On the Significance of Communicating Behavior Expectations to the Students During Early Stages of an Academic Course

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Abstract

Classroom management has a critical impact on effective teaching and learning. Classroom disruptions are the pattern of repeated behavior that significantly interrupts the teaching and learning process. It, therefore, becomes vital to handle these disruptions and the ability of a teacher to handle classroom discipline is given key priority in observation of teaching and learning conducted by the regulators. In this paper, we will focus on evaluating the significance of communicating behavior expectations to the students earlier on in the course, or ideally in the very first session, and its impact on effective teaching and learning. The analysis is based on the review of literature, interviews, and on the results of a survey completed by the teachers of a UK-based FE institution.

Keywords: Classroom management, classroom discipline, ground rules, teacher education

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1. Introduction

Classroom management is possibly one of the most difficult aspects of teaching. This challenge that most teachers face, can potentially cause tutors to quit the teaching profession. The US National Education Association reported that, in retrospect, if teachers were given an option to decide whether to pursue a degree in teaching, 36% of teachers would not go into teaching again (Wolfgang, 1986). There are several aspects of classroom management. we will focus on evaluating the importance of communicating behavior expectations to the students earlier on in the course, or ideally in the very first session, and its impact on classroom management, and consequently, on effective teaching and learning. It is also important to note that the discussion on issues such as the importance of reinforcing bahavior parameters once they have been established, and the strategy to implement the parameters (whether through the approaches of bahaviorism or humanism) are beyond the scope of this paper.

This article adopts a three-tier methodology to evaluate the significance of setting and communicating desired bahavior parameters to the students earlier on in the course in effective classroom management. Section 3 attempts to form a link between the topic and various teaching and learning theories in literature to establish the significance. Section 4 provides a brief account of interviews conducted with the lecturers of a Further Education (FE) institution in Yorkshire, United Kingdom, and assesses the interviewees' responses against teaching and learning theories. Section 5 provides an analysis of the quantitative data on the topic, acquired through a survey completed by the lecturers of the above-mentioned FE institutions.

2. Literature on the Importance of Communicating Bahavior Expectations

Discipline, classroom etiquette, and classroom decorum are the key components of effective classroom management. Literature proposes that classroom discipline can be enforced through preventative, supportive, and corrective strategies. While supportive and corrective approaches are reactive in nature, the preventative discipline strategy establishes expectations, guidelines, and rules for bahavior during the first few days of class. One important goal of the preventative discipline strategy is to proactively intervene in any potential disruptive bahavior through documented expectations and consequences. In situations where preventative strategies fail, research emphasizes on the use of supportive strategies before exercising consequences (MoE Guyana, 2015).

Classroom management has a critical impact on effective teaching and learning. Various theories in literature have highlighted the importance of classroom management and its implications on the teaching and learning process. Merv (2013) referring to literature, identified disruption as a bahavior that prevents the process of learning to take place. Disruption could range from mere talking in class, to a highly obstructive, violent and subversive bahavior that results in the prevention of classroom learning. Kounin (1970), Brophy and Evertson (1976) in their studies, have also identified a strong link between effective classroom management, and the teaching and learning process.

Brophy and Evertson (1976) in their study, made a comparison between exceptional and average teachers based on the academic gains and achievements of the students. From among a variety of teaching bahaviors, classroom management emerged as one of the crucial aspects of effective teaching. It was inarguably established that classroom management has a direct impact on academic achievement.

Kounin (1970) has identified various important dimensions of effective classroom management. Through an empirical study, it was identified that among others, withitness (i.e., keen attention to disruption and taking effective measures), and communication, in terms of making students aware of the bahavior expected from them at different stage s, are the most critical dimensions of effective classroom management.

Schafer and Barker (2018) discuss the effectivity of establishing mutually created ground rules during a teacher training program. Implementing the ground rules in the classroom supports high expectations for behavior and trust. These rules create a safe space for open conversation and differing opinions among teacher candidates. Such practice then extends into the actual practice of trainee teachers, fostering collaboration. Authors conclude that for students, classroom ground rules provide a safety net,

encouraging respectful interactions and community-building.

