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THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER and Classroom management

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Introduction

This document is unusual. It begins with two outlines which I usually use when teaching. They concern the teacher, what they can do, and aspire to, and a discussion of classroom management techniques. The outlines are followed by an expansion of many of the points made. I include classroom management in my course on ESP/TEFL because most of my students will, at some point in their lives, teach English in school. The material is based on my own personal experience of struggling to become a teacher, and my interaction with Tunisian MA students and my colleagues. When presenting this material, at first, some of the ideas below are deemed impracticable outside Britain. Frequently I get the most support from the experienced teachers in my class. Therefore, before starting, I ask the students to consider something different, something that is at first sight new and against their culture. I stress that am not saying that all the ideas below will work in another culture. But some of them will. I ask them as adults to consider the new ideas carefully. The major part has in fact proved to be cross cultural.

All my students have access to that excellent book by Michael Marland, "The craft of the classroom", (Heinemann 2002). It was an earlier edition of this book, along with the detailed and sympathetic advice of a headmaster, that really taught me most of what I needed. This headmaster was my neighbour when I was doing my teacher training. Dr Peter Robinson and his family took me in, and cared for me during the toughest year in my life (1978-79). Because Dr Robinson was working in a school in another county, which was totally outside my learning context, we were able - without breaking confidence - to share problems. I as a total beginner had the privilege of seeing the viewpoint from the top of the ladder, and he in turn, with great humility, saw afresh the teaching world through the pain of a totally incompetent beginner.

Perhaps because I have been to the depths - I can discuss the ideas with confidence. Teaching did not come naturally to me. I took far longer to learn than most of my friends, and the pain was much greater. These ideas are shared in the hope that some of them will be useful. In fact, I only passed my teacher training year by a stroke of good fortune which I happily acknowledge was probably God's doing.

I should explain that in Britain, one major route to qualifying as a teacher is to do a year of teacher training known as the Post Graduate Certificate of Education. In my teacher training year I spent half my time in a school, taking classes for other teachers. You then have to get a job - and it is the individual schools which do the recruiting - it is not the Ministry of

Education which organises recruitment and can send you anywhere in the country. This first job is paid employment but under 'probation'.

In my teacher training year, my discipline was so weak that the teacher advisor warned me that I must improve, or she would have to fail me. I continued to be weak, so she called in a second opinion - the inspector if you like. This inspector arrived, unannounced, expecting to find me in a free period. He wanted to discuss the problems with me. But that morning, events outside our control took place.

Just before the inspector arrived I heard that the chemistry teacher was sick, and I was asked to supervise his class. I replied that I could do better than that. Since I knew the class (which was a rare one with few discipline problems), I would give them some chemical formulae exercises, and explain in detail the answers. So, at less than five minutes notice I took over a class, and taught a full lesson without any preparation. It happened to be one of the best I had taught, and in walked the inspector and saw most of it.

In the discussion afterwards, the inspector said that my disciplinary problems were large, but that day he had seen me teach. If I was flexible enough to teach like that at short notice, then, provided I did not give up I would eventually learn to be a good teacher. 'Eventually' took me the whole teacher training year and another eighteen months as a paid teacher.

I had much more suffering to endure. It was very frustrating - I wanted to be a good teacher, as did my pupils and colleagues, yet I had to learn the hard way. Some might ask, why if I believe in God, did not God give me immediate success? There are several possible answers to that. Perhaps the best one is that because I know what it means to be on the failure list, because I know what it means to be so nervous that I could not eat breakfast before going to work, because I had to suffer, then I can relate to those going through similar struggles.

In my first term of teaching, I was given several bad classes, and was also given 'the worst lab in the school'. This is quite normal. Did I have an unfair number of bad classes? It felt that way, even if it was not true.

So, before I started teaching, I studied the labs and did my seating plans. In the lab I put up some science posters, and generally tried to make the room different. That immediately caught the attention of most students - here was a new teacher who cared enough to liven up the worst lab in the school. This fits with a basic principle - to do what was easily within my power. I eventually came to love that lab, and when I had the chance to move to another one in which the benches were arranged much better, I refused.

In my first term I lost a lot of weight, and went off my food. I was concerned enough to seek the advice of a doctor. He was smart. He did not even seek a medical explanation, but cut me short and told me to go back and get help to control my classes. In trembling the next day I approached my head of department, explained I had a problem with health, and the doctor said I had to ask for help. My department head was surprisingly sympathetic, said he did not know it was that bad, then threw the ball back into my court. Precisely which class was the worst,

what was the problem, and what did I want him to do about it? I took a deep breath, named the class, said it had six trouble makers in it, and I wanted them all out of my class. He agreed. He would take them at the back of his class (across the corridor). They would do copying for an hour, and after a few weeks I was to take them back into my normal class, one at a time, until after a term I was teaching the whole class.

That worked! Six months later, I was speaking with the headmaster. I should explain that it is the headmaster in consultation with senior teachers such as the head of department who decides if a new teacher has passed their probation. In Britain this task is not performed by inspectors as it is in some countries. I was nervous - was my need for extra help going to mean I had failed my probation? When asked, my Headmaster was surprised, and then replied with an unforgettable pearl of wisdom. "Oh no, I never fail a teacher who asks for help". When he saw my surprise, he explained, "You see, it is the stubborn teacher who will not listen whom I sometimes have to fail. If you carry on, you will become a good teacher".

