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Classroom Management Strategies to Increase Student Collaboration

Vicky Giouroukakis Ph.D.
Molloy College, vgiouroukakis@molloy.edu

Maria Dove Ed.D.
Molloy College, mdove@molloy.edu

Chapter Sixteen

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Maria G. Dove and Vicky Giouroukakis

In a New York suburban middle school, Ms. Malone begins a social studies lesson with her seventh graders. The room is extremely quiet, and the teacher assures that it will stay that way by keeping the students seated in straight rows and writing the names of offenders on the board. She calmly reminds students of the consequences for not adhering to her rules—an initial warning followed by a phone call home if the offense is repeated.

Students in Ms. Malone's class tend to settle down quickly and begin to independently complete the daily assignment as written on the board. For the rest of the lesson, she displays printed text via an interactive whiteboard, asks questions about the material presented, and directs students to copy particular notes.

In another classroom across the hall, Ms. Searson introduces an English language arts lesson by explaining the step-by-step instructions students will need to follow in order to accomplish the objectives of the lesson. The students, many of whom are English language learners (ELLs), switch from Spanish to English as they exchange ideas with one another briefly before the task begins.

Although Ms. Searson's students are initially seated in rows, the movable desks are easily brought together, and her students are invited to collaborate in pairs or trios. The students work in tandem; yet other than the permitted use of students' native language, there is little adaptation, forethought, or organization for small-group instruction to address the students' needs.

At the same school, Mr. Banner, a science teacher, is preparing to introduce his biology lesson to a class of eighth graders. Students enter and congregate around the room, freely conversing in Spanish and in English in

spite of the period bell that has just signaled the class to begin. Mr. Banner makes multiple attempts to redirect his students to their seats where they finally settle down to focus on the initial activity projected on the board. Students' attention during the lesson varies, and there are a great many conversations occurring throughout the lesson between students that have nothing to do with what is being taught.

THE CHALLENGE OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS

American middle schools, serving as the halfway point between elementary school and high school, have their own unique challenges as they represent a critical time in the lives of young adolescent students. Current attention to higher standards and increased accountability through academic testing has created undue pressure on middle-school communities.

When youngsters transition to middle school, they face a new system of regulations, responsibilities, routines, and available support (Maton, Schellenbach, Leadbeater, & Solarz, 2004), often leading to an increase in their anxiety and stress, which ultimately impacts school behavior. Considerable biological and cognitive changes occur in middle-school adolescents. They often are more self-conscious and may lack self-esteem, and yet they begin to understand more complex concepts as well as think more abstractly.

Middle-school students also strive for autonomy and independence and have a strong desire to make their own decisions as they also become more peer oriented (Maton et al., 2004). Still, these youngsters often lack a certain level of maturity as evidenced frequently by their inappropriate classroom behavior. For this reason, middle-school teachers often enforce stricter control and discipline and allow less autonomy with this student population as illustrated in the chapter opening vignettes (Eccles et al., 1993; Emmer & Evertson, 2012; Ridnour, 2006).

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA)/Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2010), and more particularly, the speaking and listening strand of the English language arts standards, students will need to collaborate with one another during class time to meet clear learning objectives.

The CCSS document contains a note on the range and content of student speaking and listening in that "students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations—as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner—built around important content" (NGA/CCSSO, 2010, p. 48). With these expectations, developing a new set of classroom management strategies is most crucial for all secondary teachers.

THREE TEACHERS—THREE DIFFERENT CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT STYLES

Strong teacher-student relationships are central to ensuring student success. For Wolk (2003), "classroom management is not separate from teaching and not something that a teacher must achieve before teaching can begin. [...] The best discipline and curriculum are, in turn, built on caring and trusting relationships" (para. 8–9). If the goal is to increase student collaboration and in the process not surrender student discipline, it is important to establish relationships in the classroom that foster trust, respect, and caring.

