Christian View of Classroom Management

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How we view classroom management is thoroughly rooted, of course, in how we view the student as well as how we view the role of the teacher and the purpose of education. On a state accreditation visit for another college, I interviewed a principal to ask what he thought of the student teachers from the college under review. He said classroom management is always a big question in his mind when it comes to student teachers and first-year teachers. They can go two ways, he said. They can be strict, which he said is good, or they can try to be friends with the students, which is not preferable in his opinion. This dichotomy lines right up with the common view that there’s a spectrum with authoritarian on one end and permissive on the other end. Or to use Barbara Colorosa’s terms, brick wall vs. jelly fish. Many educators will point out that you can’t teach much content if you have a chaotic environment in the classroom (so you should be a jelly fish). Others will point out that having a classroom where you can hear a pin drop isn’t much better in terms of engaging the students in active learning (so don’t be a brick wall). All this applies to being a boss or a parent too, by the way.

Just as it’s quite simple but not necessarily indicative of real learning to gauge the quality of education with just the scores on a multiple choice test, so also it’s probably overly simplistic to assume the decibel level in a classroom is inversely proportional to the quality of teaching and learning going on in that room. (Too bad this was the most commonly used measure of good teaching for eons.)

In fact, real learning is often kind of messy and complex and sometimes a bit topsy-turvy. So while pure chaos is probably counter-productive, overly-scripted and overly-controlled environments probably are too.

I will focus in this article (sorry it got kind of long) on a teacher’s general approach to classroom behavior policies, but let’s also be clear that classroom management happens in the design of the lessons, the use (or non-use) of cooperative learning and other teaching methods, the arrangement of the student desks and other items in the classroom, and yes even that “teacher look.” In fact, many educators agree that a teacher says more about her or his classroom management philosophy in the design of the lessons and the arrangement of the room than in the posted rules of conduct.

Secular View #1

Generally, the camp that wants more control emphasizes the very real challenges of trying to get anything productive done when people aren’t staying in their seats, aren’t raising their hands to speak, and aren’t paying attention. This camp says kids can’t learn in a chaotic environment. This camp says to student teachers and first-year teachers, “don’t smile till Christmas.” It says, establish clear routines like flipping the light off and on or raising your hand and counting down on your fingers for quiet. And it says, give clear consequences for non-compliance and then follow through with total consistency, time and again, no exceptions, no favorites, no mitigating circumstances.

This view asks, were your parents like this? If not, they should have been. And if your students’ parents aren’t like this, you just need to work harder at it. Kids need to learn discipline, obedience, adherence to assigned tasks, and perseverance.

And these ARE good character traits and behaviors. Good for the Army, good for sports teams, good for blue collar work, and good for school as it’s conceptualized by this camp. And to be fair, probably good for everyone in general. After all, the most creative artist in the world isn’t much of an artist if he hardly ever gets out of bed, never mixes his paints or glazes according to the instructions, and never finishes paintings he starts.

So in this camp, before the creativity can come out, the discipline needs to go in. That’s where a strict teacher comes in. To help kids learn self-control and to help them achieve their potential, you need to set high expectations.

Secular View #2

By contrast, this camp says kids can’t learn in a hostile environment – no one can. (Or maybe only law school students can because they’ve already gotten through college and actually need to practice being adversarial litigants, so a hostile environment can help them learn to not only survive but thrive in this mode. Maybe. But K-12, probably not so much.) Dewey’s classroom visit comes to mind, where in a very controlled classroom he observed students taking turns at “recitation” – the teacher calls on someone to define a new term, the student stands up and recites the memorized definition of the term. The term being learned in Dewey’s classroom visit was “igneous fusion.” The selected student recited the definition but had no idea what the concept really meant – all that roiling molten lava at the center of the earth on which the tectonic plates float – no clue, no real understanding.

Many Asian countries still do this type of classroom environment but are generally looking at Western education for models of how to cultivate more creativity in their students and in the workforce they will become. (Meanwhile, some American educators are looking at these more structured Asian models and wishing that we could get back to something more along those lines, since what we have now may appear to be more disorganized and unproductive than we want. But that’s another example of Secular View #1.)

So Dewey (like his fellow progressives Rousseau and Montessori) called for more humane and more personalized classroom environments. More interest-initiated. So before kids can start putting concepts together and getting creative with applications of concepts, they need to be interested, intrigued, and excited about the concepts. That’s where a dynamic, creative teacher comes in. To help kids learn wonder and awe and creative applications of learning in new ways, you need to create a non-threatening, exploratory, interesting, and stimulating environment.