It is with this background I now present several lists of what makes a good teacher, and how they can manage their classroom.

Outline: THE TEACHER

1. **These factors are independent of the subject and mode of teaching. They are also cross cultural.**
 - **Care
 - **Teach well
 - **Manage well
2. Prepare work at two levels, since all teaching is to some extent 'mixed ability' teaching
 - a. Basics. Essential. Minimum.
 - b. Extension work.
3. **Have many activities, change frequently.** Have a rhythm/pacing of a new task every 10-15 minutes.
4. Give worked examples as a way of explaining how to do an exercise.
5. **You know**
 - a. where the students are (ability level etc)
 - b. where students want to be
 - c. what the institution/Head Of Department requires
 - d. the type of class
 - e. what is realistic. But do not get in a rut, keep striving for improvement!
 - f. preferred learning styles of students
 - g. better learning styles
 - h. resources/texts
 - i. your own strengths and weaknesses, how easily you adapt, how readily you learn.
 - j. your agenda and priorities
 - k. outline syllabus of their other subjects
 - l. What is realistic for homework
6. The activities should be specific, achievable, relevant, and timed.
7. **Checklist: every lesson should include:**
 - a. Reading: gist
 - b. Reading, detail
 - c. Grammar
 - d. Pronunciation
 - e. Individual work, pair work, group work.
 - f. jokes
8. **A fast motivating rhythm maintained**

9. **You need to be:**

- a. flexible
- b. enthusiastic
- c. have good relationships with students and staff
- d. willing to experiment [Story: how you passed teacher training]

10. **What makes a good teacher?** A major point here is that many of these points below are under the direct control of the teacher. What can easily be done must be done. What is harder must be worked at. Some statements are idealistic, and unachievable at first. But, it is well known that 'if you aim at nothing you will hit it'.

- a. Appearance: formal, almost like a uniform
- b. Maintains order
- c. Strict and fair but not harsh
- d. Rarely angry
- e. Never insults students, ie never attacks their character.
- f. Never criticises colleagues in public, especially not in front of the students
- g. Explains things, even if only a few need extra help
- h. Fair, impartial
- i. Hard working
- j. Reliable, always there on time, rarely absent. Meets deadlines. Marks homework promptly.
- k. Organised, well prepared
- l. Motivates students, encourages them
- m. Exciting. Makes lessons interesting
- n. Models <teachability>.
 - 1) How easily can a student ask you a question?
 - 2) How easily can a student correct you?
 - 3) Do you cover your ignorance, or admit it and promise to do better next time?
 - 4) How readily do you listen to students before giving your judgement?
- o. Creates an environment conducive to learning
- p. Cares for the weak student. Does not give up on them. Finds satisfaction in seeing their progress -- not in their actual mark.
- q. Stretches the bright student
- r. Continually striving for improvement
- s. Does not give up when there are problems. Stickability.
- t. Willing to fail
- u. Willing to experiment
- v. Flexible
- w. Starts strict, relaxes later in the year
- x. When they say something they do it: they never announce anything they are not willing or able to do.
- y. Treats everyone with respect, including the caretaker and the cleaners, and teaches their classes to respect everyone in the school.

11. Discuss

- a. Anger
- b. Arguing
- c. Sanctions
- d. Loud voice
- e. Do classes need to be silent? All the time?

Outline: CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

1. Observe well other good teachers, in ALL subjects not just your own.
2. Preparation is far more important than marking, but regular marking is easy to do and will help your teaching and your control.
3. Seating plans. Prior question: What is in the best interests of the pupils? Friends distract!
4. Tidy classrooms. Attractive. eg 6 displays per year.
5. Key point: what are the students doing?

6. Advance preparation

- a. Room plans
- b. Spare chairs! Lights! Sockets for cassette recorder.
- c. Chalk, rubber (for rubbing out your writing), paper, pens,
- d. Emergency work(sheets) for disruptive students who arrive without books
- e. Names list, with details of students you should know about:
 - 1) medical problems
 - 2) Social problems
 - 3) Disruptive students
 - 4) Known groups that should be split up

6. School expectations

You should find out all this in advance, and know what is expected of you, and of the students. You should know what is possible, and in particular, which sanctions are available.

- a. Homework. How often, how much, marking
- b. Late arrivals, procedure for
- c. Who has authority on your lesson content
- d. Who can give you advice about your lessons
- e. Toilet routines
- f. Who can give you advice about discipline
- g. Roll call, and reporting those absent
- h. Writing on desks
- i. Violence
- j. Tests, frequency and content
- k. Reports
- l. Seating plans,

- 1) Feasibility. Use of.
- 2) Use it from the first day

7. **Mark book**

I set aside space for comments/descriptions. This helped me learn the names. Also, near reports time, I would take in their books, mark them, and make notes, so that I had everything I needed for reports. I could also then observe carefully the students I was not sure about.

Keep your reports factual, and what they can do to improve.

8. **Discipline**

- a. Act fast, deal with early signs. Localise -- define the target, and do not punish a group.
- b. Criticise:
 - 1) Behaviour not character
 - 2) Fault not person
 - 3) Specifics not vague trends
- c. Use Praise much more than criticism, both public and private.
- d. Divide and rule - split up disruptive groups

9. **Receiving the class**

- a. Work to do, ready on the Blackboard,
eg. "Turn to page 21 start exercise 4". eg. Re-read the notes you made in the previous lesson, especially thinking about...
- b. Stand in the door -> control of both classroom and corridor
-> students enter one by one -> chance for personal contact with students
- c. Concentrate on trouble-shooting.

