

## Abstract

It has always been my belief that the classroom stands as a forum for question and inquiry, exploration and determination, and that the acquisition of an improved level of understanding for each individual student is the ultimate goal. However, as I progressed on my journey as a Newly Qualified Teacher I soon came to realise that an emphasis on the Individual was vital if I was to see the realisation of my own expectations and values. This is the narrative of my efforts to develop the Learning of students through the creation of positive relationships with an emphasis on communication and constructive use of Talk.<sup>1</sup> This project falls into three main areas:

- The rationale and evaluation of my influence as a facilitator of a positive Learning experience.
- The exploration of positive classroom management strategies.
- The evaluation of processes employed and how they can inform future practice.

## Background

This project began as a means of necessity, as I attempted to transfer my skills and achievements from teaching 'practice' into teaching 'reality'. The use of my Career Entry Profile<sup>2</sup> was the first step on the journey of reflective practice that has come to form the core of my development as a successful practitioner. This project, combined with targets on the Career Entry Profile, were to offer me an invaluable insight into how my personal approach and modes of communication could have an impact on the learning that took place in my classroom. The development of a reflective approach to my practice enabled me to focus on issues and areas of contention within my classroom<sup>3</sup>. On close evaluation of my lesson I found that the classroom that I had created was not one of inspiration and constructive creativity, but more of division and defence.

On my initial reflection there were three main areas of contention that informed the outcome of my lessons: the culture of the school and its impact on the group, the consistency in my approach to Teaching and Learning, and the way in which expectations were made explicit with regards to classroom environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Guberman (2000) states that children have an 'abundant enthusiasm and skill...and reach new understanding' when working with peers. This was a major concern with this group who seemed incapable of having 'purposeful, collaborative activity.'(Guberman, 2000)

<sup>2</sup> Career Entry Profile was a continuation of a constant process of reflection and target setting, which I had experienced throughout training.

<sup>3</sup> The use of Action Research was a development on the use of the CEP as it is 'disciplined by enquiry' (Hopkins, 2002, p42) and links understanding and active engagement, rather than just reflection.

Shortly after my arrival at Westwood St Thomas' School, I became aware of a distinct difference in the cultural and social environment present in my classroom to that I had experienced at my previous school. I had previously been greeted by a very strong group culture<sup>4</sup> and united front from the students. It appeared that the main contention was with low level disruption and that as a whole group the primary aim was to learn and co-operate. This was apparent through the successful use of group work and the strong support systems that were in place at pastoral and management level. However, I was now met with a whole new set of rules and expectations, as the emphasis appeared to be on the individual and their attempts to dominate and to a certain extent dictate the lesson.<sup>5</sup> The key to a successful classroom appeared to have switched from matching expectation and individual need, to matching expectations to relationships and behaviour. However, it was not just necessary to meet the individual 'relationship' and communication needs of the lone student, who vied for attention, but those same needs in as many as three or four in any one class. The impact on the Learning environment by these few students could only ever be deemed as detrimental to a positive learning experience for the whole, unless certain strategies were to be enforced at personal levels.

Key to this predominant 'contest of the individual' was the low level of motivation,<sup>6</sup> which appeared present within the group. At first it is instinctive to equate levels of group motivation with issues regarding ability, however this was a top set group with starting predictions of Level 5 or above at SATs. As the first term progressed predictions of attainment dropped as the students were assessed as performing mainly at Level 4. This was a great cause of concern, for the students were not only performing far below their potential, but also that of their comparative group in the other band. It became obvious to me, as teacher of both top set groups, that there were some underlying issues preventing this group from achieving their potential.<sup>7</sup>

On reflection it became apparent that my approach towards teaching and learning were highly inconsistent between the two top set groups. After further, more in-depth reflection, it became clear that the main influence on this was my relationship with the students within each group. This reflection took the form of lesson observation<sup>8</sup>, consultation of in-house policies on Effective Teaching and Learning and the exploration of my own feelings