Democratization of classrooms and dialogic teaching have emerged as recent jargons padegogy that now have overreach into setting ground rules. Barak and Lefstein (2021) examine the potential conflict between ground rules and dialogic teaching goals. The article explores whether students' differing opinions and teachers' behaviors are considered in setting ground rules. The study is focused on a fourth-grade class where students questioned the ground rules, showing how teachers impact the rules. Using language research, it finds issues in the so-called fair process, as teachers aren't open to criticism. The study ends by suggesting a more real and inclusive way for setting and maintaining ground rules.

Discussing a case study about the ground rules for technology use, Johler (2022) discusses the importance of establishing ground rules that apply around the whole institution. This can help students internalize the rules and routines and makes it more predictable and consistent for them, which in turn makes it easier for them to follow them and easier for the teachers to reinforce them. The authors also argue that a positive socio-emotional learning environment does not rule out negative consequences and in case of violations of ground rules and logical consequences that the pupils are aware of can be effective in preventing disruptions.

Frank (2005) emphasizes on the importance of the first impression of a teacher and has termed it as a determinant of the course of their entire career. The author suggests that the students are constantly monitoring the bahavior of their teacher and will waste no opportunity to take control of the proceedings. Student taking control into their own hands from the first day of class and constant reinforcement of bahavior parameters, has been highlighted as a recommended course of action.

Caboni (2004) has discussed the importance of negotiating ground rules with students on the first day of class as it would set expectations in relation to bahavior parameters from the very start. Disruptions in the classroom have been classified as disrespectful and insolent inattention. It was advised that the process of negotiating ground rules with students will give them a sense of ownership, and consequently, peer pressure could be used to tackle disrespectful disruptions. It was also highlighted that the proactiveness on part of the lecturer, and building credibility from the beginning, is the key to addressing challenging situations in relation to classroom decorum.

Kreuter (2012) has emphasised the principal of “ease up, don’t ratchet down.” Authors believe that to enforce bahavior parameters, it is easier to ease back and enforce a policy less strictly than it is to suddenly clamp down later in the semester. A ‘laid-back’ attitude, in regard to discipline, can cause a loss of control, and a ‘clamp down’ attitude at a later stage could create a dismissive attitude from the students.

Ken (2013) stresses on the importance of a discipline policy which not only contains consistent consequences for breaking the rules, but also goes through a frequent review. The article also discusses theories based on the principles of reward and punishment, motivation and self-esteem, and more importantly, teaching methodology to manage bahavior. The author, agreeing to Kreuter (2012), suggests that it is better to err on the side of being too strict because it is much more difficult to raise the bar later.

Evertson and Emmer (1982), and Sanford and Evertson (1981) studied classroom management and identified actions of teachers associated with the dealing of students’ on-task and of disruptive bahavior. One of the critical findings of these studies was that an early attention to the issue of classroom management, specifically at the start of the school year, is vital in relation to a well-run classroom.

Literature analysis has also identified various other critical perspectives on this issue, some of which will be discussed in the rest of this section.

Ken (2013) and Reed (2016) believe that setting the rules and tone in the first lecture is less important than the credibility of the instructor and quality of the lesson. It has been argued that although the initial impression of the instructor does matter, it is the quality of the lectures that is the decisive factor in evaluating the instructor. It is also inferred that the credibility is established on the first day and is evaluated by the students on a day-to-day basis. Thus, there is always a chance of a comeback from the instructor.

Sally (1999) has identified various physical, emotional, and environmental issues associated with challenging bahavior. Strategies to deal with difficult bahavior have also been identified. Based on the theory of humanism, the author has insisted on the need of civility of both the tutor and the student. By promoting mutual respect and understanding, Sally highlighted the shared responsibility in creating a positive learning environment.

Ken (2013), Kounin (1970), and Caboni (2004) highlight the importance of employing a suitable teaching methodology in tackling bahavior related issues. Smoothness and momentum during the lesson, presentation, and challenge in classwork were identified as critical factors in avoiding difficult situations, in regard to bahavior (Kounin, 1976). Ken (2013) insists on the importance of a teaching methodology for bahavior management, whereas Caboni (2004) suggests that inattention and disengagement could be effectively addressed through adapting to appropriate teaching methods.