10. **In the lesson**

- a. Use names -- students who are watched, and know it, give less problems
- b. Overlap activities -- multitask. Handle individuals while still teaching the group.
- c. Change activities. You need a balance of routines which help to keep order, and changes which avoid monotony.
- d. What are the students doing [not, what the teacher is doing!]. Are the students actively learning? [not, are they quiet!]

11. **Lesson end**

- a. Time it to the minute!
Eg 3.55 Pens down. Summarise what has been achieved that lesson. Brief word of praise.
 - 3.57 Books away, in silence.
 - 3.58 Stand up.
 - 4.00 bell -> ROWS leave, not all at once!

12. Collecting and receiving work

- a. Collect the work in the seating order, OPEN!
- b. You go round and do the collecting, so as not to miss any book.
- c. Books given out, using the seating order they are in.

13. Noise

- a. Insist on one person speaking at a time in a large group.
- b. Avoid calling out, by you choosing the names.
- c. Use pair work, and group work, and insist that one person at a time in the pair/group speaks.
- d. Keep students busy.
- e. Use eye-contact: this gives the sense of speaking to individuals.

14. Questions/instructions

Keep these precise. "Those who have NOT got a pen, put up your hand". Better: "Who has NOT got a pen? Put up your hand."

15. Pace the year

- a. Conserve your energy. Become a survivor without becoming hard or cynical. Work hard, then stop. Make sure you have outside interests that are relaxing.
- b. Target classes for special attention. I focused on two classes, for 1-2 weeks. After 10 weeks or so of this (twice round) my discipline was getting better.

16. Think

- a. Forgotten your notes/lesson plans/material. [leave some emergency material at school]
- b. Losing your voice
- c. When you go to a new school, what do you find out? What do you NOT get to know?
- d. When you do a lesson plan, what do you concentrate on?
 - 1) variety/ fast moving rhythm.
 - 2) basics/extension
 - 3) pupil learning/doing (not you!).
 - 4) priorities

17. The bottom lines

These statements above are the ideals. No one can live up to them, especially at the beginning. So what can be done?

- a. Admit, you cannot do all you want to do.
- b. Do as much as you can in advance
- c. Learn from your mistakes
- d. Learn to survive. You may need to use survival techniques, and to build slowly. eg
 - 1) Rote copying to get the class busy and quiet
 - 2) State your rules. Explain what is acceptable and what is not. Then enforce them, but calmly.
 - 3) Do not be provoked into an angry argument.
 - 4) Target one or two classes each week/fortnight, for special attention. eg, I could not issue detentions for troublemakers in all my classes: I would have too many. So I worked on a few, for 2 weeks, then moved on. In a term, each class was worked on at least once.
 - 5) Learn which experienced teachers are able and willing to help you.
 - 6) Preparation is more important than marking. [Context, UK: books marked weekly].
- e. Build. Get lesson notes from others
- f. Build. Ask advice. "What do you advise me to do?"

DISCUSSION AND EXPANSION

* **A basic principle**

Few people are born as good teachers. Most 'bad' teachers can become good, given time, effort, and good tactics. At the beginning, many of the characteristics of a good teacher are but daydreams. The way you grow professionally until they become part of you, is to concentrate on what you can do, and do that well. There are many major elements of a good teacher, such as preparation, marking, being smartly dressed etc which are possible for the worst teacher with the most disruptive pupils. As you concentrate on these, you will slowly improve in the other areas.

* **Before classes start**

Preparation begins long before you see a class. Insist on a tour of the school! Insist on seeing all the rooms you are likely to teach in. Take notes of the seating arrangements, power points, light switches etc.

Find out what the school expects of you, in terms of content of your lessons, and classroom management. What are the toilet routines? If there is a fight, or a medical emergency, do you know how to summon help? [I am assuming that a teacher always stays with the emergency and sends messages with pupils].

Get your markbook organised. Ask teachers who know the classes to comment on any student you should know about.

Plan for trouble! Some schools do not leave chalk in the room, so that students will not steal it and throw it at you. If chalk is provided, then be sure that someone will take it and leave you stuck - unless you always carry reserves in your bag. Other students will come to class without pen, paper, textbook, etc. Make sure you have a supply of cheap replacements. Students will soon learn that 'forgetting' does not work.

The ideal is for the teacher to get to the classroom before the students do. In Britain, a teacher is often responsible for their classroom and for the corridor immediately outside the room. Therefore, Marland recommends actually standing in the doorway and allowing students to come into the room in single file. This gives a welcome chance for personal interaction.

As soon as pupils move into the room, they should see instructions on the board. Something simple to do for the first five minutes or so, such as:

*** Revise your homework

*** Do question 4 page 23

*** Read page 26

Make it a habit to put up these instructions, and the pupils will get into the habit of looking and getting busy. With most students busy, you have time to deal with the problems.

* **A second basic principle**

It is not what the teacher is doing that matters. The key question is: what are the pupils doing? Busy students are less disruptive. Over a long day, teachers need short pauses. As long as students are busy, then this is fine. The attitude that the pupils need to be busy takes the stress off a teacher who might otherwise think only in terms of what the teacher is doing.

