

## Reflection Paper

**Subject:** Sophomore English

**Grade:** 10

**Module 1: Classroom Environment for Active Learning :** Teacher implements instruction in order to engage students in rigorous and relevant learning and to promote their curiosity about the world at large by:

**Selected Indicator:** 4. Fostering appropriate standards of behavior that support a productive learning environment for all students

### Goal:

Sophomore English-Period 5 (College Prep)

**GOAL:** I will implement researched and peer-suggested strategies to consistently reinforce appropriate behavior, such as listening while another person is speaking, and enforce appropriate consequences for inappropriate behavior, such as interrupting. As a result, students will settle in with a decrease of five minutes into classroom routines and consistently earn less than five tallies per class period.

### Initial Summary:

Originally, I thought that by doing two days of workshops with my students on safety and respect in the classroom leading up to a student-developed social contract, that my students would only need reminders of that contract in order to create an efficient and inclusive work space. However, I soon discovered that some students did not internalize the contract they developed and merely signed because they wanted to be finished with the assignment. Instead of holding themselves accountable for their actions, they saw the assignment as wishy washy and an excuse to postpone academic work. I soon found that creating effective procedures and routines and consistently building them into the classroom were imperative in creating a more effectively managed classroom. Currently in my fifth period Sophomore English class, students constantly interrupt both myself and their peers, engage in side conversations and ignore directions to assignments so that they have to be repeated several times. Four or five students in the classroom have consistently appropriate behavior in the classroom. Other students struggle to remain on task due to constant distraction from their peers. I have struggled with knowing how to create routines that allow students to consistently settle down at the beginning of class without constant redirection, which is proving ineffective. Students call out and say exactly what is on their minds, relevant or not to the topic of discussion at hand and when corrected, talk back and create further distraction.

### Reflection:

For this module, my learning plan consisted of regular mentor observations, studying literature on classroom management and environment, and using peer suggestions to create consistent classroom routines that foster appropriate standards of behavior. My goal was to cover a wide range of resources that could be tailored to individual student needs, as well as implementation across the classroom. During initial conversations with my mentor, we agreed that beginning routines was one of the missing components in the classroom formula. Conversations with other teachers provided insight into issues that may also surface due to an inefficient system of discipline. After these conversations, I began to take notes on the first twenty-five minutes of class before they break for lunch, looking more closely at how quickly students began work or how long they took in quieting down to listen to directions and how many times students needed to be redirected. The result of the first week was copious notes of students "testing" my boundaries and discipline rule-breaking that I had only been minimally aware of. Students avoided work by engaging me in a "but Miss" conversation, which I let happen up until that point. This ability to converse allowed students to avoid the assignment given to them and showed them that it was okay to discuss it with me instead of completing the assignment. After a serious conversation with my mentor, she suggested giving students a daily journal topic or bell ringer activity to settle them into a productive mindset. Another teacher also suggested putting the whole class on a "tally system" that both rewarded and disciplined students. Moving forward, it was imperative to redirect students more effectively by making sure they understood that the classroom rules were not up for negotiation. They needed to consistently see that rules should be respected and followed as soon as they enter the room.

To further my study of successful classroom management, I consulted excerpts from three reading sources that were either provided by my school or suggested by peers. I focused first on chapters fourteen and fifteen of *The First Days of School* by Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong, which focused on assigning and arranging seating, in addition to starting class. The first chapter on seating arrangements versus seating assignments explicitly laid out that assignments needed to be tailored to "maximize learning and minimize behavior problems" (Wong 118). In order to assign seats, first a seating arrangement based on the purpose of the assignment had to be made. The seats in the classroom were already arranged in a larger U-shape with a smaller U-shape within it. This arrangement was already conducive to classroom discussions, which are common in the subject area. Chairs and desks could be easily moved to form groups or individual work stations within the lesson if needed. In discussing with other teachers the subject of seating assignments, many suggestions arose on how to arrange students. While they cautioned against putting easily distracted students together, they did suggest putting the most consistently distracted students toward the front of the room. This created a proximity to the teacher that would limit some of the unwanted behaviors, such as texting under their desks and speaking with a neighbor during instruction. Multiple seating arrangements were tested, some working better than others, until an arrangement was met in which students were able to settle into their work with minimal distraction. Assigning seats also sent a clear message of authority in the classroom and when paired with other strategies,

proved effective in maintaining a productive and orderly classroom.