Ellen (1998) highlights critical problems with existing classroom management models that are based on a reward and punishment system. The author underlines the shortcomings of such approaches, which often overlook underlying causes of disruptive behavior. The author also emphasizes on the importance of a model that encourages active inclusion of students in drafting rules which results in a sense of ownership on part of students. This resonates with other modern educational theories that encourage a shift towards holistic student development and responsible decision-making, aligning with the evolving concept of collaborative and student-cantered learning.

3. An Account of the Interviews Conducted with the Lecturers

Posed with the question on the importance of setting up behaviour parameters in relation to classroom management, responses from the lecturers of the UK FE establishment taking part in the survey, have been summarised in the following section. Due to limitations on time available for conducting this study, only five interviews have been conducted.

It was identified that the students had a very positive attitude at the start of their classes. About 3 to 4 weeks in, after students had gauged their tutors' commitment towards the ground rules, they would adapt their behaviour accordingly. It was therefore argued that a continuous enforcement of rules is very important and that setting rules on the first day of class is rather insignificant. This point of view is in coherence with the learning theory presented by Frank (2005).

It was also highlighted that the disruptive behaviour could be due to the students' lack of interest in the course or simply due to their inability in understanding certain aspects of the curriculum. This inability could also be related to their learning style or quality of teaching. These findings conform closely to the learning theory identified by Ken (2013).

Social and psychological aspects, such as establishing superiority in the classroom or even attention seeking attitude, could also trigger disruptive behaviour. Disruptive actions such as laughing could, in addition, relate to an effort to deal with anxiety. The importance of the phrase 'Know Your Students' was highlighted by every lecturer that participated in the survey. An attempt by the tutor to understand domestic issues (including family and friends) faced by the student, could also significantly help in handling disruptive behaviour.

Lecturers in the sample group have emphasized the need of employing reactive and corrective discipline approaches in handling challenging situations related to behaviour. The need of reinforcing the discipline policy repeatedly over the period of time was also stressed upon. This observation by the participants is in accordance with the theory in literature (MoE Guyana, 2015).

Some lecturers have also highlighted the importance of a centralized, department-wide, discipline policy instead of individual tutors being responsible for creating and enforcing their own policies. It was recommended to display the policy in prominent locations in the classroom (or institution) to reflect the department's keenness on the matter. This not only avoids issues arising from conflicts between policies of the institution versus the tutor (Kretuter, 2012), but this strategy of being on the same page allows institutions to back the lecturers in difficult situations (Donaldson, 2016).

The interview survey also helped identify various critical environmental factors important for classroom management and effective teaching and learning. It was emphasised that setting norms and rules from the first day of class and making them a part of the syllabus is an indicator of assertive enforcement. It was deemed important to establish expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour as suggested in literature (Sally, 1999). It was argued that teachers could become 'easier' on the rules while still ensuring classroom decorum.

4. Discussion on the Survey Results

Due to the open-endedness of the discussion during the interviews, diverse points of view emerged on the topic. In an effort to draw definitive conclusions on the topic, it was therefore decided to devise a survey questionnaire with 5 close-ended questions described in Table 1 below. Out of the 35 lecturers from different departments of the same FE establishment that were contacted for this survey, only 10 could submit their response in the during the submission window.

Table 1: Survey interview questionnaire

No.	Question	Choice of Answer
1	Do you think setting behaviour parameters in the first class is important for future classroom management	Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)
2	Do you set up/believe in setting up behaviour parameters at any stage during a term or semester?	
3	Do you agree that setting up and enforcement of behaviour parameters would contribute towards teaching and learning?	
4	In your opinion, would reminding students about the ground rules and consequences improve class discipline?	
5	Do you think setting ground rules is important than the credibility of the teacher or the lesson quality?	

Analysis of the mean response score in Figure 1 reveals the degree of agreement or disagreement of each respondent with the topic. The score averages between 2.6 and 4.6 and highlights the diversity in the sample set.