* **The first lesson: seating plans**

The goal of the first lesson is to establish your dominance, and to set out the standards you expect. Therefore do not worry too much if little learning takes place. I suggest you plan your seating order in advance and spend the first few minutes rearranging the class.

I used alternate rows of boys and girls, and I used alphabetical order of first names. This nicely broke up the groups. Even good students tend to be chatty when they sit next to their friends. Another way is to sit them boy-girl-boy-girl.

This idea often provokes astonishment. A popular idea is that children learn best in their little cliques and groups of friends. Marland argues that learning is more efficient when natural groups are broken up. When I tried it the whole class knew that I was taking charge. I also received questions from senior teachers because it was so unusual, and because of the disruption caused while it was being set up. Certainly, teenagers and adults may well learn best when in self-selected groups, but with children, it is probably best to follow the experts.

I have it on good recent authority from British teachers that this idea certainly exists, and is quite a good one. Initially there will be chaos while it is being introduced - even resentment and misunderstanding. The ideal is to get there first to the room and not allow anyone to enter without permission. Then the teacher simply calls students in, one by one, and shows them their allocated places.

Even with adults, insist that students always sit in the same place, then go round and write down your seating plan. Explain if you have to that you have a problem learning names and this is the easy solution.

Knowing names, and knowing who is seated where gives you some power. Learn to teach with the seating plan in your hand and refer to it often. Never allow calling out, instead, you choose which person to speak and answer a question. In this way you will gain control.

* **Preparation or marking?**

Both these tasks are under direct control of the teacher. Neither is affected by problems in discipline. Therefore both should be done well. But a beginner teacher must of necessity take a lot of time over preparation.

If it comes to a choice, then preparation is the higher priority. If the institution insists on a

lot of marking, then you may need to tactfully negotiate lower expectations - at least for your first year of teaching.

* **Speeding up marking**

In my first school I had over three hundred different students, thirteen class-sets of books to mark each week, and at least ten hours of new lesson material to prepare each week. Some of the lessons were neatly packaged, with notes, handouts etc. Others I just had the syllabus and was expected to work through it in my own way, with termly targets. So there was an immense load of preparation. In addition, the head insisted that homework be set and marked weekly for all the classes. This was clearly impossible for a new teacher, so I negotiated a compromise: the classes I saw twice a week would receive and have corrected the homework on a weekly basis. [Work would be set one lesson, and collected at the end of the next]. The classes I only saw once a week received double homework every other week. This meant ten hours of new lesson material plus over 200 books to mark per week. I was at school 830am to 4pm with an average of one hour per day of slack time. Lunch was eaten with the students, so it really was an 'on duty' meal. Getting to work meant 20 minutes bike ride, up hill against the wind in all weathers, a short train ride, and a bike ride to school.

I was NOT unusual. In fact, my long, non-stop day, high preparation load, high marking load, was considered a normal part of the job. It is my experience outside Britain that marking is often neglected by teachers. I hear complaints about the high work load - as seeming justification for this neglect of duty. It needs to be said loud and clear that **a teacher who does not prepare lessons well is not being professional. Also a teacher who does not regularly mark the books of students is not being professional.** There are legitimate ways of managing the workload, but the tasks themselves must not be shirked. Not giving reasonable time to preparation and marking is negligence, and unprofessional behaviour. If behaviour is classified as unprofessional, I mean that it should be changed immediately. For all but the very best new teachers, if they are clocking less than 50-60 hours a week of work then they are probably not doing their job.

Having said that, there are legitimate ways of saving time. I knew that I needed to speed up the administration. Therefore, before I started at that school I put the names of the students in my mark book in two lists: boys and girls, and within each list used the alphabetical order of first names. I also seated the students on alternate rows, boys-girls, and insisted that they sit in that alphabetical order. It was a simple matter therefore to collect the books in alphabetical order, open at the first page that needed marking. Once a mark has been given it takes time to find the names of students, and this method reduced it to a few seconds. If books are not in alphabetical order you can easily waste 30-60 seconds per book finding the name in your list. Even the fact of collecting work open at the first page to mark will save you time. And all these little time savers add up. Thirty minutes saved per class set can amount to over five hours saved each week.

For most of the classes, I learned to mark each book at less than one minute per book. I would check to see the work had been done, and then 'spot mark' ie mark in detail a

particular part. I would target one or two classes per week for more detailed correcting. In this way I was able to mark 200 or more books per week, even as a total beginner. Paradoxically, the weekly marking resulted in less work overall. There are fewer pages to turn. The teacher can see on a weekly basis what is not understood - and teach accordingly. They can notice those who have not done their work and take prompt corrective action.

Prompt marking has enormous benefits for teaching and discipline. Students respond to teachers who mark promptly. A teacher with poor discipline can at least be respected for the marking. And marking is easy to do, even for a beginner. It may be tiresome, but the sheer speed of correcting can create a pleasant thrill. I also believe that speedy marking in a situation when I am concentrating enables me to be more consistent, and to memorise better what I am looking for - what is acceptable, and what is unacceptable. Better a set of books marked quickly at full concentration than a set marked slowly while watching TV, as some teachers prefer.

Of course some teachers are too perfectionist - they spend too much time in their job. Teaching involves making rational compromises - like the spot marking explained above.

* **A solution to the problem of noise**

Some teachers have a 'presence' about them so that as soon as they walk into a room everyone goes quiet. Most senior teachers have it, and I used to think it went with the rank. But I have seen senior teachers without this natural authority, and I worked with a young teacher - promoted to head of department after only three years teaching - who also had this charisma.

