly with projects that involve a number of steps; writing and numbering the directions also helps.

We can also make success-oriented decisions about when to give instructions. I've seen far too many lessons fail—and far too much time wasted when teachers have to repeat directions over and over—because the teacher did not have the students' attention when directions were given.[2] Sometimes waiting a few seconds until they finish putting things away or get settled in their seats or the work area will save time and prevent confusion down the road. If we give information to students without first asking for their attention, we shouldn't be too surprised when the majority get it wrong.

Say It Once!

Here are tips to ensure that you never have to repeat your instructions:

- Be sure you have the students' attention first. Wait until they have finished talking, writing, or cleaning up, for example, before you begin speaking. Use an auditory signal (e.g., bell, chime, a phrase or word like "Look at me" or "Freeze") to help shift their attention.
- Give the instructions verbally, as simply and clearly as possible.
- Make sure the instructions are available in written form as well, on the board or on their papers (or on a task card, for example).
- Make it okay for kids to ask one another for clarification. (If you have many kids asking each other for help, you may want to back up and reexplain what you want to the entire class or group.)
- Let the parents know your policy for giving directions before you implement it and the options their children will have, just in case a story gets home that claims "the teacher wouldn't tell me what to do."

If you need to interrupt their work, a signal from a bell or chimes, flashing lights, or clapping hands, for example, creates a shift in the auditory or visual field and can be very effective at getting your students' attention. Giving directions to inattentive students communicates a lack of self-respect (you are worth listening to, aren't you?), and it sets them up to fail as well. Likewise, hold off, if possible, on presenting new or important instructions as kids are getting ready for lunch or dismissal if the information can wait; unless those instructions have fairly immediate relevance, they'll probably be remembered better at another time.

Good instructions offer structure.

In addition to clarity, good instructions offer structure. "Choices within limits"—the anthem of the win-win classroom—applies quite clearly to the directions we give. But if the limits are too broad, students can be overwhelmed. Although some kids can turn the vaguest instructions into creative and meaningful learning experiences, others, regardless of age, need a starting point—something concrete from which to depart. These students will find a certain amount of security, for example, in writing from a story starter or turning a simple design into a drawing. This initial structure makes it easier for them to eventually face a blank piece of paper than starting from scratch. We can also provide structure by limiting length (one

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side of a paper), media (a picture made on the computer), expression (written in the present tense, drawn with only one color of ink), content (using all twenty spelling words, people involved in the women's movement during the 1970s), or any number of criteria.

Our ultimate objectives for any assignment will help us determine which choices we can offer and the amount of structure necessary. Many teachers now use rubrics with levels of completion or competence according to a list of the important components and criteria of the work assigned. This information gives a clear description of what the students need to do to attain the score at each level.[3]

Educator Jo Ann Freiberg insists that "learning should not have to be a secret! Helping students be successful means providing them with helpful and structured guidance." She notes, for example, that students study harder for an exam when they have a study guide than when they are just told to "study everything we've been over so far." Regardless of how the information is presented, identifying details about tasks to be done or specifying the criteria for a particular assignment can save a great amount of time in reexplaining and help avoid student confusion and mistakes as well.[4]

GIVE THEM A GOOD REASON

As we saw in the value of stating our boundaries positively, the language we choose in giving directions can help us encourage cooperation, build responsibility, avoid reinforcing teacher dependence, and discourage rebelliousness. Since our language and attitude are so closely linked, changing one will invariably change the other. As we commit to a positive, win-win focus, we will become increasingly aware of negative tendencies in our words and the tone of our voice. Likewise, as we shift from threats and warnings to promises and positively stated contingencies, our attitude mirrors that change.

Similarly, the reasons we give for asking for certain behaviors can either work for or against us. Our instructions and boundaries are most effective when they appear to make sense to our students. In power-based, authority relationships, the reason for doing something, whether stated or not, is connected to the power of the authority and the punitive consequences of noncompliance. Asking students to "do it for me" may not sound particularly authoritarian, but the implication of conditional approval actually works in the same manner as "do it or else."

In a win-win classroom, teachers give kids credit for being able to make positive choices even when the outcomes do not involve the threat of deprivation or punitive consequences. "Please put the lids back on the paint jars so the paint doesn't dry out" communicates much more respect for students than "Put the lids back on these paint jars or you'll never see them again." There is a clear and sensible reason for putting the lids on the jars; the request has nothing to do with the teacher's power and in no way threatens to compromise the emotional climate in the classroom.