Wong and Wong insisted that starting a class well meant getting students right to work. After reading this, it made sense that my class was so rowdy in the beginning, because I spent too much time going over arbitrary announcements and tasks instead of starting them on what needed to be accomplished that day. As part of the transition, my mentor teacher suggested giving students journal prompts at the beginning of class in order to "get them into the right mindset." Willing to try anything to accomplish more within the class period, I implemented this strategy the following class, with some immediate success. While in the beginning of the year, it took students as long as twenty minutes to settle down to work, this strategy minimized the time it took consistently by more than 75%. In the last four classes of the observed timeline, more than 90% of students were on task within the first three minutes of class and 100% of students within six minutes. The reduction in time spent getting the class ready to work resulted from a fidelity to having students working right from the beginning, just as the reading suggested. Now, even if it is not a journal assignment, there is a bellwork activity to prepare students for work, which then allows them to maximize the potential for learning in creating more possible learning time.

The other challenge I faced in the classroom was providing a system for disciplining undesirable behaviors with appropriate and effective consequences. At the beginning of the observation period, students often spoke out of turn, or ignored directions and class discussion by talking to the person next to them. Group work was riddled with tangential conversations. When I looked to both my mentor teacher and other colleagues for guidance, the answers were relatively common. They suggested implementing a simple, straightforward signal to students that an undesired behavior was occurring, so that students would be able to self-correct with relatively little disruption to the class, and minimal public acknowledgement of the behavior. Also, taking a close look at the wording of expectations deemed necessary to see whether they were simple and straightforward. Once those were clear to students, a very straightforward hierarchy of consequences appropriate to the violation was suggested. If it was a first time offense, a warning was appropriate, leading up to a private conference, a phone call home, detention, and an office referral if the behavior continued. This system, if to be used to its full potential, had to be consistent above anything.

Upon examination of the classroom rules, which had been created collaboratively during the first week of classes using a "social contract," it became clear that there were too many rules that were vague. A set of seven vague expectations was pared down to three simple expectations: Respect each person, be responsible for your actions, and do your best work. These expectations are revisited when necessary. If a change in routine is introduced at any time, students are reminded that the expectations still stand. Once the expectations were re-introduced with concrete examples and reinforced with consistency, student behavior improved monumentally. With a simple reminder of the expectation that was being violated, students could be

redirected with a 95% success rate. While these reminders still occupy a greater proportion of the class, their efficiency is clear. This strategy, in conjunction with a warning system, laid the foundation for more learning opportunities within the classroom.

One colleague suggested an effective warning system that helped make students more accountable for their own and each other's behavior. The entire class takes part in a tally system. Whenever a student performs an undesirable or inappropriate behavior, a tally mark goes on the board as a warning. If the same student repeats the behavior, they are asked to stand in the hall and wait for a private conversation or are served a 20-minute detention, depending on the severity of the behavior. However, if another behavior arises, another tally goes on the board. If the class as a whole earns five tallies, there is a mandatory writing reflection given in addition to their regular homework that asks them a digging question about their behavior. An example of one of the prompts sent home was "Why is it important to listen to others while they speak and wait for my turn?" If students reach twelve consecutive classes with fewer than five tallies, they are rewarded with free time, homework passes, IMAGINE dollars, or other rewards. The first few days this system was in place, students reluctantly completed the reflections after earning tallies. However, after the third assignment went home, students began self-regulating their behavior, and began holding each other accountable as well. The result was a greater proportion of productive learning occurring within the ninety-minute block, and sole responsibility for behavior management was no longer on the teacher. Soon enough, the writing reflection became irrelevant and the tallies were enough of a reminder to redirect. Upon further conversation with my TEAM mentor, I decided that forcing students to complete a writing assignment as a punishment could be a deterrent to students wanting to write. With that, a shift was made to focus on the positive aspects of good behavior, including the rewards, and looking for alternatives, such as a pop quiz on the material they were currently learning, to quickly and effectively show them how detrimental their behavior was to their learning.