I was blessed with a foghorn voice. I thought it was a blessing but friends and family hated it. When I first started teaching I tried to use it, and for months would shout a lot at my classes. Until one day a senior teacher took me aside and taught me otherwise. The voice of a teacher has to last over 40 years, therefore, like a singer, it must not be strained. Secondly, students get used to a teacher who shouts and no longer take the teacher seriously.

Even when lecturing, even when I have a microphone, I find it easy to talk above a class, but in doing so my voice is strained. Therefore I try to get quiet. I will for instance, stop talking until all is quiet. But sometimes noise builds up. Therefore, a better way when teaching is to say that I will talk for a few minutes then stop and allow them to discuss what they have heard. Some of the noise in a classroom is due to students asking each other about what the teacher has said.

In schools, one key to achieving silence is to name the students still talking - one more use for the seating plan. Another key is to start loud then slowly reduce the teacher volume.

Even if silence can be achieved, I found that it rarely lasted long. In my second school, I noticed that even the good classes rarely stayed quiet for long. So I discovered a new

method of teaching. I had not read about this in any book on teaching, and no one explained it to me.

If students will not be quiet, why should I waste energy attempting to make them? Why should I wear myself out? Why should I make a fool of myself? The key question is to keep the students busy learning. Many activities can be done without requiring the whole class to be quiet and to listen to the teacher. So what I learned to do was to keep to a minimum the activities requiring silence from the whole class.

I made a habit before opening the door to a new class to write instructions on the board. If I had to enter a room with students already there, I would immediately clean the board and write an instruction. Something simple like turn to page xx and answer the first question. When all the problems had been sorted out, and everyone was busy, I would, from a prominent position, tell the class to put down their pens and to listen. I would teach for five minutes or so. As soon as noise built up, I would instruct them to go back to the work set for them on the board. Then I would go round the class. I would select maybe ten students and ask them to pay attention. I would teach, question, and explain. As long as the rest of the class had a tolerable noise level I would leave them to work - or not work. After a few minutes with one group I would move on to the next and repeat the same mini-lesson.

In a one hour lesson it was possible to do this circle of small group teaching two or more times. It was easy to get a small group to listen. The students felt they received more personal attention - which they did! After each round, I might try a whole class activity.

The point is that with noisy classes you do not need to continually demand that they are quiet. This method worked and was a low stress method. With some classes I also achieved a compromise with disruptive pupils: they keep their noise down, and I would not be too demanding.

* **Rewarding good workers**

One big incentive to work, which rewarded the good students, was to announce the homework before the end of the lesson, and allow students when they had finished class activities to get on with the homework. In some cases, I even allowed them to do the homework from other teachers. This seems like heresy, but why should it be? I was fortunate as a teenager to have teachers in my best subjects who allowed me to do homework as well as the classwork. As long as I maintained my position of near the top of the class, I could sometimes work on another subject while listening to the teacher.

* **Relationships are very important**

Teaching is all about relationships. Before I even entered a school as a student teacher, Dr Peter Robinson stressed the importance of this statement: **teaching is all about relationships - not just with the pupils and other teachers, but also with the caretaker and the cleaners.** If you want others to respect you then you must start by respecting them. It begins with a cheery respectful greeting to everyone, including those,

such as the cleaners, that may otherwise not be shown respect. It continues with the way you leave a classroom tidy. Perhaps at the end of the day you will insist that the chairs are put up so that the cleaners can work. It also showed in the way I talked about other people to other people. In any institution there are underclasses of people. I respected the cleaners, and regularly provided them with 'volunteers' to help with cleaning [which was also a meaningful punishment for disruptive pupils]. Similarly, the laboratory technicians appreciated the extra effort I took to make sure pupils left benches and equipment as clean and tidy as possible.

* **Disruptive pupils**

Precisely what can be done will vary with the country and the school, but there are some tips that may work across cultures. The traditional way is to move disruptive pupils either to the front row, or into the four corners of the room. The problem is that some classes have more than four trouble makers and classrooms only have four corners! So, I learned the hard way to move disruptive pupils to the back. My eyes naturally focus on the back row. Some pupils gain their power through being watched by others, and at the back of the room this is harder for them. Naughty children at the front have easier access to the board and to my bag when my back is turned, so sometimes at the front they are actually harder to handle. The good children can tolerate the naughty ones who are behind them.

In some cases, I compromised with the naughty students. "You keep reasonably quiet at the back, and I will not be too hard on you".

Now, one of the golden rules of teaching is that you almost never attempt to punish the whole class. But what happens if the individual cannot be pinpointed, or if you do not have enough evidence to take action? To solve this problem, I kept the trouble makers together. True, they would interact with each other. But, whenever there was a problem I was confident it came from one of them. So I would put the whole small group of maybe three or four children in detention. When they complained that only one of them had done something wrong and that I had picked on the wrong person I replied that another time it had been them, and I had taken no action, so they could take it as mere catchup.

By putting all the trouble makers together, and punishing the small group, the rest of the class were not upset: I kept the majority on my side.

* **Threats and criticism**

A teacher must be a person of their word. Never make a threat you are not able and willing to carry out. So think carefully before you escalate to a threat. If the next person to speak goes into detention, then into detention they go. And you do not forget, because you carry a notebook and write it down.