When we ask our students to do something, we usually have a better reason for asking them than "because I said so." The actual, logical, and intrinsic reason for a boundary—so the markers don't dry out, so that we don't disturb anyone on our way down the hall, so that no one trips and falls, so that we'll have time to hear the entire story—can help build commitment and cooperation, and engage otherwise defensive or defiant students in ways that simple commands never will. These criteria are stated for the benefit of the student and the class as a whole. The request has nothing to do with the teacher's needs—although, as part of the group, these needs will be served as well. The fact that this approach clearly focuses

on what's in it for the students, individually or as a group, can account for an increase in cooperation. It may take a few extra seconds, but the extra information we provide in giving the students a practical reason for doing what we ask fosters respect for the value of the task and for our request as well.

All of these techniques will work best when we can overcome the resistance to having to explain our requests, especially when it comes to things we believe students should already know in the first place. For a long time, I honestly resented having to take time to show fifth graders how to correctly use the pencil sharpener, to show eighth grade gang members how to put books back on a shelf, or to end each of seven classes with a daily reminder to push the chairs under the desks. It was certainly easier to get irritated and blame parents or previous teachers who either never had bothered to teach these skills to my students, or whose instructions, for whatever reason, just didn't seem to transfer to my room.

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And yet, when I finally surrendered to these necessities, a few things happened, not the least of which was that my life in school got easier and my relationships—with my students and my job—improved. The few minutes I devoted to these seemingly redundant instructions and my eventual willingness to repeat them ad nauseam significantly increased the likelihood that I would get what I wanted. Better still, after a few weeks, the end-of-class bell would consistently elicit a chorus of kids, mockingly reminding everyone to "push in your chairs."

To be honest, I'm not sure I even had a logical reason for wanting the chairs pushed in. If I were really reaching, I suppose I could argue for safety's sake—a common justification despite the fact that the chairs didn't really pose much of a threat. I think I was just after whatever reduction in chaos a room full of pushed-in chairs might represent. Maybe it was just a "thing" I had, but the fact that the kids were willing to humor my fixation and accept my priorities and quirks was ultimately far more valuable to me than anything they might have done with the furniture.

USING EXPECTATIONS CONSTRUCTIVELY

It can be disappointing to discover that entering an inspiring classroom environment does not trigger some magic that enables children to use a pencil sharpener, recap the paste, alphabetize resource books, or move around the room nondisruptively. Even if the lessons are well planned and our mood is positive and enthusiastic, without information, instruction, and guided practice, we actually doom our students—and ourselves—to failure.

There are hidden assumptions and expectations in every lesson we plan. We will do well to take nothing for granted. Even if we firmly believe that they should know how to handle science equipment, use a dictionary, work with a partner, move to various parts of the room, staple papers together, or put their assignments in a particular place, it's possible that at least a few will not. Certain routines and procedures may be so basic or obvious that they're easy to overlook, especially for teachers new to the profession or those working with a grade level in which they haven't had much experience. Obviously, we cannot predict every single need that will arise, but the better we can account for the skills and behaviors our activities demand, the better we can plan for success, and the less likely we are to be undermined by students' confusion, frustration, or ineptness.

We will often need to invest time in filling the gap between where the students are and where we would like them to be. I once had a group of high-risk eighth graders spend a few minutes practicing putting the caps on felt-tipped markers they enjoyed using but routinely forgot to recap. I could not afford to keep replacing the markers when they dried out, so I did a half-humorous lesson on recapping the pens, making sure that we listened for the click that indicated they were on tight (a trick entirely unfamiliar to most of my students). From that point on, the markers seemed to last forever, and the students became remarkably committed to their care.

Building independence and self-management requires more than expectations. We need to encourage initiative and allow kids to behave in ways that they can actually self-manage. This may mean allowing them to get supplies, move about the room, interact with a classmate, or use a certain piece of equipment at specific times without asking permission first. (Having those options can also accommodate the kids' mobility needs as well as their need for autonomy, eliminating a lot of those annoying and attention-getting behaviors we might otherwise see.) Instruction, guidelines, and practice make student responsibility and self-management a reality. Combined with meaningful, positive consequences for cooperation and opportunities to succeed, this type of preparation encourages the positive behaviors that high expectations can indeed inspire.

Instruction, guidelines, and practice make student responsibility and self-management a reality.