Christian View #1

In a *Christianity against culture* view, we’re not here to entertain kids. We’re not here to tickle all their fancies and amuse them to death. It’s a sinful world out there and they need to learn to recognize the world’s vices for what they are while preparing to be salt and light in this sinful world. The best way to be a positive witness is to be a well-informed, well-trained worker. Honest labor, responsible adults, faithful spouses, decent parents, with maybe some service to the community thrown in – the sooner the better. Every community needs some solid citizens, hard workers, decent bosses—and the Bible has some good pointers for that. And God has a good plan for everyone’s life. The sooner we get people on board with those plans for their lives the better. Yeah, you can do a bunch of intellectual fancy footwork in school, or a bunch of artsy stuff, but you’re better off with just a solid, moral, traditional work ethic.

Put the Ten Commandments up in front of your classroom – or at least your own ten rules that reflect respect for God and others and hard work and other people’s property. Then enforce your rules and maximize getting their noses to the grindstone and hitting the books.

Christian View #2

In a *Christianity-Embracing-Culture* view, we’re not here to restrain kids or terrorize them. We’re not here to give them one prescribed way through the social and emotional maze of childhood and adolescence. The Bible is about freedom, so we’re here to open doors, explore new worlds of knowledge and expression. God made their wondering minds and the wonderful creation – we just need to get their wondering minds wondering on a grand scale about the wonderful things God has created and allowed humans to accomplish. The teacher in this view models how awesome everything is and how awesome our minds are. The teacher shares her or his own experiences of grasping life’s awesomeness and helps to usher the student through new doorways to new examples of God’s creativity, majesty, and infinite knowledge.

So, really you don’t want to have actual rules, per se, but maybe just some useful guidelines and common sense principles so everyone can participate in unfolding God’s awesomeness and God’s plan for everyone’s life.

Christian View #3

In a *Christ Transforming Culture* view, the most loving and responsible view of classroom management may not be the strict view or the friend view. It may be more of a view of separate callings for the teacher and the students.

The teacher is called to be a teacher and all that that entails – not to be a drill sergeant, brick wall, or sin detector. Although at times a teacher is called (within the role of being a teacher) to be firm or to ferret out bad behavior, those are not the primary foci of teaching. The primary focus is to find ways to enable effective learning. So instead of focusing in our teacher education classes on the use of straight-jackets and sedatives, we focus on coming up with creative lessons, inclusive methods, and developmentally appropriate outcomes.

Similarly, being a teacher may sometimes involve enticing students to explore and enjoy some new concept or field of knowledge, but the role is not just entertaining or stimulating or distracting students from boredom or misbehavior. If the primary focus of those called to be teachers is to enable effective learning among those called to be learners, then we should resist doing it all for them. We are not supposed to be pied pipers, riveting science guys, or spellbinding story tellers. That would be glorifying the scaffold, the messenger, instead of the understanding itself, the message.

God has a message for each student each day. We are just the messengers. Often we provide the telescopes, the microscopes, or the safety deposit box key needed to get to the message. Just as students need to learn to discipline themselves and not be always protected from distractions, so too they need to learn to engage their own minds on what is true, and beautiful, and excellent (Phil. 4:8) and not always get handed novel ideas and exciting applications ready-made. Just as we won’t always be there to shield them from temptations and to keep them focused, so too we won’t always be there to provide the cool implications and demonstrate the intellectual leaps for them. We want to take down the educational scaffolding eventually and let them blossom into the flowers and plants God has designed them to be.

Students do need to learn discipline, but that doesn’t make our primary role that of a disciplinarian. Students do need to learn intellectual engagement, but that doesn’t mean our primary role is entertainer.

The implications are that students are called to learn to discipline themselves and to engage their own minds and hearts in whatever God is calling them to do. The teacher’s role in all this is to help make it happen. That what our profession is about – discovering and adapting the methods that can best help this to happen.

A Visual Model

I found a diagram (see below) with concepts often used to describe different kinds of business leadership styles and different educational administration styles. Since the teacher is the administrator or manager in the classroom, I think this diagram works well for the classroom too. I’ll add some educational commentary and some biblical perspectives below the graph.

Although the actual terminology used here is focused on negotiating contracts in the business world, I have seen this exact graph in education books with just slightly different wording sometimes. And there are Christian perspectives associated with each area of the graph.

Let’s start in the bottom left quadrant—“withdraw.” This represents the teacher who doesn’t want to make waves, doesn’t want to stifle student creativity or get into a power struggle. Avoids getting to know anyone too much and avoids reminding anyone of the rules or expectations. These may be nice motivations (so they tell themselves), but generally we know going into teaching or any job with other people that getting eaten alive is not God’s best plan or call for how we should spend our days. So this teacher is not getting much accomplished in terms of substance (covering curriculum, enforcing the rules, or enabling attainment of student learning objectives). Nor is this teacher getting much accomplished in terms of building relationships. This graph labels this box “withdraw” –sometimes it’s labelled avoider. This is the guy in the parable that buried the master’s treasure instead of doing anything with it. Not God’s call.