When you criticise a student, think twice before you use general labels. A pupil is not 'lazy' in general: they have not done their homework. Criticism must always focus on the specific factual detail and you must refuse the temptation to generalise. I am mentioning it here because not every postgraduate I teach seems to have heard of this.

* **Sanctions**

There are very few sanctions left to teachers. I was able to put pupils in detention. I organised my own detentions, and had to do them sometimes four days a week. Yes, it was work, and yes, it was worthwhile. Yes it was in addition to a high load of preparation and marking. But, following school policy, the detentions did not involve students sitting in silence. They had to do something. Failure to do homework meant detention to do it, and once finished they could go. There is a principle: learning should never be a punishment. Therefore, except for other problems I would set copying of non-school material as a punishment.

With some disruptive students in the detention, I was able to use physical exercise as a punishment. I used step-ups -with their hands on their head to make it harder. They would do 100 at a time, then I would check their pulse and breathing. If there were obvious medical problems then I stopped. The first times I did this I actually did the exercises with them and showed them that I could do it. If I could manage 200 step-ups in one go, then so could they - even if I do have bigger legs! Some pupils, particularly the bullies, like to appear strong. Step-ups gave them some healthy exercise and meant that I could show them I was fitter and stronger.

I hate students writing on desks. Therefore, anyone caught was immediately set to work with a scrubbing brush, and maybe sand paper, and they had to do the hard physical work of cleaning up. This was done in breaks and after school. Because I made friends with the cleaners I would often send them some 'volunteers' to help. This to me is a very constructive punishment.

But what about abusive behaviour? How can this be handled? People misbehaving in this way need to be encouraged to think about their words and actions, and to come to see that they are wrong and why they are unacceptable. Therefore, I would ask them to give me a two page apology. If not done for homework they could come to detention to do it. Taking nearly an hour to write a detailed apology was useful for the student, and gave me some insight into the person.

Having received the apology, I would rarely show it to other teachers. I might keep it for a few weeks, and remind them in the next incident that they were welcome to write a four page apology if they wished. I sometimes demonstrated the principle of forgiveness that once a full and frank acknowledgment of fault has been made then the score was reset to zero by accepting the apology, and tearing it up! A nice point, but it was hard for the pupil to see an hour of work in the rubbish bin!

* **Medical emergencies**

Every teacher should have received basic first aid training - especially those working in science or sports. **If you have not, I suggest you go and take a course in it.**

It is a good idea to know about students with known medical problems. Become knowledgeable about their disease or handicap.

Story 1

In my first week of teaching, the head entrusted me with a haemophiliac. [a genetic condition affecting the blood clotting mechanisms, which means that bleeding, internal or external, is difficult to control].

Help! I had the worst lab in the school, with no clear access for the teacher to all the points in the room. More than once that year I jumped from benchtop to benchtop to get to a problem, carefully dodging glass equipment, acids, bunsen burners and surprised children. And this child, at the slightest cut, could bleed uncontrollably, or, worse, at the slightest bang or scrape, bleed internally.

Now this eleven year old knew his problem extremely well, and the head's secretary had a supply of injections he was trained to give to himself when needed. As expected, he walked into his first lesson, a little late and in a cocky manner announced to the whole class:

Hi Sir, I'm a haemophiliac

I instinctively knew that to gain his respect and that of the class, I had to show that I knew a lot about his problem, and I had to do this without humiliating him. So I quizzed him and explained his answers to the class.

What type of haemophilia? What precautions did he take? What medicines did he use?

From then on I never had any problems with that child. I really liked him, and he was able to be normal most of the time, and to do laboratory experiments just like the rest of the class. Of course, it was easier for me because I am a graduate in Human Biology and I had studied this condition in more detail than the child was capable of understanding. Nowadays, with the internet, every teacher could do that, and what you do not understand in what you read you could get the pupil to explain to you.

Story 2

Another time a child groaned, collapsed and shook all over while on the floor. We had been taught several times what to do - keep the class from crowding round, make sure the tie is loose etc and otherwise do not touch. Then call for help. It was probably a classical 'epileptic fit' but I was a teacher not a doctor. When I had to fill out an accident report form I stuck to the facts: what happened, when, who did what, and timings. I remember being asked to say 'the child had an epileptic fit' and I refused - that is diagnosis and not my competence. I as a teacher had to take the routine steps, and provide an accurate description, and note the usual and the unusual so that a doctor could evaluate the child.

* **Violence in the classroom**

We were taught in teacher training that violent confrontations can usually be avoided, since few events begin with violence - instead, there is a steady escalation in a confrontation, and teachers have to learn how to de-escalate, and avoid violence.

However, in my second year of teaching I experienced a 12 year old who went out of

control and attacked other pupils. He walked into my science lab and started grabbing heavy bags and satchels and throwing them into the air so that they could have landed on glass jars of liquid chemicals or on the heads of other pupils. I did not hesitate. I put my long arms round his chest and fell to the floor with him, then sent for help. It so happened that this was on the ground floor, and a senior teacher just happened to be passing and had seen everything. He walked in, and said something like “Thankyou Mr Lowe, I will take charge now” and he took the boy to his room. Later, the boy came and apologised. It turned out that he had just been home to lunch to find that his father had left his mother. Even now it hurts to think of the pain that child must have gone through.

Now, what are the lessons to be drawn from this story?