Hot Tips for Increasing Success

- Create a clear mental picture of what you want. Think about any special details or conditions that will be important to you: Do you require a certain heading on the papers they turn in? Will it bother you if someone starts to sharpen a pencil while you're addressing the whole group? Where do you want the materials put when the students are finished with them?
- Identify behaviors and skills your students will need to complete a particular task or function independently and responsibly in your class. Tell your students what you want, preferably before they have a chance to mess up. Let them know how it will benefit them to head their papers a certain way or put materials away properly, for example.
- Assess the levels of ability and self-management your students have already developed. Watch them work—or not work. What happens when you ask them to do routine things in the classroom? Are they able to solve problems on their own? Are they allowed to ask a classmate for assistance when you're not available? Are they bewildered by choices or directions? What does your room look like at the end of the day?
- Assume nothing other than the fact that your students may not be sure what you want—and start from there. Even if they know how to take care of the books in the classroom library, they may not know how *you* want them to do it.
- Have your kids rehearse daily routines. Have them practice moving from their seats to the reading table before you start teaching reading in groups. Have them practice getting equipment and putting these items away before you ask them to do so as part of an activity.
- Have one small group at a time learn to play a game or operate a piece of equipment before they need to use it in a center, a small group activity, or on their own. You often need to train only a handful of kids yourself. Students can learn quickly and well when they know that they will get to train their classmates in turn.
- Unless you intend to spend your entire year guarding, dispensing, and retrieving classroom materials, teach your students how to get, use, and return things when they are finished.
- Whenever possible, make your verbal directions also available in written form.
- Accommodate kinesthetic learners by literally walking them through routines.
- Give instructions in logical sequence. Write complex instructions out, when you can, numbering the steps for clarity.
- In giving verbal directions to young students, low auditory students, or students who have not had much practice developing their listening skills, go slowly, giving directions a step at a time. If possible, wait until the students are ready for the next step before giving them additional information.
- In determining how much information to give out at one time, consider the age and maturity of the students, their experience with your directions, and the complexity of the instructions you have to offer.
- Let your kids know that you're giving them information, even if it's really basic and obvious, only because you want to increase the odds of them being successful, not because you think they're dumb.
- Let the kids monitor the materials. I once decided the best person to keep track of the cards in our individualized handwriting program was the one student who seemed to lose track of them most often. She took her job quite seriously: Not only did she never lose a card after that, but she also once kept the entire class from going to lunch until the "Capital R" card turned up!
- Have the students practice working independently. Assign some seatwork and put yourself off limits while you work at your desk. Make sure the kids have enough to keep them busy, preferably something they can do easily, such as review work, practice drills, or a puzzle. Remember, the emphasis here, for the moment at least, is on building independence—not academic competence.
- Encourage students to help one another or go on to a different task until you are available to help. You'll be amazed at how much progress you can make when your time isn't tied up dealing with behaviors your students can learn to manage on their own.

Activity

Use the Activity Checklist to plan or evaluate the directions you assign for various activities.

Activity Checklist

Product and/or Behavior

Objective:

Criteria for successful completion:

Clarity

Skills or behaviors (cognitive, social, motor) required by this activity that may be new to the students:

Materials or equipment used to complete this activity that may be unfamiliar to the students:

Other considerations (for example, movement within or outside the classroom, need for other facilities or resources):

Presentation of Instructions

Verbal:

Written:

Illustrated:

Other (taped, signed, other language):

Samples of finished products available:

Structure

Limits, starting point, or focus:

Choices available:

Other Success-Oriented Features

Getting students' attention:

Time-related (that is, *not* when they're wound up about something else or too far in advance for them to remember):

Small steps:

Logical sequence:

Evaluation Summary

In what ways were these directions success oriented?

In what ways did the students have difficulty with the directions?

In what ways might these directions have been even more success oriented?

Note to self: Next time, remember to . . .

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Activity

Directions are more meaningful and more likely to engage student cooperation and success when there is a logical reason and benefit to them. Complete Chart 1.1 using the instructions provided.

1. In the first column (or on the left-hand side of a separate piece of paper folded into three columns), list specific behaviors you would like to request from your students.
2. Column 2, identify the primary reason you want them to do what you're asking. Think in terms of logical outcomes ("…so the paste doesn't dry out," "…so the cables don't get tangles," etc.) or benefits to the students, rather than how this would please you, make your life easier, or help the kids avoid an angry or punitive reaction..
3. Column 3, create a request or set of instructions connecting the two: "Let's keep quiet in the hall so we don't bother the other classes." "Please pick the blocks up off the rug so no one trips on them." "Put the CDs back in the case so they don't get scratched." "Get your note in by Tuesday so you can go on the field trip."

Chart 1.1 Developing Clear and Logical Instructions

Desired Behaviors Requested	*Reason for Request*	*Instructions to Student*

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NOTES

1. How often do we refuse to teach or demonstrate a skill because it's not on our grade level curriculum? As long as I resisted having to teach things they "should have learned by now," I doomed my class, and myself, to needless misunderstanding and misbehavior.

2. See sidebar, "Say It Once!"

3. Adapted from the definition of rubrics on the Ozarka College website: http://www.ozarka.edu/assessment/glossary.cfm.

4. Jo Ann Freiberg, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2006.