The three teachers described at the beginning of the chapter have different teaching styles, levels of tolerance, and classroom management skills that contribute to the types of teacher-student relationships that exist. We examine their approaches to teaching and learning in order to discern how their present practices may facilitate or impede effective, collaborative student discussions as outlined by the CCSS.

Teacher-Centered Interaction

Ms. Malone employs a *teacher-centered interaction* approach that is characterized by desks arranged in rows, a traditional question-answer format, and individual student work. Student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions are controlled, and students speak only when asked by the teacher to respond to questions.

In classrooms where teachers are reluctant to release control, there are few opportunities for students to shape the curriculum and create a shared community of learning. Interaction occurs in a one-way direction, from the teacher toward the students or the students toward the teacher.

The teacher controls what content and topics are taught as well as how they are assessed and uses a direct or lecture-style method of instruction to maintain management. Students learn that the only audience they need to address and please is the sole authority in the room, the source of all information, the teacher. Individual work prevails, and student input is limited to responses to teacher-posed questions.

Undifferentiated Student-Centered Interaction

Ms. Searson provides opportunities for *student-centered interaction* in her class. Her management of the class seems more fluid, yet remains structured as evidenced by her students being engaged in conversations that pertain to the lesson. However, the collaboration is not scaffolded in that there is limited use of strategies and activities that would benefit the diverse students in her class.

The teacher releases control to students when she puts them in groups because she knows that cooperative tasks are beneficial to them, but she does not address the particular needs of her academically and linguistically diverse students. Students who would benefit from additional support are randomly grouped and complete the same assigned tasks as their more capable peers with few, if any, adaptations.

Unfocused Student-Centered Interaction

Mr. Banner's instruction is the least structured of the three teaching styles, and even though collaboration occurs, it is usually nondirected and unfocused. One may perceive the classroom as chaotic—but even in many classrooms where some level of disorder ensues, learning takes place. Rather, Mr. Banner's class for the most part remains unstructured and lacks opportunities for purposeful and meaningful interaction. Students seem to have all the control, and the teacher is often unable to direct students to remain on task.

The challenge to consider is how to best help these teachers to develop instructional practices in combination with classroom management skills in order to best facilitate the CCSS framework for speaking and listening. In what ways can these three teachers increase student collaboration yet maintain their individual teaching styles and comfort levels?

RESHAPING CLASSROOM PRACTICES

According to Marzano (2003), the most effective teacher-student relationships are characterized by specific teacher behaviors: exhibiting appropriate levels of dominance, maintaining balanced cooperation, and being aware of high-needs students" (p. 8). These intended behaviors are for the most part the key to classroom management success.

Additionally, in order for students to remain on task, teachers must give thoughtful attention to their individual needs, which may include addressing different learning styles, strengths, preferences, abilities, and readiness levels through techniques that foster learning for all. Yet, concentrating on the needs of individual learners will not suffice when it comes to meeting a set of rigorous listening and speaking standards.

With the changing expectations as presented by the CCSS, teachers must now develop ways in which students can actively engage in a range of collaborative conversations in class. Students must be able to not only listen to another student's point of view but also evaluate sound reasoning and substantive evidence for that student's particular claims.

To conduct such conversations, students will require a broad set of new skills that include focused attention to and examination of information details concerning academic content. To facilitate these skills, some teachers will

have to minimize their teacher-centered interactions while others may have to find more meaningful ways for students to conduct discourse while maintaining control.

Directed Group Work

In most middle schools, traditional direct instruction takes place with the exception of some classes that employ group work. In the least effective use of group work, students are randomly grouped and asked to complete a task with little, if any, delineation of objectives, explicit instruction, teacher guidance, or progress monitoring.

The best or most studious group member, more often than not, reluctantly completes all of the work and hands it in to the teacher for credit that will apply to the entire group. Sometimes teachers assign individual grades as well as group grades to counter inequities often associated with group work. However, this has not proven to be a panacea for the hardworking individual students who shoulder the majority of the assignment.