1. The first responsibility of any teacher in this situation is for the safety of their class. Therefore, even at a risk of pain or bodily harm, they must protect the class.
2. The second responsibility is to the child, and involves planning in advance what do do in emergencies like this, then acting with minimal force. I knew what to do because my father for over 20 years had taught in a special school for disruptive and delinquent boys. He used to joke that he taught the boys the normal schools could not cope with. We had also discussed scenarios like this in our teacher training. The result was that I had been well briefed.
3. In these days of litigation and false accusations against teachers, it is vital that if you touch a pupil you do so with several reliable witnesses.
4. Usually, the teacher should not leave the room - they should send for help. This implies you know how to send for help - who is available, where, and that you know who the reliable pupils are who can help you.
5. I knew the physically putting my arms round a child so preventing further violence, then myself falling onto the floor was something I, with very little strength, could do. Better to hurt myself in falling onto the floor pulling the child down with me than to hurt the child by some more painful grip. In practice it all happened very quickly and easily and no-one was hurt. Once on the floor, other pupils could be asked to sit on the legs etc if need be.

What makes a good teacher

- ** The basic principle is that **you should first do all that is easily in your power, then work towards the ideals**. If you aim at nothing you will hit it. If you aim high and miss it by a little this is better than aiming low and hitting it.
- ** Dressing formally, with clean smart clothes, almost like a uniform, immediately creates a visual impression. People in authority usually are dressed smartly.
- ** A hard working teacher, who is prompt at meeting deadlines, will earn respect from pupils and colleagues alike. In fact, this can cover a lot of weaknesses! If this means a 50-60 hour week in the first year of teaching, then so be it. That is quite normal. A teacher who is unreliable, and who does not work reasonably hard, is being unprofessional.
- * **A good teacher models teachability**
This I find to be a very difficult principle to practice, but I aspire to this, and if I did not aspire, I would be worse off. A good teacher, by definition, must be a good learner. A good learner knows that they do NOT know everything, that they do forget, and sometimes make mistakes.

Now, we all know that some pupils will deliberately ask questions in order to delay the lesson, or to see how the teacher reacts! Other teachers are determined to only teach the syllabus.

A few weeks ago I heard someone criticise their teacher because they refused to answer a question that was off the syllabus, even though the question was interesting and there was enough time. The suspicion was that the teacher did not know the answer, and covered up by using the 'off subject' excuse. Then, a week later, I found myself committing exactly the same offence when a student brought me a question about phonetics. I did not know the answer but knew about the detail, and had decided when preparing the course that the detail was not important for that level of class. When I realised that I had agreed with the criticism of another teacher, and committed the same error, I felt shame, and promptly researched an answer to the question my student had asked.

In some cultures, the teacher is expected to know the answer. One year when I surveyed my students, one of them astutely explained that they would forgive me for a subject I obviously knew less about (because I teach a lot of different subjects), but that when I was asked a simple question as to how to decide what is a significant figure and did not know how to explain it even though I had written a textbook of methodology and statistics, then I really should have known.

I remember that incident well. It really was a question of the starting point - how much prior knowledge could I assume? I thought I was reminding students of the difference between a decimal place and a significant figure, and that the details belonged to lower high school - which they do. I had never before been forced to explain something so

elementary. I remember doing my best in the lesson, but eventually had to face up to the fact, in front of the class, that while I knew the difference, I could not explain it as a series of clear steps or clear rules.

What could I have done? Here are some possible scenarios, which also apply to cases where the teacher does not know the answer, or cannot remember the answer. Somehow, the students deserve a fair answer, and the class are expecting the teacher to behave in a face saving way.

Answer 1

Does anyone else know the answer?

Then you see if one or more people can explain. You recognise the good answer, and reinforce it. Remember that your recognition ability is far higher than your recall. It is often possible that someone else will know the answer, and the effort of explaining will be good for them. If this fails, then proceed to answer 2.

Answer 2

That is a good question, which I do not have time to answer properly now. Let me make a note of it, and I will answer you next week.

If you do this, make sure you note down the question, and make sure you find the answer. If for some reason you cannot after a reasonable time of searching, then come back to the class and say that you could not find the answer.

Answer 3

Yes, that is a good question. Why not try to find the answer for yourself, and bring it to me next week?

This answer is particularly useful for the students who delight to sidetrack and trip up a teacher. It firmly places the responsibility back upon them.

Answer 4

For that level of detail, I think you need to see a mathematician (or see a colleague). Why don't you ask them? Tell them that Dr Lowe sent you if you like.

Or, this really is getting off my subject. Dr XY is the department specialist, why don't you ask them?

I use this approach in particular for questions that are on the edge of what I teach. It is well known for instance that I cannot explain English grammar. So I have established a list of colleagues whom I know are good at this subject, and refer these questions to them.

Answer 5

Why don't you come and see me at the end of the lesson, and I will try and explain in more detail. [This is excellent for lectures where you can finish early].

Or, when the class are busy doing an exercise, remind me, and I will try to answer you.

*** Channelling comments by students**

In every class there will be criticism of the teacher. Some of it will be constructive, a lot will be due to misunderstandings, and some will be unfair. Criticism can be ignored and not tolerated, or it can be channelled and negotiated. What I do with every new class is to announce in the first lesson that I know some of them will have comments and this is how I propose to work. If they are ever impolite in my classes I will not listen to them and I will firmly shut them up or ignore them. But if they want to come to me afterwards and politely speak to me in a small group, then I promise to listen to them.

