

Prompting Slow Students:

Instilling a Sense of Urgency

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As an English teacher at a leadership college for Japanese women, my interest is in cultivating certain leadership qualities in students. One such quality relates to time management and operating with a “sense of urgency” (a term borrowed from the military, where soldiers are trained to quicken their actions). Some classes or students are frustratingly slow to take action (chatting with classmates, being overly leisurely in getting ready - generally reluctant to commit), and fail to give the respect due the teacher to commence teaching. Students need to understand that time means money, and they should be encouraged to approach tasks with speed and intention. Furthermore, Japanese students who intend to undertake academic study abroad need exposure to the expectations of foreign institutions, including the pace of work and standards required. To this end, this article looks at some experimentation to prompt students to smarten their pace. (Previous experiments in high school classes also showed some promise.)

It would appear that some students have either not developed the skills to manage time and pace themselves, or have not been given a genuine chance. The exercises below begin with the teacher setting time limits and standards, and gradually transferring that responsibility to the students.

The following are some strategies I have experimented with to create in students a greater sense of urgency in the classroom.

1) Inform Students of Your Expectations: Unless students clearly understand your expectation to begin lessons, or segments, in earnest immediately, they will repeat their dawdling patterns of behaviour. Be prepared to commence immediately, and be consistent with your approach. I have found students, for the most part, to be appreciative of an “earnest” teacher, and to be seated, alert and waiting to commence.

2) Start without them: Don’t wait for stragglers. Simply start without them. The dawdlers will eventually realize the class is seriously engaged in a task, and will panic at being left out. Suddenly they must ask questions, ascertain the task, and become involved - they are now operating with a sense of urgency.

3) Inform Students of Expectations Abroad: Students aren’t aware of the expectation in other countries to work quickly and energetically in class, and also outside class with regards heavy homework loads. This revelation usually comes as a shock. Those students wanting to undertake academic study abroad will be interested in improving their pace. Demonstrate your message by giving students a short, timed activity to complete, and don’t wait for stragglers before commencing. Often, the time has expired before many have settled down to the task, or even realized a task has been assigned. Reiterate your message, and continue to assign timed activities over ensuing classes.

4) Timed Activities: Students often have no idea how to control time. Set a task with a short time limit (eg 5 minutes to write a 10 line dialogue, answer a set of questions, complete a cloze exercise etc.) Many students will squander that 5 minutes in dithering, preparing, checking on their neighbour etc. They will express disbelief when told time is up. Firmly reiterate your expectations, and those in other countries. The message will start to register. Extend the time limit and assign longer tasks, even allowing groups of students to work together to accomplish the task. This often encourages initiative from the students, such as dividing the task among themselves, appointing a student to scan the text ahead and check new words, monitoring time and progress, urging the group on etc. Operating with this sense of urgency, students also seem to lose inhibitions, and call out to the teacher or other students for assistance.

5) Create a busy schedule. In order to keep the momentum going initially, a busy, well-planned schedule is required. Any moment the teacher hesitates will be used by the students to commence chatting etc, and the momentum is lost. Once the students have become accustomed to the teacher’s expectations, such a rigorous schedule can be relaxed.

In the initial phase of developing momentum, it may be beneficial to start the lesson with a short task to get attention, get everyone seated and set the pace (vocab quiz, cartoon with words or punch line missing etc). Add the occasional competition to finish first, or not be last. Continue through the lesson by changing segments quickly, as time lost thinking about what you’re going to do next kills the momentum and creates a space for the students to be distracted. Students soon get to understand your tempo, and to feel challenged and rewarded with what they’ve accomplished.

Teachers of young children know that a busy program, with activity changes even after a few minutes, holds their attention and helps keep them out of mischief. Even including short segments with older students and adults helps to keep them stimulated. In long, drawn out segments, the tempo may slow and energy levels dwindle as students begin to tire and lose focus.

When you deem it “safe”, allow a moment of relaxation and repartee after periods of intense concentration. Neck muscles in particular become very tense. (I recently had one class tease me while I was still stretching - they were sitting bolt upright: “Sensei, we’re ready! Are you tired today?”)

The majority of students should start responding, and appreciate the effort that you have put in and you should show appreciation for theirs. (The first time I pretended to collapse in my chair from exhaustion at the end of such a lesson, the students grinned and did the same, acknowledging that both parties had worked hard and achieved a lot.) Once this livelier pace has been established, the approach

can be relaxed, as students should be arriving on time, alert and ready for immediate action.

6) Give feedback on time-saving techniques. Observe students and give them feedback on how to better manage their time, such as beginning the task immediately (obvious, but this is where most time is lost); reading ahead to assess how much work and time is required, and to allow ideas to incubate in the brain; doing easy tasks first and returning to difficult problems; encouraging simultaneous action in pair or group work, (e.g., one student scans the text ahead and checks new words etc.); speedier dictionary work; discourage the use of erasers - teach them to cross out, print heavily over a word etc; make yourself available and approachable for providing assistance. Set time limits for tasks and call out time remaining. This seems to encourage time-saving initiatives eg one team of students divided the work among them, then pooled answers, with each student in turn teaching the group. Furthermore, when faced with a sense of urgency, students lose their inhibitions, yelling out for the teacher's assistance. (Teach them how to do this, e.g., raise their hand and shout "Help me please!")

7) Consider your own demeanour. Students take cues from the teacher's behaviour. If you are earnest, with erect posture and purposeful movements, the students will be more inclined to emulate. Admittedly, some classes really

test the teacher, in which case it's better to maintain professionalism with an attempt at emotional detachment, than to succumb to feelings of hopelessness.

Conclusion

This article presents a no-nonsense approach for ridding dawdling and delaying tactics in class, and encouraging prompter action with a faster pace. With junior and senior high school classes, a short term of experimentation certainly proved effective with more mature students; the inevitable core of immature students being harder to reach. In the college scenario, students commented on evaluation reports that they liked the classes being "earnest", because they were pushed to work hard and achieve. (The core of totally disinterested students dropped out of the courses early.) The dull, glazed looks disappeared and the sparkle returned, with students sitting straighter and more alert. To survive, students were forced to abandon their inhibitions and yell for help, becoming more assertive learners.

Hopefully, students will also apply this "sense of urgency" where needed in their lives - to achieve desired goals; to work in a disciplined way through both pleasant and unpleasant tasks; and most importantly, to seize those opportunities that come their way, and not pass them up due to procrastination or being "slow". ETJ