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<sup>4</sup> My previous school was Levenshulme High School in Manchester. The school's single sex population was a mix of numerous cultures, races and religions, which I feel had an impact on ethos and culture of the school, especially with regards to community spirit and levels of maturity amongst the students.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers (1997, p 16) recognises that at times it feels as though a certain group of students attempt to deliberately 'sabotage' the lesson. This appears to be evident in the Sample Lesson One, however, I do not think it is quite so intentional as Rogers suggests, and is rather a call for attention from a student who feels uncomfortable in the learning environment. See Video evidence and analysis in Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> The school's Guidelines for Effective Learning (Westwood St Thomas School, 2000) states that Motivation is one of the key themes of learning and advocates the student's ownership of their own learning as vital to sustained levels of motivation.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for Mock and final SATs results data.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix for lesson observation notes and Observation questionnaires.

through the use of the Educational Narrative<sup>9</sup>. I found that my practice with the group was in direct conflict with the Guidelines to Effective Learning, which places great emphasis on the student exploring their individuality through independence and creativity.<sup>10</sup> On reflection, I found that instead of promoting the positive aspects of the 'individual differences amongst kids' (Gardener, Vol. 55, No.1) I was constraining their self-expression in an attempt to achieve 'classroom management'.

In an attempt to refine my concerns I decided to video a lesson and analyse the content,<sup>11</sup> with a focus on the use of Talk and evidence that real learning was taking place. I found that my practice was in conflict with the Effective Teaching Guidelines.<sup>12</sup> It has been a great development within our department to place a real emphasis on the practice of Modelling the learning process to students. It was therefore quite shocking to see that despite my attempts to Model the process of exploring and creating texts in my classroom, I was effectively failing to Model the actual Learning process. It is my firm belief that the Teacher's primary role is to be a constant Model of expectation and proactive learning in the classroom. However, I was presenting an open contradiction to the students through my negativity of body and verbal language. In truth I was creating a personal barrier to a positive learning experience through my tone, gesture and attitude.

### Methodology

Throughout my training I was encouraged to be reflective practitioner. This is also a strong ethos within the school<sup>13</sup>, especially with the active engagement of several members of staff in Action Research. I was extremely fortunate to be involved in a department that held reflective approaches at the heart of its practice, and benefited from being able to share in two other Action Research enquiries taking place within my own Faculty. Action Research became a valuable tool for the focus of educational theory into practice. This was again part of the school's emphasis on Professional Development, however I often saw conflicts between theory and practice and recognised concepts and ideas regarding Classroom Management as being somehow detached from the reality of my own classroom<sup>14</sup>. The use of Action Research also enabled me to validate my ideas in the company of a supportive and questioning forum. This environment enabled me to highlight my thoughts and explore them

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<sup>9</sup> The department were asked to create a narrative exploring any aspect of their place in Education in an attempt to further reflective practice. See Appendix for my Educational Narrative exploring my feelings of my classroom persona and attempts to manage discipline.

<sup>10</sup> The guidelines for Effective learning (Westwood St Thomas School, 2000) includes a section on Independent Learning, which follows OFSTED Guidelines.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix for video evidence of Sample Lesson One and Two and analysis.

<sup>12</sup> The Guidelines for Effective Teaching (Westwood St Thomas School, 2000) includes a section placing vital importance on the formation of positive relationships between students and staff, which are based on mutual respect.

<sup>13</sup> The School Improvement Plan (Westwood St Thomas School, 2002-2003, states 'all staff are asked to examine their own professional practice...continue to set and achieve high personal standards.'

<sup>14</sup> 'I cannot stand aside, look at it as an abstraction...I have to become part of the living system that I am wanting to influence...' (McNiff, 1992, p 61)

within a public arena, whilst maintaining a personal response to the issues raised in my enquiry.