Whenever I know I am using a different teaching method, or teaching content that the students do not expect, I have found it useful to treat my students in an adult way. Perhaps there is a new style of teaching, or you want students to do pair work and they have never been used to this before. These students have an inherent resistance to the teacher, which can be partly overcome by directly addressing the resistance, giving some of your reasons, and asking them to give it a fair try for a few weeks.

It is hard for a teacher to take correction, especially in a culture where the students expect the teacher to know all the answers, to be the master of their subject. But the facts are that all teachers are human, and we all make mistakes. I am told that it is shameful for a lecturer or teacher to admit they do not know the answer. In my teacher training classes I ask each year if this is true. Then I ask them a question: What is more shameful, to be wrong or ignorant and to cover it up and everyone knows it, or to humbly admit you are wrong or ignorant, and thankfully take the comment and try to do improve? What takes more strength of character and courage? Which approach promotes integrity and trust?

I was once given a class to teach of colleagues from other departments. I guessed that they overestimated their ability in English, and underestimated the time needed to make progress. So I remember asking them what they wanted to study. They all wanted to be able to read texts in history, philosophy, etc. So I asked them how much lesson time they were willing to give to their studies. They all agreed that 90 minutes out of the two hours was quite enough, and they would not be present during the busy times of the year. Then I asked about homework, and they all agreed they did not want homework. When I proposed to use parts of a general English textbook, they all thought they were upper intermediate. So I proposed a two week trial, one from upper intermediate, and the other from the lower intermediate textbook. After two weeks they all agreed the lower intermediate was the better book. So I suggested they worked my way for a month, then we had a feedback session: I wanted four lessons in a row to give a fair trial before making changes.

That worked! I had negotiated the expectations and the realism in the group, channelled their criticism, and led them to my own conclusions.

* **Seeking advice**

All of us need advice from time to time, and a new teacher needs a lot of it. But teachers get tired of handling the discipline problems of a beginner teacher. A new teacher does need to stand on their own feet, and it is shameful to the new teacher to have to get help to discipline a class.

So I learned the best way to get help was to find out which teachers were able and willing to listen, and go to them with this simple question: Can you give me some advice? What do you know about this pupil? How do you handle them?

Often when I did this senior staff would intervene, but not always, and I had not asked them. My goal was to solve the problem myself. I was not behaving in a way that irritated my senior colleagues.

* **Mixed ability classes**

There is a whole literature on this subject and I where I work I provide a selection of articles for my students. My background is from a British system where we were divided into classes according to ability, per subject. As part of their knowledge of Britain, I ask my students to understand how it can be done. I also ask them not to reject this approach out of hand.

Setting and banding

In many secondary schools in Britain, it is common to divide students by ability and by subject. Related subjects would commonly be grouped. So for instance there would be groups such as the languages, maths and science, English history and geography, etc

In my school days I was in the bottom 'set' for French, and in the top sets for science and English. In games, art etc we were kept in mixed ability groups. Simply put, in any given subject or subject group all the sets would be taught at the same time. At the end of each term there was a class test, or a common examination. The top 2-3 students went up a class and the bottom 2-3 moved down a class. The bottom class was usually kept smaller, to enable more intensive teaching.

In some schools pupils are put into bands. There might be two top sets, three middle sets, and one bottom set.

Once students have been put into a set, then a common end of year examination is not needed. Each teacher can set their own tests, since only those at the top and bottom of a class change places. Thus it is possible to set an easy test for the bottom group, and so encourage the pupils, while still keeping most of the students in that bottom group.

This approach is new to many of my students. They usually have several questions.

- * Is this not a nightmare for time tabling? To which the simple answer is, yes, but hundreds of schools do it and have done even before computers became common. It is actually not that difficult to do.
- * Is it not shameful to be in the bottom set? To some extent it is shameful. But because it is done per subject and few people are brilliant in every subject, then most top students are in at least one non-top class.
- * The bottom sets must be difficult to teach? Yes they are, but they need not be. Sometimes the bottom sets can have a different curriculum. My experience of them was that they could also be the most demanding and the most rewarding. The smaller group means that you swiftly get to know all their names, and their characters are a constant challenge you. When I left teaching in Britain to work abroad, it was these pupils who expressed the most appreciation for me including one who cried.

I challenge students to consider using this system if they ever are in a position to do so. Since it feels anti-cultural I point to institutions within the country that do put students into a class according to their level.

* **Helps the weak and stretches the bright**

A good teacher helps the weak and stretches the bright. This is easier said than done. When I have dared to suggest that in a big class, the teacher arranges them: weak, average, strong, they reply that this would shame the weak. In other words, avoiding shame is a high priority. The fact that in a class everyone knows who the weak students are, and they will be shamed when the examination results are posted on a public noticeboard is beside the point. There are times when shame is accepted, and other actions when it is not.

But, far too many classes proceed at the speed of the slowest! A good teacher must find ways of stretching the bright while helping the weak. Here are some possible solutions.

1. When presenting a new topic or a new exercise, the first students to reply to questions should be the brightest. Once they have got the point, then the middle students can be approached and the weak students last. Finally, the bright students can be asked to be more sophisticated.

Maybe in a new dialogue, the bright students come to the front first.

2. A lesson is planned with a common core, and supplementary work for the weak, and stretching questions for the strong.
3. When asking questions, the weak students should be asked easy questions, and the strong students should be asked difficult questions.