

# Is your classroom under control?: Discipline in the non-teacher's classroom

by Chris Hunt and Alison Miyake

*Last issue we began examining the concept of discipline in the classroom. We concluded by mentioning the need for mutual respect. We rejected the notion of punishment and instead suggested that instead adults can model behaviour. Here we continue where we left off.*

AM: So the question is “Should we even be thinking in terms of discipline? Is discipline necessary?” I agree that as teachers, we should really be aiming for self-discipline on the part of our students. By this, I don’t mean, “By now you should know the rules, so I don’t have to tell you.” or, “I’ll let you students police each other and tell each other when you have broken a rule.” as I often see being used in the Japanese elementary schools where I have taught.

Fundamentally, the idea of having peers agree on what is good behaviour with the power to tell people when they don’t like something someone is doing, rather than always having (or using) the teacher as authority figure who does the enforcing, is extremely important. What is often missing though is that the students aren’t the ones who get to decide the rules in the first place. (See Adele and Mazlish, 1995, for a way of involving students in rule-making and problem solving.) Self-discipline should really mean, “I am interested in what I am studying, it is important to me, and therefore I feel a stake in being here and making sure that everyone’s needs are met in our learning environment.”

CH: Yes, as Maria Montessori said, “Discipline must come through liberty” (2000).

AM: I have just finished an excellent book called, *Open Space Technology: A User’s Guide* (Owen, 1997). One very important point that the author makes right at the beginning is that the typical way of proceeding in companies, or organisations in general, is to wait for the boss to order something and then the person whose job it is has to do the work. As the author says, “Very quickly, conventional wisdom creates a negative self-fulfilling prophecy where the only way that a job gets done is when we don’t care enough to do it”, but are told to do it. What is missing from this is the will, a personal interest or stake in doing something. In other words, we should let people initiate more, do the things that they really think need to be done and we’d likely be surprised by how much ends up getting done anyway.

Maybe this is a bit of a leap, but this is what I feel is missing in public school classrooms and it has led me to look into things like free schooling (where students are able to decide the rules of the school and whether or not they attend classes, like at Summerhill School in the UK and the

Sudbury Valley schools in the US) and unschooling, where all learning is self-initiated. Part of the homeschooling movement and influenced by John Holt, these parents believe that kids don’t need to be “taught” to learn something, but rather should be free at all times to pursue what interests them. Parents don’t provide a “curriculum”, but stimulation in the form of materials and guidance as to where to find answers and more information.

Why do we think that teachers have to tell students what to study and enforce rules of behaviour for them to learn what they need to know in life, including how to interact with peers and teachers at school?

CH: I think fear plays a large part. Teachers fear losing control. There’s also the empty vessel philosophy that suggests that children require filling with knowledge supplied by the adult. There’s often an assumption that if children aren’t focused on the teacher then they either can’t learn anything or won’t learn what they should learn.

AM: I agree on both points. When I started teaching in elementary schools (with no experience in teaching kids), I wanted my Japanese teachers to give me ideas on how to organise activities and introduce them so kids would be interested (age-appropriate and similar to what they have done before so they would understand how to do the activity) and the whole thing would proceed smoothly: kids walking around the room in an orderly fashion repeating after me... That’s taking it to an extreme, of course, but I do think it is common for nervous new teachers to worry and check that students are on task or “doing things the way the teacher expected them to happen”, and ignore the moving-toward-chaos effect that a lot of people with different interests and ability levels doing an activity can have.

CH: I don’t quite follow this. What is the moving-toward-chaos effect?

AM: It’s what happens in an elementary classroom when you play a game. When we don’t leave students room to complete a task in their own individual, creative way, we are essentially telling them not to get involved or invest themselves in the task. It’s much more than just taking the fun out of it. I see this happening in the language classroom often, when the task gets so structured that there is only one possible correct response and, even worse, we are timing the response, expecting it to happen quickly. This is not what natural language is about at all.

