

# The classroom is not an arena and the teacher is not a ringmaster

Paul Dix explains how organising your teaching space and your behaviour can help you to create positive behaviour patterns in your classroom.



**T**eaching from behind a desk and a laptop is a dangerous game. With barricades positioned carefully, the teacher attempts to manage the class from the worst possible vantage point. The class, who are being asked to watch their sixth PowerPoint presentation of the day, throw grenades from behind dimly-lit back rows. How can you manage students if the computer screen has lost its novelty appeal and there are turf wars in the middle rows?

Sitting behind a desk is what my teachers used to do. It was a riot. I know, because I was the balaclava headed youth with the best aim. With the crowd behind me, I was able to push the teacher's buttons with precision from 20 feet away, shooting straight over the desks into their corner of imagined security. As a student who enjoys a battle, what better field of play than from a safe distance and across the desks of the expectant audience? My experience of interchanges from both sides is that it quickly escalates to, 'How dare you say that to me? Get out of my room!' Chair thrown back, door slammed, optional swearing, lengthy report etc.

With new schools awash with IT, the organisation of the classroom often reverts back to students sitting in rows with the teacher's desk at the front. This is often how the architects plan the sizes of classrooms when they build new schools. With the arrival of interactive whiteboards some classrooms are beginning to resemble mini lecture theatres.

The teacher and students are forced to spend a great deal (if not all) of the lesson staring at a screen. (Both of whom, for different reasons, will have spent most of the previous evening staring at a screen). Eye contact and sometimes even personal contact is lost. The two youths in the far corner hardly need to feel more isolated from society than they already do. The configuration of the room for teachers and students needs more careful consideration when managing behaviour.

Classrooms need to be arranged so that the teacher can get to each student without disrupting others, preferably with enough space to speak to individuals privately and discreetly. It is possible to create different areas from which to address the whole class and change the focus of the lesson in an instant. With more flexibility in your own movement around the room, you can tour the darker corners and bring them light. There is usually more than just one table grouping configuration that works eg cabaret style, horseshoes, one large table with satellites around, tables against the walls, a circle of chairs or even sitting on the floor (see **TEX** Issue 1). If you can't move furniture then you must take even more care with your own positioning and movement around the room. Push your desk against the wall and you will already

find yourself shouting less, if only because of your proximity to the students.

So what of your own behaviour? It is worth remembering that being spoken to about your behaviour in front of your peers is at best tense, and at worst, terrifying. Just check your own reaction the next time you are beeped at for some minor driving error, or admonished at the dinner table by your partner in front of friends. Being spoken to about your personal conduct in public is embarrassing. Having it shouted across a room full of your peers can be humiliating and more often than not, will elicit a defensive reaction. So it goes with children.

Instead of calling to students from behind the desk, move from student to student, monitoring learning and reinforcing positive behaviour. Instead of shouting from behind the barricades, you can take control of difficult conversations with careful consideration of your verbal and physical language.

Take a moment to prepare what you are going to say to the student and think beyond the first sentence. Approach the student calmly and gently if possible, by getting brief eye contact as you arrive. Get down to their eye level and preferably lower. Right down, not bending over but sitting, or if your knees can take it, squatting. Explain that the behaviour that you witnessed is contrary to the rules, apply your warning or sanction and then, perhaps most importantly, give them a model for the behaviour that you want. Try using as an example that student's previous appropriate behaviour eg:

*'I saw you throwing the pen across the room. The rule in this room is that we stay on task throughout the lesson. You will need to see me at the end of the lesson to discuss your poor choices. Remember last week when you got a merit for writing that excellent science investigation? That is the standard of work I expect from you.'*

If they argue, use 'I understand what you are saying but...' or 'I hear what you are saying, but...' Then return to the conversation that you want to have. When you have finished speaking, don't hover or stare at them, but walk away. Give them the time and space to make a better choice. If you were dealing with students who very young, this is the approach you would automatically take to avoid their defensive reaction, usually tears. If we are to avoid the defensive reactions in older children that result in the interaction escalating or exploding, we have got to be more personally involved, gentler, more caring and, dare I say it, more respectful.

You are not a ringmaster barking orders but an adult modelling appropriate behaviour with care and sensitivity. Your arena is only the personal space between two people and there should be as little room as possible for spectators. **TEX**



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