My first priority was to gain video evidence of the issues that had arisen within my target group. I felt that this was a vital form of evidence, which would serve both summative and formative purposes. The video evidence is formed of two sample lessons, which were filmed three months apart. In order to utilise this evidence to its full potential I carried out a formal analysis of the content to determine what factors were preventing the existence of a positive learning environment. It was my aim to take a step outside my own personal connections with the lesson and myself as the leader of that situation in an attempt to explore possible practical strategies to aid the learning of all students in my classroom.

Although I felt that the video evidence would assist my own evaluation of concerns and issues within the lesson I decided to take advantage of the supportive ethos of my department, and I invited my Head of Department to observe the Sample Lesson One. The culture of the department and school fully embraces reflective practice through the engagement of peer observation,<sup>15</sup> which is designed to be a wholly informative and supportive practice. This use of peer observation allowed the video evidence to become part of a wholly reflective process: firstly the observer made an initial and focussed response during the lesson; I made an initial evaluation of the lesson; I then watched the video evidence; I then discussed the lesson with the observer; this led to a detailed analysis of the evidence as a whole<sup>16</sup>. The lesson observation notes and video evidence then became tools for reflecting on progress made whilst attempting to employ various strategies.

Once the key areas of concern had been identified it was necessary to employ various strategies in order to address the issues. Once faced with real students, in a real classroom, despite the extent of training and discussion relating to Classroom Management that I had received in theoretical seminars, I found a direct conflict between theory and practice. The underlying issue here was that of the unpredictability of people and whether the teacher could control that through the implementation of strategies, relationships, environment and expectation. I was interested by the writing of Bill Rogers<sup>17</sup> with regards to the persona of the teacher during the lesson and how 'situations' can be anticipated and managed through the constructive use of communication and the formation of positive working relationships between student and teacher<sup>18</sup>. I had the opportunity to take part in a day's training hosted by Bill Rogers and was captivated by his animated and personal communication with his audience. I soon became aware that he was in fact modelling his theories to his 'students', who very quickly became enthused and engaged. I realised that I too must become such a model within my own

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<sup>15</sup> Peer Observations follow the Guidelines for Effective Teaching (Westwood St Thomas School, 2000) and are designed to create reflective partnerships within the department.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix for Observation notes, video evidence, analysis and evaluation.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Rogers, *Cracking the Hard Class*, 1997, Scholastic.

<sup>18</sup> 'It is the process of collaboration between teacher and students from which a higher likelihood of co-operation, responsibility and accountability can operate.' (Rogers, 1997)

classroom if I were to achieve the level of positive engagement required to create the successful learning environment that formed the core of my values as a teacher.

## Analysis

On viewing the video evidence of Sample Lesson One I formed one key question with regards to the lack of positivity in the classroom: who was that awful Miss Grim standing, no sorry looming, in front of the class? It was most disturbing to witness the ways in which I attempted to control and teach the lesson, and I could not recognise the slightest suggestion of my own personality as I spoke to the class. This highlighted the key concerns that were preventing the progress of learning in the classroom: the lack of positive social engagement; the lack of constructive communication between students; and the ways in which my own attitude regarding the group, and its certain individuals, was limiting and restricting their independence and ownership of their learning.<sup>19</sup>

During the training day with Rogers, I recognised many of my own personality traits within his style of delivery. It has always been my priority to maintain a sense of Myself within my classroom, and to use my strengths, such as my sense of humour and personal approach, in order to form strong working relationships with the students. Rogers' delivery exhibited many similarities and it was incredible to see how quickly he captivated his audience through the use of personal touches and humour. I came away thinking, 'Yes, that's the type of teacher I am, Rogers shares many of my values.' However the video evidence painted a very different picture, as there was clearly no sign of my personality and I appeared to be some kind of misery machine, which was a far cry from the bubbly and enthusiastic practitioner that I claimed to be. This is where the use of Action Research managed to focus my thinking on what I hadn't realised, rather than what I thought I knew for certain.