Moving up to the top left. More substance. This teacher \*looks\* successful and has the pin-drop classroom. This is the controller. This teacher is setting up a contest, actually, a power-struggle we sometimes call it, and is going to show who’s boss, who’s the winner. There may be lots of coverage of curriculum in this approach, but does God really want us to do all the work of forcing learning on kids and making them miserable in the process? (And with flabby mental muscles at that?) Like the boss who makes work miserable, this teacher can make school miserable. This is the demanding teacher with a brick wall discipline plan. Does God really want kids to get smashed up like this? Granted, sometimes the most loving thing to do is to lower the boom, but usually that’s after a second (or third) chance didn’t work.

From <http://www.saleshacker.com/how-to-create-win-wins-in-contract-negotiations/>

Moving diagonally to the bottom right, we have the jellyfish, the polar opposite of the brick wall. This type of teacher cares a lot about relationships instead of rules. Here is where students push against expectations and find no resistance at all (until the jellyfish eventually stings them!). This teacher is an accommodator. The rules, tasks, standards, etc. go out the window when it feels like the relationships are crying out for more attention. So, guess what happens? The relationships are constantly crying for more attention: Tell us another story, please move the deadline again, don’t tell our parents or the principal, we’ll like you even more if you cancel the quiz. They won’t. They’ll respect this teacher even less. But it’s hard not to feel like maybe God wants teachers to be nice and understanding and accommodating. After all, it’s such a cruel world out there, even for kids.

So we have seemingly God-ordained excuses for both extremes—defeating and accommodating. But the top right quadrant is not a compromise between these extremes. One does not have to sacrifice one’s love and understanding and attention to relationships to be a collaborator. Nor does one have to sacrifice one’s commitment to substance, to the standards, to the curriculum, to accomplishing anything.

One does not have to choose between being student-centered or curriculum-centered. Especially if you don’t let either one be your god. You’re not there to take orders from the kids (the kids are immature and the “customer” isn’t always right), and you’re not there to take order from the curriculum, the substance of education. You’re there to work creatively with the specific students God placed in your classroom to maximize the substance of \*their\* education, not whomever the textbook publisher had in mind as a “typical” student for that curriculum. Not whomever you had in mind as the ideal student either, the student that would make \*you\* feel successful or needed or so fired up that you could say, “And they PAY me to do this!” Just don’t go there either – they’re not there to meet your needs. God put \*you\* there to address \*their\* educational needs for a whole year – not to run them into a brick wall of task-oriented attention to substance, rules, and curriculum. Not to smother them in the toxic jellyfish of your need to be loved. (God has other ways for you to get those needs met. Again, don’t put that on your students.)

But the trouble with the collaborative solution to teaching (parenting, being a boss, being a spouse) is that just seeing it on a chart and resolving not to be in the other quadrants doesn’t guarantee you’ll just suddenly be collaborative. So Sergiovanni, the guy who originally came up with this chart for principals, put in a fifth box right in the middle. So instead of saying, I can’t get to the top right so I’ll stay somewhere in the defeater/winner/controller slot or I’ll just stay somewhere in the friendly accommodator slot (or, worse, I’ll just stay in the withdrawn/avoider slot)—instead of being overwhelmed and giving up like this--you can look at the chart and say, as part of the maturation process, as part of answering God’s call in my professional development and my personal development, I’m going to progress first into the compromise slot, which is still not God’s ultimate ideal for me --with the goal of moving out of that slot at some point and into some part of the collaborator slot. The compromise slot isn’t as advanced on either the substance or the relationship stuff as the collaborator slot, but it’s not in any of the other corners, the extremes, so it’s a good compromise along the way to professional maturity. It’s a good way point on the journey. (Sanctification is a journey. Professional and personal maturation is a lifelong process.)

So all this has profound implications for what kinds of rules you post on your classroom wall – or if you just have some rules but don’t choose to post them at all. Sure, you probably need some rules – we know it’s chaos without them. But to avoid the inhumanly stifling atmosphere of an overly controlled classroom (being smashed against the brick wall is painful and disrupting of the learning process – just ask anyone from Oliver Twist to Tom Sawyer to Pink Floyd), and to avoid the unstructured and unproductive wasting of God-given time and talent (getting stung by that jellyfish is painful and distracting too), we need to find a good, collaborative balance and create a learning environment that fosters responsibility and community -- intellectually, morally, and creatively (Beversluis).