We should be teaching kids to express themselves freely

and creatively, without worrying about correct grammar, by simply offering them the words or structures to say what they want to say. This is, after all, how kids learn their first language, not by being “taught”. I often think about how kids would continue to learn things by imitating the world around them without having to go to school if we would let them freely explore and learn in their own way(s). In parenting, the norm is not to think of disciplining as punishing or rewarding. Kids need to participate in rule-making and to understand the reasoning behind the rules in order to see how the rules are applied. No enforcer needed.

A parent knows that every child is different and our job is to see and build on each child’s unique abilities to give them self-esteem and the confidence to go after their dreams. If you take the time to observe, it is pretty easy to figure out why someone is “acting out”, with the most common reasons being as simple as being hungry, tired or bored. Now that my daughter is four, having no say or being told what to do or being ignored are the most common reasons. I always felt it very challenging to only spend 45 minutes every two weeks with my students and to try to understand their needs, their feelings of the day, their home situation and how it might be impacting on their day at school, but these are all the things that help you figure out the problem behind the behaviour, as I know in my heart as a parent.

CH: This is why generally I favour small classes and team teaching. Two teachers can be much more flexible in addressing individual needs than one. I think flexibility is key. Very young learners are great teachers of this.

Recently, for example, I was having a class when a two-year-old boy began swinging a fishing rod wildly. It was rather dangerous. I asked him to stop but he wouldn’t. His mother tried to take the rod away from him and he began to get angry. I asked him again firmly to stop but he wouldn’t. I too started to use force, but quickly realised that to do so would mean either damaging his fingers or breaking the rod. Suddenly, inspiration came. I picked him up and took him out of the classroom. I put him down on the couch in the waiting room and told him that if he wanted to swing the rod he could do so but not where he might hurt people. I went back into the classroom but as soon as the next activity started, put my head out of the door and asked him if he wanted to join in. He came back into the room to join in and actually handed the rod to me! I had managed to find a way to respect his feelings and at the same time maintain a safe learning environment for everyone. I should say that the whole time I communicated with him in English.

AM: I want to come back to what you said about flexibility and control. It’s really true (something I learned from your presentations) that the teacher cannot control what learning goes on in the room.

Unfortunately, because we are confined to meeting at a certain time and place for a given number of minutes, there is control being put on the learning and teachers feel they have

to accomplish something in that given time frame. I agree with you that what the teacher wants to “control” is only the environment, allowing for a safe, teamwork approach to what gets done and how. I think your use of non-competitive games is really important for creating safety and continual learning: learning doesn’t stop when someone wins, which can be so frustrating with traditional games. I also think that Co-operative Learning is important. Maybe, Chris, you could give us some ideas of how to create this environment in the classroom through some specific activity ideas?

CH: I thought you’d never ask! Seriously though, it’s not just using particular types of activities but more the whole approach. Using non-competitive and co-operative games can get children learning together but giving them as much choice as possible and avoiding false authority (I’m the teacher so what I say goes) are equally important. Anyway, here are a few suggestions:

1. Make your lesson plan transparent. Write it up on the board in simple English even if the children can’t read. Where and whenever possible let the children choose the order of activities.

2. Give time. It shouldn’t be imperative to complete a whole lesson plan in one lesson. Activities not completed in one lesson can be done first in the next. Teachers sometimes have a tendency to put completing a plan ahead of giving children the time to absorb learning or play with new language.

3. Have choices of activities that fulfil the same learning point and allow the children to choose which activity to do. One reason I like the book *Co-operative Learning* by Spencer Kagan (1992) is that he clearly shows how content and activity can be separated by using structures. Find structures that a group likes and use them with different content. (*see fig.1 for examples*)

4. Use different kinds of activities that stimulate different intelligences. Present the same learning point in more than one way.

5. Get feedback on activities, especially when introducing them for the first time. You could use a feedback slip (*see fig.2*). The box is for the number of the activity (taken from the board). The children circle one of the faces rating the activity (Great, fine, so-so or terrible) and then put the slip into a post box (a regular box with a slit cut into it). After class the papers can be sorted and assessed.

6. Conduct occasional questionnaires and/or interviews and get feedback on what children think about what they are doing and what you are doing. Concentrate on ways of making the lessons more useful and more fun.