The triangulation of reflection, observation and analysis of evidence allowed me to realise that my concerns were largely misplaced, for emphasis now shifted from what the problem was with the class to what were the issues with my own influence on the classroom atmosphere. I soon realised that I was allotting most blame for the lack of focus on the students, and I had very quickly attached a negative label to the group<sup>20</sup>, which was preventing me from recognising their potential skills and talents as individuals. In order to deconstruct the negative attitude I had developed toward the group as a unit I attempted to engage with colleagues to see the students within a bigger picture. The label was also deconstructed by seeing events that took place

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<sup>19</sup> Wells (2000) recognises a key link between social engagement and students' relationship with learning: 'For when people's participation in a society's ongoing activity...learning no longer seems so mysterious.'

<sup>20</sup> Rogers (1997, p19) recognises 'labelling' as inevitable, yet deceptive. The teacher can very often become obsessed with identifying the whole on the basis of understanding an individual.

within the lesson as 'normative student behaviour'<sup>21</sup>, rather than a personal conflict. It became evident, through the use of the video evidence that I was focussing far too much on secondary behaviour, rather than exploring positive ways in which to deal with the initial issue. I developed the use of 'Tactical ignoring', offering the students choices and enforcing positive expectations, rather than dwelling on what was going wrong (Rogers, 1997). I found that by shifting the focus of the instruction from one of accusation and insistence, to one of simply reminding the student of expectations, the student was forced to assess their role in the classroom and the fact that it was their choice to own their behaviour.

The reinforcement of objectives and expectations must be accompanied by a good model of attitude and behaviour if the learning is to be a positive experience for all students. Rogers (1997) states that encouragement and the open use of praise as a strategy is key to a successful lesson. It therefore became imperative for me to develop an explicit use of praise and show of positive attitude. The first step was to address issues concerning my restrained body language<sup>22</sup>, which made me appear very uncomfortable. I attempted to display a more open and relaxed persona with the key use of wide and expressive gestures. I also attempted to address my use of tone while speaking to the whole class and individual students. It was through this conscious effort that I became much more relaxed in the lesson and was able to show my enthusiasm for my subject with more vigour. In this way I was providing a model to my students that it was fun to explore and learn, which was reinforced by the use of encouragement and explicit praise.

The video evidence allowed me to assess the role of the teacher and the role of the student in my classroom. A key observation was the apparent lack of ownership of the lesson for the students. The lesson appeared to be something that was being presented to the students and there was little flexibility for an individual response to materials and ideas. The students were asked to respond to the texts during a direct questioning session, which emphasised the controlling force of the teacher. Mercer (1995) states that: 'peer groups are most effective when they are outside the visible control of the teacher', which advocates the role of the teacher in the classroom as more of a facilitator, than a director and authoritarian. I recognised that my choice of strict modes of sharing information was preventing debate or interest due to the clinical nature of their implementation. Crook (1995) argued that the teacher must seek 'more continuity between classroom agendas and the successes of pupils in out-of-school contexts'. This promotes the idea of celebrating the students individuality and the importance of independence in learning. I had to therefore take on one of my worst fears with regards to teaching: effective group work. I attempted to encourage more constructive discussion with a variety of modes for feedback. This included the development of discussion frames and a scaffold approach in an attempt to use Talk as a positive Learning tool in the classroom. The interaction

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<sup>21</sup> Rogers (1997) explores the causes and effects of 'unreasonable' student behaviour and how secondary issues can soon outweigh the initial problem and lower the level of tolerance to a personal level.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix for video and analysis.

between all lesson participants created a more informal atmosphere, which allowed open encouragement and advice to be shared without appearing to be a criticism or demand.

The development of positive relationships within the classroom was vital if the group were to achieve their potential. This meant that the students had to be encouraged to transform Social Talk into Constructive Talk. Rogers'(1997) claim that 'key powerbrokers in the class...become catalysts for disruptive behaviour across the class' was certainly an appropriate description of the target group. It was vital that these students had to realise their position within the context of the whole class, however, it was also important that I did not attempt to completely restrain their personalities. This would be a hypocritical gesture in light of my earlier statement regarding the expression of my own personality within the lesson. It was therefore vital to channel the energies of these 'powerbrokers' into Constructive Talk. Vygotsky(1981) claimed that intellect was uniquely linked to social interaction and that higher order mental functions depended on the realisation of this relationship. This links in perfectly with my concerns regarding the under achievement of this high ability group. Their progress was being effected by the restraints being placed on their abilities to realise constructive interaction within the context of the lesson.