Another aspect of creating a productive classroom surfaced in *Teach Like a Champion* by Doug Lemov. In this text, the emphasis on techniques for building routines and expectations were many, but two surfaced that proved more helpful than the rest. Doug Lemov stressed a strong voice with "a tone and demeanor they employ in their interactions--that maximizes the power" (Lemov 182). He uses several facets of a strong voice to prove his point, including the economizing of language. This clearly became more effective in my classroom. When I kept my pitch low and serious during a correction, I found that I had to repeat myself less, whereas when I spoke in my normal pitch, students tended to ignore the correction or repeat the action. I found that the implementation of the tally system was maximized when four or five words described the warning, and then a swift detention was given as a consequence for continuing the behavior. Lemov also suggested "sweating the details" instead of only focusing on the big things, rationalizing that emphasizing correction on the small things would make the big things irrelevant. In order to incorporate this principle into practice in my classroom, I focused right at the beginning on having students take out only the

materials they needed for the warm-up and putting their backpacks on the floor. Focusing on this quick action did lessen some behavior issues. For example, students could no longer hide their cell phones behind their backpacks and text their friends. By sweating the small things, respect became a more concrete principle in the classroom.

Enforcing consequences and having a consistent warning system was not quite enough in creating the classroom environment fostering student achievement. Those strategies focused too much on the negative behavior happening in the classroom, leaving students who had consistently good behavior unacknowledged. In researching effective strategies for giving praise to students, I consulted the book *Classroom Instruction that Works* by Robert J. Marzano, Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. One chapter, on reinforcing effort, seemed to discuss the type of praise and positive reinforcement that was missing from my classroom initially. They wrote about the “importance of believing in effort” and the need for students to “learn to change their beliefs to an emphasis on effort” (Marzano 50). Upon further reflection of student responses to grades and feedback, it became clear that students felt effort was irrelevant. They insisted that their poor grades were due to them getting answers wrong, rather than on how much they tried to complete an answer fully. This was inconsistent with my personal belief that if a student puts in the effort to do their work and be successful, then they should receive a grade no lower than a C. Instead, students were narrowly focused on whether an answer was right or wrong, completely disregarding any improvement they may have made from a similar assignment they completed previously. In order to battle this disconnect, the authors of this book suggested incorporating anecdotes about times when they succeeded by continuing to try even after a failure and by examining well-known figures such as athletes, social leaders, and other influential examples that became successful simply by not giving up. They suggested having separate rubrics for effort and achievement, so that students would always receive credit for how hard they worked, and not only if they achieved a “correct” answer. Both ideas seemed easy enough to incorporate into daily instruction.

As a result of researching the impact on reinforcing effort, I added two simple things to my instruction. The first thing was a constant personal reminder to praise appropriate behavior, including improved effort in certain students to monitor and exude positive behavior. The second thing I learned from this reading was to praise effort in everything my students do, if possible. In some cases, that meant giving an assignment as a “practice” and giving everyone who tried it full credit, still marking things they may have did wrong or poorly. In other cases, especially more complex assignments worth more, I added an effort component. Now, about 15% of a student’s grade on any particular assignment is based on effort. This has shown students that trying does count for something, though the benefits of incorporating effort more consistently into the classroom has had some slower results in improving classroom behavior and achievement. The first goal in affirming effort was to show students that they could succeed merely by doing, which has so far been relatively successful. With some students, it only goes so far, because they have taken praise to mean that they can stop doing their work because it is “good enough.” In these cases, further

reflection led to more calculated and clear wording of praise given to "I like where this is going" and "I think this will be excellent once it is developed further" instead of "great" or "this looks awesome." The simple changing in wording showed students that they were on the right track, but not yet finished, signaling to them that it was not okay to simply give up and talk to their friends.

While the balance of these techniques changes daily, all of these techniques have helped to provide my classes with effective routines and clear expectations so that they may successfully learn. In some cases, classes have become more productive simply by limiting the "settling down" time in the beginning. Now, students are aware of what they are expected to do at the beginning of class, and know the routines put in place to make sure they can be successful. In some cases, self-monitoring has become an asset to student behavior. The most valuable lesson I have learned in this module is that I may not be able to prevent undesirable or inappropriate behavior from occurring every time, but a great deal of it may be anticipated and avoided because of the successful implementation of expectations and routines. An emphasis on effort showcases the importance of trying, giving students no excuses with regards to "opting out." All of these strategies have led to a vast improvement in productivity and learning. While the system is always changing and improving, success is more plausible with clear intentions.