Quinn (2013) argued that "group work is neither as widely used nor as effective as necessary if we wish to produce a generation of learners adept at collaborating. In fact, group work as often practiced does little to enhance collaborative skills" (p. 47). Yet, group work allows students to:

- take part in rich conversations, one on one or in groups, with diverse partners that build on others' ideas,
- acquire new content knowledge,
- build communication and collaboration skills,
- enhance their self-esteem,
- apply critical thinking skills, and
- develop positive relations with teacher and peers.

The Rules of Engagement

In order for students to participate successfully in collaborative conversations, they must be mindful of the rules for cooperative discourse, establish needed conversational roles, and focus on objectives as well as the time limitations of specific tasks (NGA/CCSSO, 2010). For example, seventh-grade students must be able to "follow rules for collegial discussions, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed" (NGA/CCSSO, 2010, p. 49).

They must be directed toward developing a set of guidelines for civil discourse: engaging in active listening, focusing on evidence and facts, using reason and collaborative problem solving, and avoiding personal attacks (Mars, 2011). Students must take part in the decision making for their roles

and responsibilities in organized conversations and come to consensus about how they will conduct themselves in conversational activities.

In this way, students will have ownership of the behaviors they exhibit, and with ample practice, be able to self-monitor their adherence to the agreed-upon guidelines. In addition, ongoing assessment of how students converse collaboratively must be in place in order to maintain a positive learning environment as well as offer students feedback about meeting agreed-upon expectations.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

One way for teachers to develop the needed skills to manage their classrooms is to participate in a *professional learning community* (PLC) (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). According to Roberts and Pruitt (2009), a learning community "provides a vehicle for teachers to share ideas about standards-based instruction" (p. 12). This type of professional learning for teachers often translates into improved student outcomes.

In the case of the three teachers described in this chapter, establishing a PLC that fosters active collaboration, reflection, and honest dialogue about classroom practices between and among those who share the same pupils or similar challenges would bring about needed change. By each teacher capitalizing on his or her strengths and creatively problem solving together, their shared ideas can help build particular learning environments for their students who, in turn, can also be guided to engage in collaborative conversations themselves.

As one possible scenario for our featured teachers working in a PLC, Ms. Malone might describe how she is able to maintain control of her students, Ms. Searson might identify her management of student group work, and Mr. Banner might share how he developed his high-level of tolerance for elevated classroom sound and student activity. Together, they focus on how to better structure their class lessons to increase effective conversational practices for their students and how to train them in the rules of engagement. As each of them incorporates new ideas for managing their classes, they can return to the group for further support, guidance, and encouragement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE STUDENT COLLABORATION

Successful classroom management for effective student-to-student collaboration requires some critical approaches—ground rules, adequate class time, and established routines—to engage students in focused learning, increase their use of academic language in conversation, and make class sessions

more meaningful. In addition, the forum for teachers to safely explore and discuss procedures for how to begin and maintain student collaboration; how to share successful routines, false starts, and the challenges of managing student groups; and how to take risks as well as engage in reflective practices can be accomplished through PLCs.

As general guidelines for classroom practices to promote effective student collaboration, teachers should develop class routines to explain the purpose of tasks, offer clear and precise directions that ensure students understand what they need to do, discuss the scope and time limit of student discussions, and articulate their expectations. Teachers will also need to make the rules for collaboration explicit. Students need to follow rules for collegial discussions and decision making, pose questions, respond to others' questions and comments, acknowledge new information, and justify their own ideas.

Working in PLCs, teachers can further explore how to purposefully group students according to various levels of readiness, levels of interest, preferences, and academic and communication skills or when to allow students the choice of groups. Furthermore, PLCs may also provide the framework for teachers to discuss how best to monitor and guide student interactions, how to redirect off-task conversations, or how to adjust student assignments so that all students remain engaged in meeting the Common Core speaking and listening standards.

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