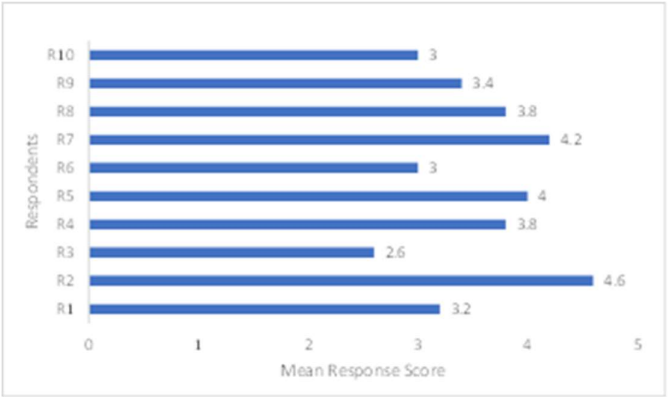

Figure 1: Mean response score per respondent

Figure 2 provides statistics on how each participant has responded to every question. This is yet another indication of diversification in terms of the selection of respondents for the survey.

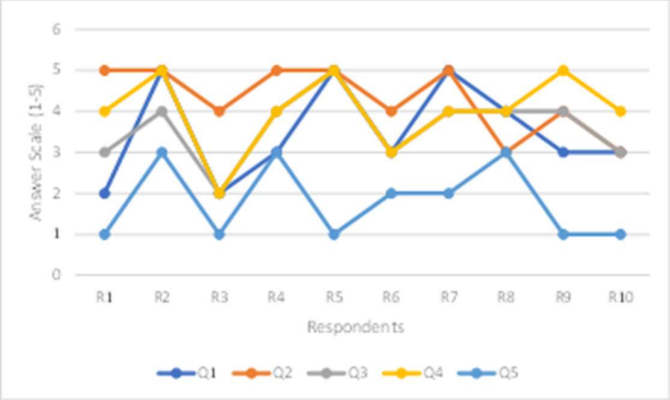

Figure 2: Response per question

The survey revealed some interesting facts about the perception of respondents on the topic. As plotted in Figure 3, 40% of the respondents have agreed to the fact that setting up behaviour parameters in their first class would make a positive impact on classroom management. Although 60% of the respondents were either unsure or disagreed with the concept of setting up behaviour parameters in their first class, 80% of the respondents have verified setting them up at different stages during the semester. Thus, the results of the statistics gathered as part of this survey are conformant to the theories of Brophy and Everston (1976), Evertson and Emmer (1982), and Frank (2005). A majority 60% of the participants agreed to the fact that setting up behaviour parameters would have an impact on the teaching and learning process as confirmed by the theories by Merv (2013), Kounin (1970), and Brophy and Evertson (1976).

Kounin (1970), and Ken (2013) have highlighted the importance of continuous enforcement of discipline policies. 70% of the respondents agreed to the fact that reminding students continuously about the behaviour expectations would improve classroom discipline. While research has emphasized the importance of the theories of behaviourism and humanism to control (or alter) behavior, researchers such as Ken (2013), Kounin (1970) and Caboni (2004) stress upon the significance of a teaching methodology in context of classroom management. 70% of the respondents agreed that the teaching methodology is an important aspect of classroom discipline. Interestingly, none of the participants disagreed with this.

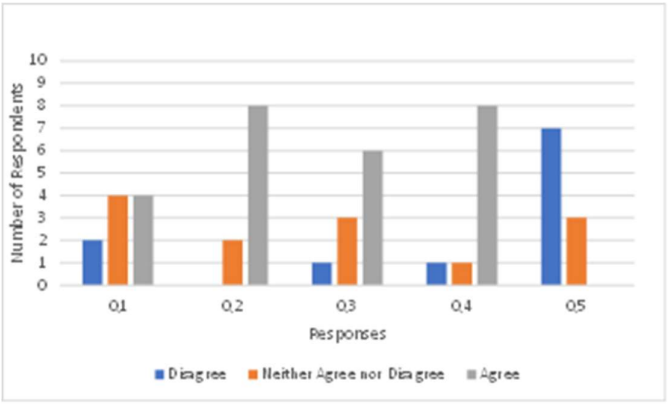

Figure 3: Cumulative response percentage for each question

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of literature, and primary data collected as part of this research through interviews and a survey, it can be established that there is a close link between setting up behaviour parameters and the tone during early stages of an academic course (or ideally in the first class), and the classroom management. More significantly, a correlation between the theory and the statistical data collected as part of this research has also been identified.

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