



Photos: Clare Smalle

When you see your name on the cover list, it is difficult to stop your heart from sinking. Picking up the cover work is a lucky dip, which you rarely win. You may journey into the unknown with a stack of inappropriate worksheets or note that says, 'They need to carry on with their coursework'. You can hear the questioning and negotiating start before you even reach the door of the classroom: 'Do we have to do any work today?', 'Have you got our books, because we don't have them?', 'Can we just talk for a bit?', 'Sir normally lets us keep our coats on', 'Have you got a boyfriend, Miss?'

The pupils can sense your frustration at being left with a subject in which you may have little knowledge or confidence. They may sense that you are busy and that you could have work of your own that you'd like to do. Some students will sense the opportunity to avoid work; others will smile knowingly and move directly to 'Operation Sabotage'.

How can you manage the behaviour of students in a cover lesson and ensure that the cover work you receive is set with thought and care?

In order to manage the behaviour of students who are not familiar with your rules, rewards and sanctions, you need to work especially hard at the start of the lesson. Arrive early and place yourself at the entrance to the room, welcoming the students with sincere enthusiasm for the lesson. Give them clear instructions about where to put their bags and coats, using positive reinforcement and praise for those students following your instructions. If you have not met the students before, then give them large sticky labels to write their names on. It won't necessarily stop all of the students swapping names, but it will allow you to speak to the majority of students using their first names and record any incidents more accurately. 'Oi, red jumper, stop chewing the curtains' will not necessarily elicit the desired response!

Your physical and verbal language is very important when meeting a cover class for the first time. They will watch to see just how committed to the lesson you are. Adjust the tightening of your facial muscles, relax your shoulders and put that pointy finger away. Just as hostility won't help you to manage the behaviour of the class, neither will a passive attitude. Your energy levels need to be high and your performance convincing. Try surprising them with your energy for the lesson. It can be very infectious.

In the opening minutes of the lesson, you need to make your expectations absolutely clear and model your response to appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. If there no rules, rewards or sanctions clearly displayed in the room, have a scaled-down version of the structures that operate in your own classroom with you. Keep this to a

Have you got a boyfriend Miss?

Managing behaviour in cover lessons **by Paul Dix**

maximum of three rules, rewards and sanctions. Explain immediately that you will use this framework and then make a point of rewarding two or three students who have followed your instructions from the beginning of the lesson. I always find it useful to have tangible, high level rewards, such as positive notes to send home or a positive referral to a colleague who knows the students well. This may not match the rewards structure in your own classroom, but it will send a clear message to the students that making good choices in the cover lesson is worthwhile.

It is at this point in the lesson that you are likely to be able to predict problems with the seating arrangement. The group that have converged at the back of the room and are busy arranging their social lives will need to be separated sooner rather than later. It is much easier to move students in the early stages of the lesson; it causes less disruption to their learning and results in fewer confrontations. Don't be tempted to give them 'a chance'; this is a lesson in which you do not want to take risks.

Resist the temptation to settle the class and then sit at your desk marking books or writing reports; students will sense that your commitment to the lesson is not sincere and may stop working and engage in work-avoidance tactics. Your hard work at the beginning of the lesson needs to be sustained throughout; your aim should be to teach the class with the same commitment to learning that you have for your own students.

Covering lessons is hard enough, but when the work has been set with little thought, it can be like walking through treacle on a cold day. If you cover a lesson and the work is inappropriate, you need to speak to their regular teacher as soon as possible. Explain that you found the work difficult to follow and ask for more guidance and information the next time. Under no circumstances, no matter how frustrated you are with the quality of work set, should you undermine the regular teacher in front of students. The students have had more time to develop a relationship with their regular teacher, and are likely to respond defensively to any negative comments.

There is not always time to agree work with the regular teacher before covering their lesson, but you can re-negotiate expectations in your feedback to them. Write them a friendly note at the end of the lesson recording those students who received rewards, informing them of action that you have taken with those students who did not follow the rules, and giving detailed feedback on the work set. By demonstrating your commitment to their lesson, you are building your relationship with the absent teacher and making them think twice before setting

inappropriate work in the future. If these communications have no impact on the quality of cover work set, you will need to consider approaching their line manager or a senior member of staff. This is particularly important when you are on long-term supply or regularly cover for an absent teacher.

At the end of the lesson, make a point of leaving the classroom tidy and organised. Finding your classroom in a disorganised mess when you return from an absence is frustrating, time consuming and reflects a lack of professionalism on the cover teacher's part. After the lesson, you need to follow up on students who have reached high level sanctions; as the teacher in charge of the lesson, this is your responsibility, so don't be tempted to pass it on to the absent teacher.

Covering lessons will give you the opportunity to develop relationships with students that you don't teach regularly. You don't have to answer the 'boyfriend question', but with a clear plan for your management of behaviour, coupled with engaging cover work, you may find time to switch to an informal register. You may even start enjoying their company, rather than being frustrated by it! **TEX**



Photo: Educational Solutions

Cover lesson checklist

- check procedure for calling on assistance from senior colleagues
- check the class seating plan (if any)
- check through register and any names that need practice
- meet students at the door with labels
- after the register, briefly introduce rules, rewards and sanctions structure to the class
- apply and model structure by delivering immediate rewards to two or three students
- apply and model sanctions structure when appropriate but preferably as early as possible in the lesson
- record (for information only) the rewards and sanctions that you distribute in the lesson
- make a point of leaving the classroom tidy and orderly
- give written feedback to the regular teacher
- follow up on any incidents and referrals to senior staff.

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