7. Consider setting aside part of every lesson for discussion about the lesson. Get children to identify any problems, brainstorm solutions with them and draw up action plans. Realise though that most children will only be able to use Japanese. Realise also that finding solutions is ongoing. What works now might not work in future. There are no fixed answers and what is right for one class might be wrong for another. Let the children decide.

AM: Maybe I can add one more?

8. Stretch yourself by experimenting with a free classroom. Put lots of materials (videos, books, cards, props) on the board and let students choose what they want to do. The teacher can always tie these into whatever grammar point they want to teach, but allowing kids to choose what vocabulary they want to learn and the medium they learn it through can be very powerful for both students and teacher.

**References**

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**Suggested reading**

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*Alison Miyake is not teaching in a traditional classroom very much at all at the moment. In this light, if you think the content of this article is irrelevant to your classroom situation, she encourages you to write to her anytime at [mbi@joy.ocn.ne.jp](mailto:mbi@joy.ocn.ne.jp).*

*Chris Hunt is interested in non-competition, non-teaching and democracy in the classroom. These and other ideas are discussed in his erratic newsletter "Wise Hat News". See <http://www.wisehat.com/newsletter/wisehatnews.htm> for details.*

Fig. 1: Examples of Kagan structures

**Talking Chips**

This is a Kagan Structure to equalise participation within groups. The preferred group size is four. Within groups the students are asked to discuss something. Each student uses a talking chip—these could be counters but pens will do just as well. After making a statement, a student places his or her chip on the table. The student must now be quiet until all the chips are on the table. Chips are then retrieved and the process continues. Note that this is very different from speaking in turn. Students are free to contribute in any order. All students are required to contribute so no student within the group can dominate and no student can freeload.

Talking Chips is a structure. Since the discussion can be about anything it is content free. In fact, it need not actually be a discussion. Returnees may well be able to hold a discussion but many children cannot. However, rather than "discuss" students could be making statements and practising patterns. For example, they could be making "I like..." or "I can..." statements (or "You have...", "She plays...", "He is..." etc). They could be looking at a picture and making sentences about it, or they could even simply be naming vocabulary within an agreed category.

*Talking Chips is one of 200 Kagan Structures. For resources describing the structures and how to apply them, or for information regarding training in the structures, log on to: [www.KaganOnline.com](http://www.KaganOnline.com)*

**All Sit Down**

This is a variant of Talking Chips. With this structure rather than using pens or counters, students use their whole bodies. The group starts by standing up. When a student makes a contribution he or she sits down. When all students are sitting, the group scores one point and all stand up again. This works especially well for reviewing vocabulary but could be used for other tasks. Use a time limit and each group can see how many points they can get while performing the task.

As these examples demonstrate, any game which is content free is essentially a structure.

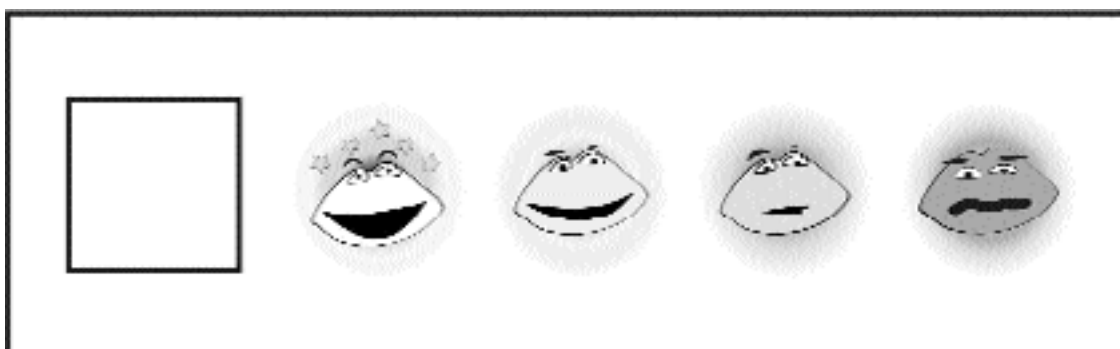


Fig. 2. Feedback strip.