A key observation from the Sample Lesson was the physical positioning of the 'powerbrokers' in the classroom. This group had positioned themselves, out of choice, in the centre at the front of the room. This meant that any disruption coming from that group would have an immediate impact on the rest of the class. The class was allowed a certain degree of ownership of the learning space with regards to the rearrangement of seating as they were asked for preferences either for or against being in close proximity with other students. This was conducted with a strong emphasis on learning, and students were asked to consider this firstly. To aid my understanding of the group dynamic I observed them in another subject area<sup>23</sup> and was fascinated to see similar issues appearing regarding the same group of students. Issues with regards to group dynamic appear to be particularly prevalent where the groups are set or streamed. This is because the students often have at least half their timetable in the same ability group, which can lead to self-esteem concerns and the development of cliques or dominant 'powerbroker' groups.

## Outcomes

'Conversely a class sometimes goes wrong because of the way it is treated.' (Rogers, 1997, p16) I was literally shocked to see the way I presented myself to the group, as it contravened all my value and aspirations as a professional and teacher. I could barely recognise myself, as I witnessed someone who was angry, uncomfortable, irritated, irritable and extremely tense in tone and

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<sup>23</sup> Observed the group in French being taught by Head of Department. This observation supports the ideas raised in the Outcomes section of this narrative, as cross setting amongst Languages and the Arts has led to this set of students spending at least half their time together.

gesture. I immediately put strategies into place in an attempt to develop a more positive environment for my students to progress and learn, however, it is worrying that I had to feel pushed to such an extreme before I began to assess my practice. I have often sat in seminars and INSET and smiled whimsically at the suggestions for successful classroom management, which I have always echoed with the sentiment: 'Well that's all very fine if they do exactly what you want the first time you ask!' To a certain extent the strategies I have explored from Rogers(1997) also seem to have been developed with an ultimately responsive class. However, what I have come to realise is that it is imperative that as a teacher attempting to enforce these strategies you must be consistent and persistent. The following issues have arisen as a result of this enquiry.

Firstly, in situations where classes are shared by more than one member of staff, a system of support and shared practice should be developed. The target group was taught by two teachers who worked in isolation from each other, and had very different perspectives and experiences with the group. This is practice that would be beneficial to be shared in an open forum. The development of a more formal structure of support should not be an issue in a department that already supports and encourages the use of Peer Observation. This sharing of practice could take the form of the observation cycle raised in the Methodology section of this narrative.

Secondly, the department would benefit from a review of the Behaviour and Discipline policy. Although there is a system of Faculty Report and progressive detentions the department would benefit from further promoting the system as a means to support and encourage both students and staff in an attempt to form positive relationships, rather than purely as a means of discipline and punishment.

Thirdly, the relationship between staff and students would benefit from a regular review process, which focuses on individual targets and positive reinforcement. This could take the form of a Learning Journal, or a target book, in which both teacher and student are required to write a comment. This would create a working dialogue and encourage the students to become more self-critical and reinforce positive praise.

Finally, the Schemes of Work should be reviewed to include more opportunities for Speaking and Listening activities. I feel that most staff would benefit from INSET focussing on the Effective use of Talk in the classroom, which could then feed directly into Schemes of Work and form regular assessment pieces throughout each unit, rather than appearing as an addition or after thought. The teacher should explicitly model the use of positive talk, and every opportunity should be taken to support and encourage the students to find their own voice in the classroom.

**Plan of small-scale enquiry focussing on the promotion of student ownership of learning and the development of the student voice in the classroom in order to create a positive working environment.**

**Toni Bowden**

**Westwood St Thomas School**

**MEE**

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